

## FRAMEWORK FOR IDENTIFYING AND SELECTING PUBLIC RIVER CORRIDOR VIEWS

### INTRODUCTION

This framework presents a suggested approach for evaluating and selecting public river corridor views (PRCVs) in the MRCCA. This process is based on very comprehensive approaches used for selecting scenic views used in other scenic view studies. While this suggested approach is still fairly comprehensive, it simplifies more complex approaches in order to be more practical and useful for local governments in the MRCCA who wish to take a more complete approach than the minimum requirements would involve. Elements of this suggested approach could be used independently or in other combinations. Each community will need to determine the public participation method appropriate for the needs and capacity of each community. Public participation options could include a group of citizen volunteers, the general public, planning commissions, stakeholders representing specific interests or some combination for all or some phases. Staff will also need to play a role which may vary depending on community capacity and type of public participation.

### BACKGROUND ON VISUAL QUALITY ASSESSMENTS

Many studies have explored why people prefer some views more than others. In general, scenic preference indicates people's relative preference for a specific view compared to all the views being considered. While research on this topic varies, people's preference of a view is generally influenced by:

1. The context or visual domain of a view (inferred from the visual elements of the view)
2. The specific visual elements of the view, and
3. The compatibility of the visual elements within that context

#### Visual Domain (Context)

Visual domain is a geographically distinct view area that defines the context and expectations by which people respond to the elements of the view. A visual domain is characterized by a repeatable set of mostly similar visual elements. Visual domain or context varies depending on the geographic scope of a study area. In the MRCCA, visual domains could include: natural, suburban, urban, riverine and bluff domains. A view can contain more than one domain. For practical purposes, a view should be limited to two or three domains.

#### Visual Domain Types

1. Natural
2. Suburban
3. Urban
4. Riverine
5. Bluff

#### Visual Elements

A visual element is a recognizable object or group of objects (such as skylines or commercial nodes at bridgeheads) which represents a component of a view that influences people's preference. A visual element can be man-made or natural and is usually more common in one visual domain than in another. Man-made examples include boats, buildings, signs, bridges, fences and roads. Natural elements include animals, crops, rocks, bluffs, vegetation, and water.

#### Compatibility

Evaluating the compatibility of visual elements within a particular view is a highly subjective process. On a practical level people can evaluate a landscape and indicate how well they like it without understanding why or being able to explain it very well. More complex methods can also be used to evaluate compatibility. These methods use evaluation criteria and could include the following landscape characteristics used in the Mississippi National River and Recreation Area Visual Resource Protection Plan (VRPP):

**Cohesive.** The ability of an overall landscape character to contain elements that appear logical, orderly and aesthetically consistent, the scene or landscape 'works' and 'makes sense'.

**Intactness.** To what degree is this landscape unaltered or unimpaired?

**Variety/Complexity.** An intermixture, diversity, or succession of different things, forms, or qualities in the landscape.

**Pattern.** Landscape includes pleasing repetitions and configuration of line, form, color, and texture.

**Visual Interest.** How memorable is the scene, does it arouse the curiosity of the viewer?

**Uniqueness.** The rarity of the view in the local, regional and national context. How abundant is this kind of view?

## SUGGESTED PROCESS FOR IDENTIFYING AND SELECTING PRCVS

Following is a suggested process for identifying and selecting PRCVs. This includes views toward the river and views toward bluffs when a specific place has been identified for identifying and describing the view. Evaluating views is inherently subjective and this process assumes that the public is the best sources of data. This framework assumes that each community will conduct its own assessment for selecting PRCVs using their collective values. Collective values will vary from community to community therefore this framework will result in the identification and evaluation of PRCVs that are distinct to each community and the variable character of MRCCA.

This process is designed to be practical for most local governments to implement. Each community determines the public participation method appropriate for the needs and capacity of each community. Public participation options could include a group of citizen volunteers, the general public, stakeholders representing specific interests or some combination for all or some phases. Staff will also need to play a role which may vary depending on community capacity and type of public participation.

