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SPRING 2015

WORKING TO PROTECT THE MISSISSIPPI RIVER AND ITS WATERSHED IN THE TWIN CITIES AREA

Ribbons of Habitat for Water Quality: Buffers Proposal Offers New Hope for an Old Problem

by Harland Hiemstra

Strutting along the edge of a cornfield on an autumn morning, a large coppery bird with dark iridescent head, white collar and red eye-patches bursts into flight with a quick drum roll of wings, long tail feathers waving behind with cocky panache.

It's not the image that comes foremost to mind when thinking about healthy streams and rivers; but the ring-necked pheasant has recently become an unwitting and unlikely poster child for efforts to improve water quality in the Land of 10,000 Lakes.

Earlier this year, Governor Mark Dayton proposed an initiative requiring vegetated buffers along all waters of the state. The governor's announcement made at an annual DNR-sponsored gathering of hunting and fishing stakeholders, grew out of a December summit Dayton called to address the state's declining pheasant population. A coalition of 29 environmental and conservation organizations – including Friends of the Mississippi River – promptly sent letters to Dayton praising his buffer proposal. “Expanding the practice of shoreland buffers presents an enormous opportunity to improve water quality and the state's natural resources,” they wrote. “These buffers provide a way to decrease nonpoint source water pollution while creating corridors of habitat for wildlife.” Since then, FMR has been working diligently with state officials to craft legislation putting the governor's proposal into law.



A successful grass buffer in Redwood County. Photo courtesy of BWSR/Redwood SWCD.

What began with hunters looking for ways to help a popular game species is now being heralded as one of the most significant water quality initiatives put forward by a Minnesota governor in decades.

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Buffer basics

A buffer is a strip of uncultivated land that lies between a farm field and a body of water. Rather than planting crops right up to the stream bank or shoreline, where a swath of perennial plants such as grass and trees are allowed to grow. This ribbon of permanent vegetation along the water's edge provides habitat for numerous species, from butterflies and pollinators to frogs, songbirds and – yes – game species such as pheasants.

Where buffers really pay dividends is by improving water quality. When precipitation runs off farm fields, it can carry a stew of nasty substances that don't belong in the water. Nitrates and phosphorus from fertilizers promote algae blooms and cause the infamous Gulf of Mexico dead zone. Soil is washed off cultivated fields and turns lakes and streams murky and pathogens from livestock manure get swept downstream.

Ribbons of habitat for water quality, continued on page 6

INSIDE

PAGE 2

From the Director
Bold Leadership from Governor Dayton on Buffers

PAGE 3

Program Highlights
The Promise and Peril of Advanced Biofuels
Riverfront Property in Elk River is Permanently Protected

PAGE 4

Program Updates
Critical Area Rules Nearing Completion
Improving Wildlife Habitat at Ole Olson Park

PAGE 5

End of an Era for Minneapolis Port
FMR Watching Several Development Projects in St. Paul

PAGE 7

Saying Goodbye To Joe Walton
FMR Welcomes New Director of Development Sara Dekok
Ronnie Brooks Joins FMR Board of Directors

PAGE 8

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Mission

Friends of the Mississippi River engages citizens to protect, restore and enhance the Mississippi River and its watershed in the Twin Cities region.

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FROM THE DIRECTOR

Bold Leadership from Governor Dayton on Buffers

by Whitney Clark, Executive Director



I was in the audience on January 16th when Governor Dayton surprised and delighted several hundred anglers, hunters and conservationists by proposing legislation to establish shoreland buffers along all of our state's waters.

A flurry of news stories, editorials and commentaries followed the announcement and opponents and proponents jockeyed for position but one thing was immediately clear. In remarks that lasted less than five minutes the Governor had fundamentally changed the debate from whether buffers of perennial vegetation should be required on our shoreland to how the buffer requirement should be applied and enforced.

As the accompanying cover article in this newsletter details, buffer strips along our streams, rivers and ditches perform several functions and deliver many benefits. They help to filter and reduce runoff pollutants, especially from cultivated land. Perennial root systems hold streambanks in place, reducing erosion. Buffers of grasses and trees in that critical zone where the water meets the land provide essential habitat for myriad species including songbirds, bees, butterflies and amphibians not to mention popular game species such as pheasants. Unfortunately, most of Minnesota's shorelands are not required to have buffers and for those that are, the requirement is largely unenforced.

