



Friends of the Mississippi River

360 North Robert • Suite 400 • Saint Paul, MN 55101 • 651/ 222-2193 • www.fmr.org

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

July 8, 2011

Mary deLaittre, Project Manager
Minneapolis Riverfront Development Initiative (MRDI)
Minneapolis Park and Recreation Board
2117 West River Road N
Minneapolis, MN 55411

Dear Ms. deLaittre,

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 Region. We have 1,700 active members, and more than 3,000 volunteers annually who care deeply about the river's unique resources. FMR has worked for more than a decade on policy and advocacy for new parks and trails along the Mississippi River in north and northeast Minneapolis. We participated in creation of the Above the Falls (ATF) plan and have served in a leadership role with the Above the Falls Citizen Advisory Committee (AFCAC) for nine years. In 2004, FMR partnered with Minneapolis CPED to fund and carry out the Upper Harbor Terminal Redevelopment Study, which looked at development scenarios, design and feasibility of closing the terminal and developing the 48-acre city owned site into parks, trails, residential and commercial uses. In 2008, we served on the Minneapolis Riverfront Blue Ribbon Task Force that recommended formation of the Minneapolis Riverfront Corporation (now Partnership) and Irene Jones, FMR's River Corridor Program Director is a current member of the MRP Board of Directors.

First we applaud the MRDC/MRDI effort and believe that it has significantly added to the forward momentum of realizing the vision for expanding riverfront parks and trails in Minneapolis. Thank you for the intense amount of work that has been carried out in such a short time period. The RiverFIRST proposal by TLS/KVA includes many exciting, creative and intriguing ideas worthy of serious consideration, and we look forward to our continued involvement as the process unfolds and more detailed plans and priorities are established. Thank you also for the opportunity to provide comments on the potential projects and directions presented so far. Our comments at this point are broad and over-arching and address project choices and priorities. We will likely submit more detailed comments regarding specific project elements/amenities once the concepts have been further refined.

Scherer Park

We like the Scherer Park concept and we believe this is the site that should be given the highest priority for implementation in this process. We love the emphasis on getting people down to the water, with easy river access for canoes and kayaks. We also really like the idea of restoring Hall's Island and creating a side channel to support a safe, calm experience on and near the river. We support the possibility of private development on the landward side of the property, but we are not in favor of anything too tall that would block the neighborhood visually from the river and vice versa. Perhaps this is an overused concept, but a restaurant like "Sea Salt" might work well here, and it would not violate restrictions for the type of development allowed in regional parks. Ideally any development should be very river-oriented and serve the local businesses in the area as well as park

users. Bike and/or boat rentals, a restaurant that serves lunch and sells picnic lunches, an ice cream or coffee shop, etc. could become a fairly busy hub during daylight hours.

Our only complaint about the Scherer park concept is that it does not include significant improvements to Boom Island and B.F. Nelson Parks. These parks won't be experienced individually, but rather as part of a cohesive whole. We believe there is a unique opportunity to create a large and unified signature park close to downtown. A park that encompasses gateways to both the Above the Falls Regional Park and the Central Riverfront Regional Park, ties the two areas together, and helps to bring people from downtown to destinations north.

Completing the loop trails up to Broadway and the railroad bridge should also be very high priority and rolling it together with the Scherer plans might help with momentum. Getting a trail across the railroad bridge would be a major achievement. We are intrigued by the knot-bridge concepts, but would need to review more detailed plans for these before weighing in.

Farview Land Bridge Connector

FMR is very supportive of taking steps to better connect the north side to the river and parks. We love the idea of a land bridge, but we feel that, the way this bridge is conceived, the cost would very likely be prohibitive in general, and much too costly relative to the many other needs in the Above the Falls Plan. Even if we could find the tens of millions of dollars to build it, there are many other park projects that could be done to improve the park and connect north side residents, possibly with much greater impact per dollar spent.

We would like to see a range of alternatives for connecting north Minneapolis to the river with a comparison of costs and benefits. One concept that might be more cost-effective is a bridge between Lowry and Dowling, where the ATF Plan suggests a new crossing. This section includes a longer stretch between existing freeway crossings, and it would connect to a city-owned river location that is poised to become park much sooner than the heavy industrial area south of Lowry. A cost estimate for building a land bridge was included in the Upper Harbor Terminal Redevelopment Study. Other options that should be considered are adding one or more pedestrian crossings and/or doing some greening and traffic calming design measures for the freeway bridges and approaches between Lyndale and the river (Plymouth, Broadway, Lowry, Dowling). Particularly compelling among these is a strengthening of the Broadway Avenue corridor just south of the proposed land bridge. Much community energy and focus has gone into the West Broadway Alive! plan over the last five years, and focusing on improving this existing corridor – perhaps with a redesign of the Broadway Bridge and surroundings to make it less intimidating for pedestrians – might be a worthwhile alternative.