### 1. Create an inventory of potential PRCVs.

Identify specific points in public parks, public overlooks, historic sites or any other place accessible to the public that have views towards the river and/or views towards bluffs from a specific place at the OHWL. Invite participants to nominate views for consideration. Nominations should include the following information (form should be developed to standardize data collection once a community determines what type of data to collect):

- a. Type of PRCV: View toward river or view toward bluff, or other view
- b. Photos: A photo taken during leaf-on conditions, preferably with sunshine. The river should be in the view for views toward the river and bluffs should be in the view for views toward bluffs and the “other” element should in the view of the “other” view.
- c. Maps: A map of the location the photo was taken from with two arrows indicating the general boundaries of the view as depicted in the photo and pointing in the direction of the view.
- d. Method: A method for categorizing views. This can help organize photos during the evaluation and rating process. Two types to consider:
  - i. Visual Domain: natural, suburban, urban, riverine, bluff
  - ii. View type: Focal, feature, panorama
- e. Descriptions:
  - i. Brief description about what makes the view valuable.
  - ii. Brief description of what changes would negatively impact the view (vegetation removal, building height, building materials, building mass, etc.).
- f. Access: Identify how people access the view: car, bike, walk/hike, canoe, or boat.
- g. Visual Exposure: Indicate the amount of visual exposure for each view. See description and method for assessing visual exposure below.
- h. Other Communities affected: Identify what other communities are within the view, if applicable. Staff may need to complete this.



### 2. Submission review.

Submitted nominations are reviewed for duplicates. Where there are duplicates, submissions are consolidated into one nomination and one or a few best photos are selected to represent the view. Submission data is also review for general accuracy and clarity for public review. Information dealing with how people access the view, view exposure, and whether other communities are included in the view are important to verify.

### 3. Public feedback on nominations/consolidated nominations

The public could be invited to comment on all nominated views or on staff consolidated nominations. This provides an opportunity to get feedback on information submitted and to amend information based on feedback.

#### 4. Revise nominations and develop final slate of views.

In this step, feedback is used to update and revise information on each view. The outcome of this step is a final slate of nominations that will be used for selecting PRCVs.

#### 5. Select PRCVs.

Communities consider each nominated view, including the supporting data for each view, collected through the inventory and public review and feedback steps. A form of “dotmocracy” could be used for selecting views.

#### 6. Map the spatial extent of the PRCVs.

Mapping is important to identify areas where MRCCA ordinance provisions protecting PRCVs apply and where development activities have the potential to negatively affect PRCVs. Mapping could be as simple as mapping the angle of the viewshed. With more sophisticated methods that consider vegetation and topography, only views that can be physically seen from a location could be mapped.

## ALTERNATIVE PROCESS FOR SELECTING PRCVS

Instead of using the “dotmocracy” approach discussed above, this approach uses a three part scoring system to evaluate scenic views as a measure of the relative contribution of each selected view in the community’s landscape to the collective value for all views evaluated by participants. This approach may be valuable if there are many views and/or controversy around selecting views. This approach builds on steps 1 – 4 above. The following four steps replace step 5 above. This approach would conclude with step 6 above by mapping the spatial extent of the selected PRCVs.

#### A. Assign a “Scenic Preference” score.

This step relies on individual evaluations of visual preference to assign a scenic preference score to each view. This could be done by individuals personally experiencing each view or by viewing photos of each view.