For me, what was striking about Governor Dayton's proposal was the importance of strong leadership in defining and emphasizing ethical principles in the service of public policy. In his remarks the Governor said, "I recognize this will not be well received by some private

landowners. The land may be yours, but the water belongs to all of us." With these words the Governor eloquently set the frame for the debate: Property owners certainly have many rights that must be respected, but with those rights come responsibilities as well. When the manner in which the land is used or managed leads to degradation of the health of public waters downstream, the state has a legitimate role in setting certain minimum standards for stewardship.

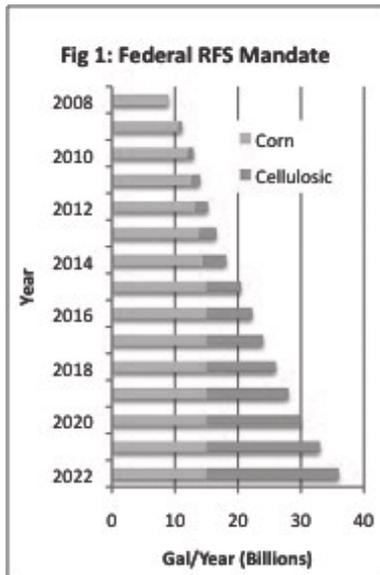
Dayton's proposed legislation is fair, flexible and long overdue. Importantly, the bill extends buffer protections to a much larger share of Minnesota's waters including some smaller streams that don't flow perennially. The proposal also includes thousands of miles of ditches, many of which are former natural streams that have been straightened to more efficiently drain agricultural land. We know these ditches are a primary delivery mechanism for pollution so it is essential that they are addressed.

In my 25 plus years working on water policy in Minnesota, Governor Dayton's buffer initiative is perhaps the boldest and most far-reaching. Of course, it is still only a proposal and there is a long way to go before it becomes law. The legislature will certainly want to influence and shape the initiative and there are lawmakers who will oppose any buffer requirement despite the benefits they would provide for our water and wildlife.

Over half of the state drains to the Mississippi River so the importance of this proposal to the health of the Mississippi is very significant. We are grateful for the Governor's progressive leadership on this issue and we look forward to working closely with the Dayton administration, supporters in the legislature and our thousands of Minnesota members to enact this proposal this year.

The Promise and Peril of Advanced Biofuels

by Trevor Russell



The nation's Renewable Fuel Standard (RFS) mandates a rapid increase in the production of advanced biofuels by the year 2022.

The Minnesota legislature is considering legislation to jumpstart the production of advanced renewable biofuels in Minnesota. If done right, this legislation will improve water quality, habitat, and our farm economy. If not, our water quality problems will only get worse.

America's Renewable Fuel Standard

The nation's Renewable Fuel Standard (RFS) mandates a dramatic increase in the production of advanced cellulosic biofuels through the year 2022. As a result, ethanol refineries are meeting demand for this fuel by harvesting corn stover: the leaves and stalks of corn plants leftover after harvest.

While corn stover is plentiful in Minnesota, harvesting this stover for biofuel production is a conservation catastrophe. That's because roots and plant material that remain in agricultural fields after harvest help boost soil health, store excess nutrients, and hold soil together to prevent erosion. If stover is harvested,

unprotected fields leech higher levels of fertilizers, pesticides, and eroding soil into Minnesota's surface waters.

Perennial Biofuels: Clean Water & Renewable Energy

FMR and our allies are working hard to promote the development of perennial-based biofuel production that does not rely on corn or corn stover. By using perennial plants as an ethanol feedstock, we can achieve the state's long-term renewable energy and clean water goals while enhancing habitat, soil health, climate resiliency, and farm profits throughout the state.

The technology already exists to use perennial crops for biofuel production. Alfalfa, for example, is a perennial crop familiar to many of today's farmers. This unique crop provides a double harvest: the leaves can be harvested as a high protein animal feed, while stalks and stems are used as a potent biofuel feedstock.

Perennial crops also diversify our economy, providing producers with additional income derived from crops that can thrive on the marginal lands and highly erodible soils that perform poorly when planted with traditional row crops.