In general, we think there should be less emphasis on creating one grand connection, and more emphasis on adding pedestrian bridges over I-94 where needed, and strengthening existing connections through design-conscious zoning. Even where connections exist, the fabric of the east side of I-94 was rarely designed to be hospitable to bicyclists and particularly pedestrians. A variety of uses – including industrial, commercial, and residential – can be designed to be set back only minimally from the street, with windows, materials and other treatments that enliven the streetscape. A rigorous design focus on selected east-west connectors would do much to encourage increased travel between the heart of North Minneapolis and the Mississippi riverfront.

We do like the elevated walkway concept along the river included in the Farview connector plan and would support the idea of finding a way for trails to connect while barging continues. The Quad Cities has some examples of this on the Illinois side. Getting trails and a parkway through this section of the ATF plan will be very challenging and we appreciate the creativity put into this concept.

Wetlands/Green Port Demonstration

While we appreciate the effort to provide space for economic development to help pay for new parks, we strongly disagree with the resuscitation of the Port of Minneapolis in the RiverFIRST concept. We believe that any planned improvements to port operations, "green" or otherwise, would be a rollback of good policy for the river's future. Current policy for both the City of Minneapolis and MPRB is for the Upper Harbor Terminal (UHT) to be closed and converted to new uses, and for the property adjacent to the river to become parkland. Even the City's current policy review of the ATF plan does not contemplate continued operation of the port – but rather it is looking at changing the land uses adjacent to the planned new riverfront park in that area. We support reviewing the land use plan here, but not the boundaries of the park plan, and we feel it is imperative that the MPRB stand by its current policy. There are many players at the table here, and MPRB is the last organization that should be advocating for improvements to the port at the expense of riverfront parks. If consolidating the port with no improvements is shown to be necessary to support incremental development of the property into parkland, we would not oppose that, but a clear phasing plan and projected date of closure for the UHT would be beneficial for all parties and stakeholders involved.

FMR has a large stake in the future of the UHT. Working with the non-profit American Rivers, FMR raised \$50,000 towards completion of the UHT Redevelopment Study, and we have been advocating for several years for the City to close the port and give land to MPRB to build a park that will encourage private redevelopment in the area. (Incidentally, we explored the idea of asking another governmental unit to provide funding to MPRB to buy city-owned land, and state legislators, congressional representatives and the Metropolitan Council staff said it was not likely because the outside world looks at the City and MPRB as one local government.)

In terms of actual park development, we are open to many concepts. We like the restored wetlands and treatment of stormwater suggested for the southern half of the site, but we would be open to other options, especially ones that tie in parkland at the northern half of the UHT site. During the UHT Study, connections to North Mississippi Regional Park were identified as critical to the success of redevelopment in this area.

The UHT Study was constrained by design to follow the ATF Plan, so it only looked at different residential use scenarios and densities. Now the City is contemplating alternative uses such as office or light industrial. We recommend planning for this site should look at the City's land use alternatives and at the same time explore different park concepts that could support those uses. For example, the wetland park concept might work nicely with a corporate campus or mixed-use development, but a narrower linear park without the wetland features could be lined by agricultural uses that give the sense of more open space. In both cases, including community gardens would put eyes on the park during evening hours.

East Side Riverfront Park

Planning the future trail alignment and securing easements in this stretch is critical, but we consider it to be a lower priority than getting trails in from Plymouth to the railroad bridge or closing and redeveloping the UHT. The stormwater treatment associated with this concept is interesting and innovative, but it has the potential to slow the process of getting trails put in and/or to disrupt recently renovated parks, such as Gluek and Edgewater. Obviously, additional planning and permitting would need to occur for us to get a better sense of the project specifics. Removing, replacing and or moving the earth in this area will be complicated and the cost should be carefully considered. One other thing to consider is that bluffs in this area are not really natural. The historic topography sloped back gently to large expanses of flat prairie, and many of the steep "bluffs" are actually made of fill and may not provide the best soils for plantings or the long-term stability needed for trails and overlooks.

Islands

We like the use of islands throughout the RiverFIRST proposal and strongly support plans and efforts to re-establish islands and restore native vegetation to existing islands within the ATF Plan. The river historically had many islands in this reach, and islands can provide extremely important bird and wildlife habitat in a highly developed urban area. Providing a string of habitat islands from Nicollet Island to the destroyed Heron Rookery would be a great way to improve the ecology, corridor connections and wildlife watching opportunities in the area. We are intrigued by the bio-haven islands and interested in learning more. Because they absorb nutrients, but not sediment, we think their ability to improve water quality is limited, but they could provide important habitat. Our preference would be to restore natural islands in the river where feasible.

Presently there are three active docks in the Upper Harbor – the Port, Aggregate Industries and Northern Metal Recycling. If the Port closed, the Army Corps of Engineers would no longer need to dredge the nine-foot barge channel north of the Lowry Bridge. This would save federal dollars and open up an opportunity to restore natural islands or just let them form on their own.

Thank you again for your work on this initiative and for your consideration of our comments. Please feel free to contact Irene Jones or me at 651-222-2193 if you have any questions or wish to discuss these comments with us directly.

Sincerely yours,

A handwritten signature in black ink that reads "Whitney L. Clark". The signature is written in a cursive style with a large, sweeping initial 'W'.

Whitney L. Clark
Executive Director

CC: Bruce Chamberlain, MPRB Assistant Superintendent for Planning