



# Friends of the Mississippi River

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*Working to protect the Mississippi River and its watershed in the Twin Cities area*

March 23, 2009

President David Motzenbecker  
Minneapolis Planning Commission  
350 S. 5th St  
Room 210 City Hall  
Minneapolis, MN 55415-1385

President Motzenbecker and Planning Commissioners,

Friends of the Mississippi River (FMR) is a local non-profit organization that works to protect and enhance the natural and cultural assets of the Mississippi River and its watershed in the Twin Cities. We have 1,400 active members and 3,200 volunteers who care deeply about the river's unique resources.

The parcel at 600 Main Street is located adjacent to the Mississippi River, within the Central Riverfront Regional Park boundaries, within the Mississippi River Critical Area, and within the St. Anthony Falls Historic District. As stewards of the river's natural, recreational and historic values, we take particular interest in this site.

The Minneapolis Riverfront is one of the state's premier public spaces. In order to protect these key civic values, and uphold the intensive planning that has been done to date, Friends of the Mississippi River unambiguously opposes the rezoning, conditional use permits and variance proposed for the 600 Main Street development.

The Marcy-Holmes Small Area Plan identifies this land as a future park space for several very compelling reasons.

- **Following the Successful Pattern of Minneapolis Parkways, Main Street Should Delineate Public Space from Private Space.** Developing this property would disrupt the pattern of parkways that is part and parcel of Minneapolis' identity. The Minneapolis parkway system works so well, and is recognized nationally because one side of the parkway is always preserved as public park space. The area between parkway and water is almost universally reserved for park-related uses. The few times that structures have been permitted on the water side of a parkway, they

almost universally have been small park-related buildings, or buildings that were built with an explicitly river-dependent use.

This proposal disrupts that pattern. A quick review of a map shows that if and when a proposed parkway connection is built between the U of M and Main Street, the only sensible way to build it would be by using the Main Street right of way in front of Stone Arch Apartments. The adopted City Critical Area Plan says as much: “extend existing Main Street to connect with East River Parkway at University of Minnesota” (page 24). Throughout its length, Main Street predictably serves as the division between the public realm on the river side of the street, and the private buildings on the inland side of the street. Developing this parcel would infringe and disrupt that pattern of public space.

- **Land is the Terminus and Gateway to and from the historic Stone Arch Bridge.** From a design standpoint, this land in particular is of critical importance to preserve as public, open space. It is at this location that the historic Stone Arch Bridge reaches land. Travelers along the Stone Arch Bridge will be welcomed (or not) by a view at the end of the bridge of whatever is built on this particular site. A 68-foot building would greet travelers across the iconic bridge with a wall. As a gateway into Main Street and the Marcy-Holmes neighborhood, it is particularly important that this area be sensitively cultivated to be as public and welcoming as possible.

This land is most appropriately preserved as parkland. However, even if Minneapolis were unable to preserve it as parkland, it would be inappropriate to develop a building of this size on this site.

There are several ways this plan conflicts in particular with Minneapolis’ Mississippi River Corridor Critical Area Plan, an adopted Chapter of the City Comprehensive Plan. As an organization focused on the River and related resources, we take special interest in ensuring the Critical Area Plan is implemented thoughtfully.

- “The City will follow the land use guidelines of *The Minneapolis Plan* except where they may be modified or made more explicit by City-adopted small area plans; subsequent small area plans will further enhance and promote the policies necessary to maintain and protect the Critical Area” (p. 21).

Granting conditional use permits and variances that expand the density of usage on this site is at odds with the Marcy-Holmes Small Area Plan. The Small Area Plan clearly shows this parcel to be programmed as future park space. In the meantime, the landowner has every right to develop the land under the existing zoning constraints. However, as we will show, changing discretionary zoning standards to allow larger, denser buildings on this site should not be allowed, because of its proximity to the River. Documentation provided by others will demonstrate other failures to conform to existing planning documents.

- “As funding becomes available, the MPRB will acquire land for new river corridor

parks or trails through purchase or dedication based on a comprehensive park system plan” (p. 41).

Based on the Central Riverfront Regional Park Plan and the Marcy-Holmes Small Area Plan, this land should be prioritized for acquisition, and certainly not more intense development. There are many adjacent sites which are ripe for redevelopment.

- “Although the parkway may vary in distance from the riverbank in some areas, it should provide the user with visual contact of the river and river-related activities whenever feasible” (p. 39).

If Main Street is used as the parkway next to the proposed development site, the proposed development erect a 68-foot wall between the parkway and river, which will not allow travelers and opportunity to see the river, in opposition to this provision of the comprehensive plan.

- “The City will prevent development that blocks or has a significant negative impact on key scenic views and encourages design which preserves, enhances, or creates key scenic views” (p. 25).

The view to the end of the historic Stone Arch Bridge is key to ensuring a coherent context for this landmark. It is imperative that this view welcome travelers to the historic Falls District. While a gateway is what seems most appropriate, zoning changes would allow a 68-foot story wall to be erected at the end of the Stone Arch bridge.

- “In general, structures within the Critical Area should be shorter when located closer to the river. Taller structures are possible within the Critical Area as distance from the river increases or measures are taken to provide some level of screening, buffering and/or enhancement of views of and from the river. (p. 27)”

The proposed building would not step down toward the river, but rather provides a 68-foot wall at the bluff edge. As photos show, much of the Stone Arch Apartments is already visible from the river, and those apartments are set further back than this building would be.

Today, Ms. Cordelia Pierson submitted to you an outline of all the key reasons the zoning proposal fails to achieve the needed standards to warrant a rezoning, conditional use permit, or variances. We encourage you to review our testimony in tandem with that in-depth assessment.

This proposal is not simply technically out of conformance with several key plans and policies, at its core it is deeply at odds with the kind of place that Minneapolis should hope to create on its central riverfront, and contrary to the civic identity that has made Minneapolis great.

FMR strives to work to create successful partnerships with community leaders and developers to all share in the rewards of redeveloping an outstanding public riverfront. By partnering together in shared long-term planning, we can preserve a quality public riverfront for future generations. The proposal, along with the associated zoning changes, conditional use permits, and variance fall far short of that mark. The zoning requests should be denied on their obvious failure to conform with existing plans and guidelines, and overall clear lack of merit.

If you have any questions, you may call myself, or staff members Irene Jones and Bob Spaulding at 651-222-2193.

Best regards,

Whitney L. Clark  
Executive Director