



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

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April 11, 2018

Inver Grove Heights Park & Recreation Commission  
Attn.: Parks & Recreation Director Eric Carlson  
8150 Barbara Avenue  
Inver Grove Heights, MN 55077

RE: The proposed sale of a portion of River Heights Park.

Inver Grove Heights Park & Recreation Advisory Commission:

Friends of the Mississippi River (FMR) is a local non-profit community-based 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 2,400 active members, more than 3,000 volunteers and over 1,600 advocates who care deeply about the river's unique resources. FMR has been an active and ongoing defender and promoter of preserving and restoring public open space within our National Park, the Mississippi National River and Recreation Area (MNRRA), since 1993.

We are writing today to respectfully request that you oppose the disposition of River Heights Park and uphold your August 9, 2017 motion to recommend the City Council *"remove this park from a list under consideration to be sold, and that we affirm the value of this park, of the open space, for not only the people in that area, but the entire City and the wildlife."*

### **National Park**

Riverview Heights Park is within our local National Park, the Mississippi National River and Recreation Area (MNRRA), a 72-mile corridor along the Mississippi River through the Twin Cities. MNRRA was established in 1988 to work in partnership with local communities to protect and enhance the natural, cultural and recreational resources within the national park corridor. Since MNRRA owns very little land in the corridor, it relies on local communities and regional park agencies to provide parks, trails, open space and other public amenities within the corridor. Natural open space at this location is contributing the health and beauty of the National Park for both people and wildlife. River Heights Park not only provides residents with a trail through a natural area, but also contributes key habitat to the Mississippi River Flyway – an internationally significant migratory corridor used by millions of birds and other wildlife throughout the year. The proximity of this park to the Pine Bend Bluffs is also significant, because its high ecological value. This conservancy parkland is one of many key park pieces that make our National Park great.

## IGH Residents

Inver Grove Heights has recognized the significance of parkland for residents in the city's 2009 Comprehensive Park Plan and Development Guide.

*Parks, trails and open spaces are important to residents. Parks define neighborhoods, offer recreation opportunities, and serve as open space and wildlife habitat. The City of Inver Grove Heights parks act as neighborhood gathering points and strengthen the sense of community. The City of Inver Grove Heights is committed to meeting its residents' needs and will plan wisely for the future (pg. 6).*

We completely agree that parks provide immense benefits to the community.

The Comprehensive Park Plan goes on to explain that River Heights Park serves the entire community, is worthy of preservation and would be adversely affected by development. This information is found through the park's classification as conservancy land. The service area given by the plan is "community wide" and the site is described as one of IGH's "Significant natural areas, which merit preservation and would be adversely affected by [by] development" (pg. 20). The decision for this land classification was made as recently as 2009. Considering such a drastic change in land use from conservancy to sale for development in just nine years, the Parks Commission should reject this change, as it is inconsistent with city-adopted policy.

In addition, the city has a goal "To provide a well balanced park and recreation system" (pg. 36). Taking River Heights Park out of the mix, or partially out of the mix, would remove parkland from a portion of the city that is already fairly disconnected from other public parkland and reduce the city's already small amount of natural trails.

- Selling River Heights Park while meeting the goal above, as we see it, is not possible, because there is no new (replacement) parkland available in the surrounding neighborhoods.
- Simply removing parkland from this portion of the city also goes against this city goal. When looking at the maps showing IGH park amenity service areas (immediately following pg. 112), River Heights Park does not fall within any of the ½-1 mile services area listed. Therefore, providing parkland for area residents should be a priority for the city to ensure open space is accessible to all residents.
- Removing River Heights Park would also reduce the small amount of planned natural trails shown on the 2030 Parks, Trails and Open Space Plan Map (page 6-10, immediately following pg. 110). Removing or shrinking one of the few natural trails would go against the city's policy "To offer a variety of activities in the park system including cultural, conservation, passive, active and organized recreation areas" (emphasis added, pg. 36).

Finally, Trust for Public Land (parkserve.org) reports that this park is within a 10-minute walk of 254 residents. The park serves 62 children, 158 adults and 34 seniors. It also provides green space and reprieve for 33 people who make less than \$35,000 per year. While the park serves mostly people who are White, it also serves a fair amount of people who are Black,

Asian, Native American, mixed race, other race and Hispanic. Without this park, these people will no longer live within a 10-minute walk from a park. We urge you to prioritize walkable parkland for the well-being of all residents.