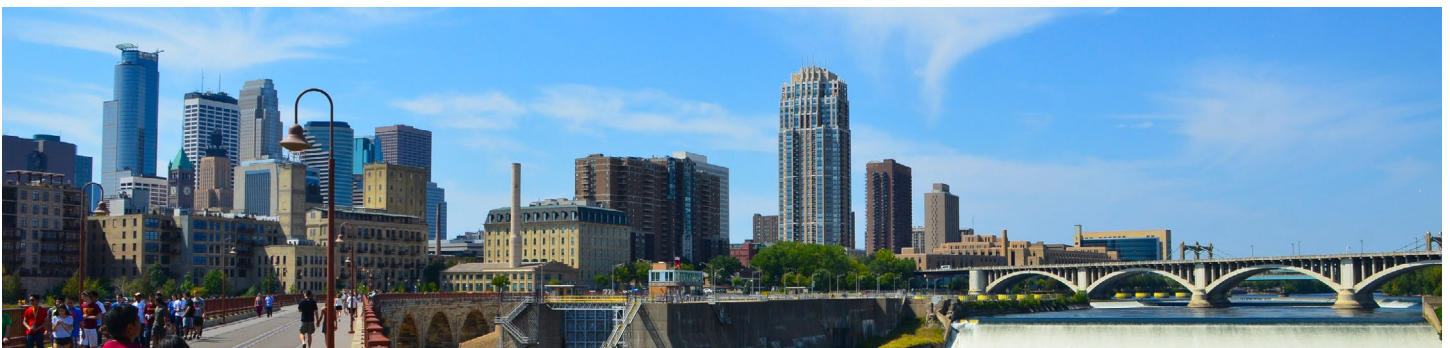
##### Scenic Preference

Participants score each view on a simple 5-point scale that rates each view from high (5) to low (1) based on personal preference. With this approach, a broad range of people can participate in a local process that is relatively simple to implement. Evaluation methods could include an on-line survey or public meetings. Alternatively a group of volunteers could evaluate each view. Considerations in designing an approach include:

- a. Normalizing scores. Before scoring, participants should view the full breadth of images to understand the range of views they will be scoring. This helps to normalize scores and minimizes chances of rating the first few photos viewed either too high or too low.
- b. Training. If a more complex approach is used for evaluating compatibility, participant training on evaluation criteria and rating systems may help create consistency in scores from view to view.
- c. Organizing photos. Scoring similar views together in batches will create more consistency in scores. This may be helpful in communities with a large inventory of photos to score and with many different types of views.

Options for organizing could include:

- i. View type (VRPP):
  1. Focal – a composition that draws the eye to one vanishing point on the horizon with lines in the view (like roads, river, trails) that lead directly to that point.
  2. Feature – a composition that has a single, dominant focal point of the view; like a waterfall, historic building, mountain etc.
  3. Panorama – an extensive unbroken view of the landscape in all directions.
- ii. Visual domain:
  1. Natural, suburban, or urban
  2. Riverine or bluff, or
  3. Some combination of #1 and #2



**B. Assign a “Visual Exposure” score.**

This step relies on the score assigned to each view on the nomination form during the inventory phase and/or as modified through submission review.

**Visual Exposure**

Not all views are experienced in the same way or for the same amount of time. For instance, car commuters have a shorter exposure or duration of a view than those who picnic at an established park with a scenic vista. A two part score may be used to rate the visual exposure. One score indicates the amount of time someone experiences the view or level of duration. The other score assesses the number of people who experience the view or use. The two scores are multiplied to get a visual exposure score. In the VRPP example below, scores range from 1 to 25.

Use	Duration				
	Extended – 5	Long – 4	Moderate – 3	Short – 2	Brief - 1
High – 5					
Med-High – 4					
Medium – 3					
Med-low – 2					
Low - 1					
<b>Overall Score (check one box and multiply the two corresponding numbers)</b>					

**Duration**

Extended: Two hours or more (5) – place where people will stop to paint, enjoy a festival, enjoy amenities at a park for an extended time

Long: 30 minutes to 2 hours (4) – such as a picnic area, park, outdoor plaza, deck

Moderate: 5 to 30 minutes (3) – long enough to stop and pause, read a sign, take photographs

Short: 30 seconds to 5 minutes (2) – such as pedestrians walking past a view, some bike use