If we are going to solve the daunting water quality, climate and habitat challenges facing our state, we must find a way to dramatically expand the use of profitable perennial crops in our agricultural landscapes. FMR and our allies are working with legislators and the Dayton administration to do just that.

Riverfront Property in Elk River is Permanently Protected

by Tom Lewanski

One of the strategies that FMR uses to improve and safeguard the Mississippi River in the Twin Cities is to work with landowners to permanently protect riverfront property. FMR has been working with the City of Elk River to develop a strategy to purchase and restore a 347-acre farm in the heart of this city. The Houlton Farm, located at the confluence of the Mississippi and Elk rivers in Sherburne County, was one of the largest undeveloped family owned riverfront properties between Elk River and Hastings. In December, the city's dream to protect this property for its open space values became a reality when the Trust for Public Land, with funding from the Outdoor Heritage Fund (as recommended by the Lessard Sams Outdoor Heritage Council) and the U.S. Fish and Wildlife Service, purchased the property and transferred the ownership to the City of Elk River.

For many projects, FMR likes to stay engaged long term so we can assist in restoring the property to maintain and



The Mississippi River flows past the Houlton Farm in Elk River. Photo by Whitney Clark.

increase the biodiversity of the site. This is certainly one of them. The ecological value of the land will be greatly increased as the existing agricultural fields are restored to natural communities, which in this case will likely be prairie and oak savanna. City staff asked us to continue to partner with them to improve the habitat and scenic values of the property. In 2015, FMR will develop a natural resource management plan for the property and the Bailey Point Natural Area adjacent to it and implement the plan with an Outdoor Heritage grant provided by the Minnesota Legislature as recommended by the Lessard Sams Outdoor Heritage Council (LSOHC).

FMR would like to thank the City of Elk River, the Trust For Public Land, the Houlton Family and the Outdoor Heritage Council for their roles in making this exiting project happen.

Critical Area Rules Nearing Completion

by Irene Jones



*Improving Wildlife Habitat at Ole Olson.
Photo by Alicia Uzarek.*

The long anticipated new rules for the Mississippi River Corridor Critical Area (MRCCA) are finally moving towards formal adoption this summer. Established in the 1970s to protect the unique natural, scenic and cultural resources of the Mississippi River from Dayton to Hastings, development standards for the 72-mile corridor have been inadequate and difficult to enforce.

FMR has been closely engaged in the process for the past six years, working with state legislators to gain rulemaking authority, collaborating with citizens and other stakeholders to influence the rules, and keeping the pressure on state officials to write and adopt rules that will ensure the river is protected for current and future generations. We are grateful to the nearly 2,000 activists that contributed their time and their voices toward advocating for strong rules, and we are certain that our efforts will be worthwhile.

Although DNR is putting the finishing touches on the final draft of the rules, we are confident that many things we advocated for will be included, such as height limits to protect key scenic views, requirements to protect open space and provide public

river access with new development, new tools to help local communities plan for restoration of riparian natural areas, and better clarity around what is required for local critical area plans, ordinances and development proposals.

Once formal review of the draft rules is completed by an administrative law judge later in 2015, the DNR will officially adopt the new ruling. As always, stay tuned for updates!

Improving Wildlife Habitat at Ole Olson Park

by Irene Jones

FMR has drafted a Natural Resource Management Plan for Orvin “Ole” Olson Park, located at West River Road and 22nd Avenue North. Our staff are working with the Minneapolis Park and Recreation Board (MPRB) to begin native habitat restoration work later this year.

The Ole Olson Park site offers exciting restoration potential. For a smaller park, it contains a large diversity of landscapes: shoreline, woodland terraces, and grassland slopes. A healthy and diverse plant community can provide much greater wildlife value than a degraded one, and tends to be much more stable, and less susceptible to disease, invasive species, and other concerns.

Restoration was started here a few years ago by MPRB, with shoreline restoration, slope stabilization, and prairie reconstruction on the riverbank. We recommend continuing these practices and expanding them to the entire park area. Currently, much of the park is infested by a host of invasive species such as smooth brome grass, Siberian elm, and Russian thistle. Now, with the planned restoration one can envision a day when the shoreline is stable and filled with native willows and sedges, the slopes are blanketed in prairie wildflowers and grasses, and the terraces are home to scattered, majestic bur oaks – and all nurtured and enjoyed by local residents. What a grand future that would be!