### **Funding**

We understand that the city is looking to save money and generate revenue. However, selling River Heights Park will not save the city significant money or generate significant revenue.

Selling or disposing of River Heights Park will not lift a significant burden on the city. The City's Park Maintenance Operating Budget Funding Pro-forma (IGH Comprehensive Parks Plan, PDF pg. 129), indicates that River Heights Park will not cost the city significant maintenance until 2028. Additionally, at the April 4, 2018 Public Information Meeting on this proposal, Parks Director Eric Carlson stated that the city is not spending significant funds to maintain the park currently.

Additionally, selling the park would not generate significant ongoing revenue for the city. Public data available ([gis2.co.dakota.mn.us/WAB/PropertyInformationPublic/](http://gis2.co.dakota.mn.us/WAB/PropertyInformationPublic/)) shows that the 2.5 acre properties surrounding River Heights Park will pay around \$2,000 in city tax in 2018. If River Heights Park were to be divided into three 2.5-acres parcels and sold as proposed, the city would likely gain less than \$6,000 in additional revenue per year, not taking into account likely decreased surrounding property values due to loss of park access.

Therefore, keeping the park would not be a significant burden to the city and the community wide benefits the city receives from having natural parkland for residents to enjoy should far outweigh the additional \$6,000 of revenue per year that the city could generate from selling River Heights Park.

### **Restoration Opportunity**

If the park is not to be sold for development, FMR is a strong proponent of restoring and enhancing this important open space site within the MNRRA corridor and would be willing to help.

The FMR supports restoration of River Heights Park because it would provide a higher quality park for residents as well as improved habitat that supports a greater diversity of wildlife and pollinators. This could include many other features (i.e. park sign, paved trails, nature play area, etc.) should park users desire them.

FMR would be eager to work with the City of IGH to secure restoration funding for River Heights Park. For many years, FMR has successfully received state funding for restoration projects on lands owned by cities. Restoring this park to more natural habitat would not need to a financial burden on the City, and could provide long-term enjoyment for city residents as well as create important wildlife habitat.

FMR can also offer assistance creating a management plan and implementing it. This aligns with the IGH Comprehensive Parks Plan, which suggests that the city will "*develop forest restoration plan*" (pg. 88) for River Heights Park. We could imagine our professional

ecologists, who have extensive experience writing management plans and implementing them throughout the MNRRA corridor, partnering with community members, colleges or universities. The partnership would help engage others in the design and implementation of restoration projects at River Heights Park to support a greater diversity of wildlife and pollinators.

FMR is also committed to our restoration sites long-term and do ongoing ecological management. One example of such work is at the nearby Pine Bend Bluffs Scientific and Natural Area, where FMR has been assisting the DNR with ecological restoration and management for the past 15 years. Last year we entered into a partnership with IGH to conduct restoration activities with volunteers at Heritage and Swing Bridge Parks and we were able to leverage \$20,200 in state funds towards this work. We would welcome an opportunity to assist with restoration of River Heights Park in the future.

Below are before and after pictures of FMR prairie and forest restoration sites.

Friends of the Mississippi River prairie restoration at Gores Wildlife Management Area.



Before



After

Friends of the Mississippi River forest restoration at Old Mill Park, Hastings.



Before



After

### **Parks & Recreation Advisory Commission Duties and Functions**

Finally, the Park and Recreation Advisory Commission official duties and functions per city code include “periodically examining the need for new parks and open space...” but it does not mention considering the sale or disposition of existing parkland. We ask that you demonstrate the courage to do the right thing for the health, well-being and quality of life of the residents of Inver Grove Heights, and protect River Heights Park for current and future generations.

We strongly encourage you to uphold your community’s vision for the parkland and adhere to your existing Comprehensive Park Plan by opposing the sale of River Heights Park in any amount.

Thank you for your consideration of these comments. Please feel free to reach out to Irene Jones, River Corridor Program Director ([ijones@fmr.org](mailto:ijones@fmr.org), x11) or Alicia Uzarek, Policy Advocate ([auzarek@fmr.org](mailto:auzarek@fmr.org), x29) with questions or comments.

Sincerely,

A handwritten signature in cursive script that reads "Alicia Uzarek". The signature is written in black ink and is positioned below the word "Sincerely,".

Alicia Uzarek  
Policy Advocate