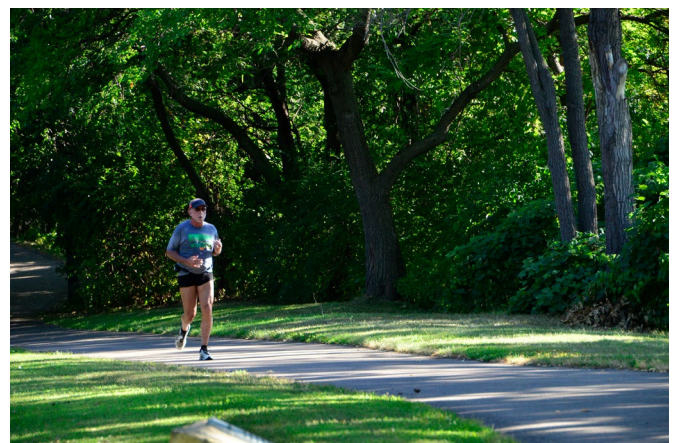
Brief: 0 - 30 seconds (1) – such as a car going over a bridge or past a view

**Use**

High use (5) – is commonly known and heavily visited. It will typically be easy to get to, well marked on common road maps and will have signs along adjacent roadways. There may be interpretive panels, site amenities such as benches, kiosks, or picnic tables  
 Examples: Major known scenic overlook with paved parking or pull off, overlook at a public or quasi-public place (e.g. visitor’s center), etc.

Medium-High use (4) – is easy to get to and may be marked on a regional map, may have some road signs, but not called out as a scenic overlook. There may be a small hike associated with the overlook. The trail or parking area around the VPE may be developed and have some site amenities. Parks with over looks may have all amenities associated with them but the primary feature is the overlook. Example: A regional park with small trail system, scenic pull out with soft shoulder, etc.

Medium use (3) – is well known by the general public who live in the area and may be on some tourist maps. It may have some amenities for viewing (benches) but it is not well developed to handle a large amount of visits. It typically will be on a hiking/bike trail and associated with that trail. Example: Specific points along a hiking trail, pedestrian points along bridges, local park etc.



Medium-Low use (2) – is known by locals and would typically require some effort to find the actual location or path to the VPE. It doesn't show on the map and is probably secluded to the typical eye. A moderate hike or extensive drive to reach the VPE is required. Example: Informal overlook near/around private development, point at end of social footpath, etc.

Low use (1) – is often only known by locals and may require a substantial hike or drive, possibly even off road vehicles to get to the point. It is likely there will be no signs or points on maps and will not have any type of development associated with the area.

**C. Assign a "Development Risk" score.**

This score relies on professional judgement. See description of development risk and scoring approach below.

**Development Risk**

Some views are at a higher risk of change than others due to new development and redevelopment potential. For example, an area with existing agriculture use may be zoned for residential. This landscape would be at high risk for change. On the other hand, existing urban uses (such as downtown Minneapolis or St. Paul) would likely be at low risk of change since the existing zoning supports the existing character. Assigning risk should compare existing uses to existing zoning and planned land uses. Local knowledge of proposed development or redevelopment or where such activities are likely to occur are important for assessing risk. With this approach, risk is evaluated on a simple 5-point scale that rates the risk to each view from high (5) to low (1) based on evaluator judgement. Staff or a small group of people with land use knowledge are recommended as evaluators. Since risk analysis requires a great deal of research, this effort could only be applied to the most highly rated views after considering scenic preference and visual exposure scores.

**D. Determine a final score for each view.**

Add scores for scenic preference, visual exposure and development risk to get a final score.

**Weighting**

Communities using a scoring system need to determine if all three scores should be weighted equally or if some are more important, and thus carry a larger weight. Note that the scenic preference and development risk scores have a range of 1 – 5 and the visual exposure score has a 1 – 25 range. If a community wanted all scores to have equal weight, the scenic preference and development risk scores need to be multiplied by "5."

## SOURCES

- National Park Services: [Visual Resource Protection Plan](#)
- South East Queensland Regional Plan 2005 – 2026: [Implementation Guideline No. 8. Identifying and protecting scenic amenity values.](#)
- Calgary Regional Partnership: [Visual Preference Survey](#)
- The Macaulay Land Use Research Institute: [Review of Existing Methods of Landscape Assessment and Evaluation](#)

## MORE INFORMATION

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