



# Friends of the Mississippi River

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

November 13, 2012

Haila Maze, Planner  
City of Minneapolis CPED  
250 South 4th Street, Room 110  
Minneapolis, MN 55415

Andrew Caddock, Project Manager  
Minneapolis Park & Recreation Board  
2117 West River Road  
Minneapolis, MN 55411

Dear Haila and Andrew,

As you know, 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 1,700 active members, and more than 3,000 active volunteers who care deeply about the river's unique resources. FMR has been an active and ongoing participant in planning for the future of the Minneapolis riverfront.

The RiverFirst and Above the Falls Policy Review have progressed enough that we thought the time was right to offer some general comments on your combined work. For clarity, the focus of our comments is split between the east and west sides of the river, with a major theme for each. We intend to provide additional comments after the draft plan is released next month.

## **WEST SIDE OF THE RIVER**

**Much more must be done to capitalize on the river's potential benefit for the North Side.**

The RiverFirst design concept and implementation strategy focuses on one significant connection to the River – at 26th Street from Farview Park. That one connection is not enough to serve the many northside neighborhoods that would benefit from river connections over I-94. Recent revisions rightly put more emphasis on other connections, and we hope this emphasis continues. Travel is encouraged only when there are several attractive ways back and forth – walking or biking “circuits” that reach well into the neighborhoods. Given its historic lack of connection to natural resources, the North Side deserves more than a single significant connection.

Moreover, there needs to be more of a compelling reason to walk to the riverfront on the North Side. So far, we haven't seen anything that has convinced us there will be enough of a real destination on the riverfront where the 26th Ave Greenway meets the river. Without enough real destinations, this section of the river could end up feeling too isolated. Representative Loeffler gave examples of the scale of destination she thought would be appropriate: a new MnSCU campus, or relocated Bell Museum of Natural History. While the nature of such decisions makes it difficult to identify exactly what that attraction might be in advance, plans should indicate a very clear placeholder for a significant destination that will be truly transformative for a riverfront.

The format of the pathways is really important. Early drafts of RiverFirst showed a series of bridges running up along the shore of the existing industrial riverfront. This approach is likely to be cost-prohibitive, and even if it was feasible, it would create a hostile and unwelcoming environment along the river. Ideally, the parkway and riverfront trails are within visual proximity of one another.

We were pleased to see that concept replaced with a more traditional strip of land and pathway in more recent revisions to park plans. We hope that the concept of riverfront green space can be presented in a robust enough way to give elected leaders the basis to secure that land from private ownership as land use changes present opportunities in this area.

Finally, we believe that a very robust public realm is necessary to establish a comfortable and accessible riverfront, particularly in the context of new or existing business parks and commercial-industrial properties. These industrial settings require a wider riverfront park corridor than exists in the draft plans, particularly south of Lowry and around Dowling Avenue on the former Upper Harbor Terminal site. This parkland, and the associated regional park boundary, should be moved significantly further back from the river.

We recommend addressing these weaknesses in the following ways:

**ACTION #1.** The parkland and regional park boundary around Dowling Avenue should extend about one full block (roughly 500 feet) back from the river.

**ACTION #2.** Plans should include illustrations that make it crystal clear that the goal is for significant public, green riverfront with trails and a parkway. Zoning should be rewritten to require setbacks for a robust green strip whenever redevelopment occurs, ideally as dedicated parkland.

**ACTION #3.** Ideally, plans will include illustrations that strongly highlight several potential new connections over I-94 to the riverfront, and a comparison of implementation costs and benefits.

**ACTION #4.** Zoning revisions should include solid design standards that apply to all lots, buildings and building faces both along the riverfront parkland/parkway, and along any current or future east-west connections to the river. Interior streets are more appropriate for secondary facades or lesser treatments.

**ACTION #5.** Plans should include very clear and robust placeholder for a major destination to be located near the riverfront in this area, along with a list of possible examples of the kind of major destination that is intended for that area.

We recommend one of two options for rezoning:

**OPTION #1.** The Upper Harbor Terminal area should not be guided to “business park” but rather toward residential or mixed uses. Other current industrial areas, at least the portions riverward of the north-south rail corridor, should be re-designated as residential or mixed use.

**OPTION #2.** Any “business park” or “industrial” area along the western riverfront should include several specific areas planned and zoned for more public destination types of uses along the riverfront, such as a riverfront restaurant. This is in addition to the areas that have already been identified as “mixed use” near key thoroughfares such as Dowling, Lowry and Broadway. Specific potential concepts for a park-focused destination of some significance should be identified in plans for the terminus of the 26th Street Greenway at the Mississippi River.

## **EAST SIDE OF THE RIVER**

**We should retain the clear long-term vision of a continuously green riverfront. Until that is achieved, we must require that changes in the corridor help get us closer to that vision for green space.**

As we transition toward continuous green space west of Marshall Street NE, we can allow a variety of commercial and residential uses to continue, but only at very low intensities. Low intensity uses afford property owners the right to use and even modify their properties, but respect the evolving riverfront context, and set the stage for the eventual acquisition of this land. It ought to be crystal clear to all stakeholders that all new development must – without any exception – be set back from the river enough to protect the slopes and enough to give space for future bike and walking paths.

We suggest addressing this in the following ways:

**ACTION #1.** Plans will include illustrations that show the long-range vision for continuous green space, as the original Above the Falls Plan did.

**ACTION #2.** Plans will include illustrations that show how the transition of the riverfront to green space might take place. That stage continues some private uses riverward of Marshall, but places strict limits on development intensity, and clearly highlights the strip of riverside “no-build” zone, noting it is to be preserved in the long term for both ecological reasons and pathways.

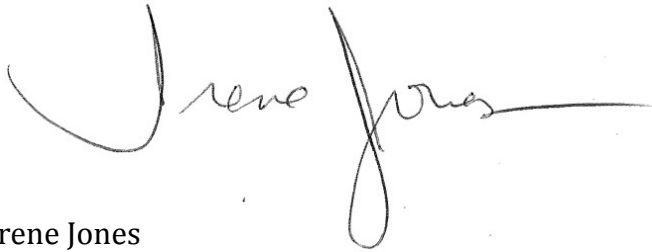
**ACTION #3.** The zoning throughout the area should allow both commercial and residential use, but only at low intensities.

**ACTION #4.** The riverfront rezoning process should review, affirm, and likely expand the riverfront setback requirements already in city code.

Finally, we really have appreciated the thoughtful, open approach that staff has taken toward developing this plan. And we want to express our thanks for some of the changes we saw in recent revisions – changes that helped us become more comfortable with some of the directions anticipated for the riverfront above the falls. In particular, the cross-sectional views, along with some of the depictions of possible development types, has hopefully spurred a richer conversation about how the Above the Falls area will evolve.

These are our major comments at this time. Thanks as always for your work and consideration. Please feel free to contact me at 651-222-2193 x11 with questions.

Sincerely,

A handwritten signature in black ink, appearing to read "Irene Jones". The signature is fluid and cursive, with a long horizontal stroke extending to the right.

Irene Jones  
River Corridor Program Director  
Friends of the Mississippi River