FMR has raised approximately \$24,000 for the first phase of restoration, which will focus on restoring oak savanna to the upland riverbanks and river terraces (sloped area between the bike and pedestrian trails), and working with volunteers to install a showy demonstration prairie garden along the bike trail. Restoring and stabilizing the riverbank is also recommended, but may require that additional funds be raised.

FMR is grateful for the support for this project from the Irwin Andrew Porter Foundation, the National Fish and Wildlife Foundation and the Minnesota Environment and Natural Resources Trust Fund as recommended by the Legislative Citizen Commission on Minnesota Resources.



Joe Walton, author of the Ole Olson natural resource management plan, shares his vision for restoring native habitat to the park during a public tour in 2013. Photo by Irene Jones/FMR.

End of an Era for Minneapolis Port

by Irene Jones

There is a very exciting opportunity brewing on the Mississippi Riverfront in north Minneapolis. The 48-acre city-owned Upper Harbor Terminal (UHT) is closing, and plans to redevelop the site could soon become a reality. Planning for a different future at the UHT site has been under consideration for almost two decades, with discussions dating as far back as the late 1990s. The award-winning Above the Falls Master Plan suggested closing the UHT, and converting the site to new riverfront parks, trails and private redevelopment. The exact vision for how this site will be redeveloped has been through a few renditions in the past decade ranging from a riverfront neighborhood to a large wetland park to a corporate campus. Much is yet to be decided, however, and one big question that needs to be grappled with is how much of the land should be devoted to parkland?



Upper Harbor Terminal. Photo by Mississippi National River and Recreation Area.

The City of Minneapolis recently completed a study aimed at answering that question. The study provides a limited analysis of three possible development scenarios, examines park and public infrastructure improvements that would be needed, and estimates their costs and identifies potential funding sources or mechanisms.

FMR looks forward to engaging with City, the Minneapolis Park and Recreation Board and other stakeholders to ensure a robust community discussion about the future of this prime riverfront location.

“Redeveloping the UHT site offers a huge opportunity to revitalize the riverfront in North Minneapolis with a big new waterfront park that can provide many benefits to the local community, the regional park system, and the health of the Mississippi River,” says Whitney Clark, executive director at FMR.

FMR Watching Several Development Projects in St. Paul

by Alicia Uzarek

The city of St. Paul is well positioned as Mississippi Riverfront development picks up in 2015. In 2007, the city of St. Paul created the forward thinking Great River Passage Plan. This plan provides riverfront development guidance making the riverfront more natural, urban, and connected. The city has also updated several small area plans near the river. It is important that we work together to ensure the community’s vision is realized to revitalize underutilized parcels and enhance existing landscapes. Here are a few sites to keep an eye on:

Highland Park: Pending city approval, the old US Bank site at Shepard Road and Davern Street will be redeveloped to include luxury apartment buildings. The City is also studying the possible realignment of Shepard Road at this location. FMR is serving on the Community Advisory Group.

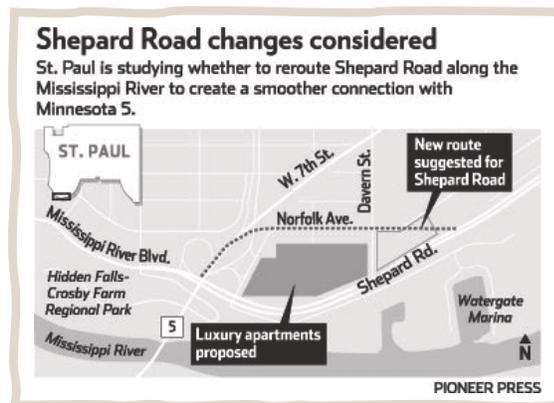
Island Station: The Island Station Power Plant was demolished last winter and is ripe for redevelopment. TJL Development LLC is working with area stakeholders to develop residences and parkland on the site.

Downtown Bluff: Ramsey County is working to coordinate the deconstruction of the former West Publishing complex and adult detention center on Kellogg Boulevard by mid-2016. A retaining wall will be built to stabilize the bluff before the site is offered to developers.

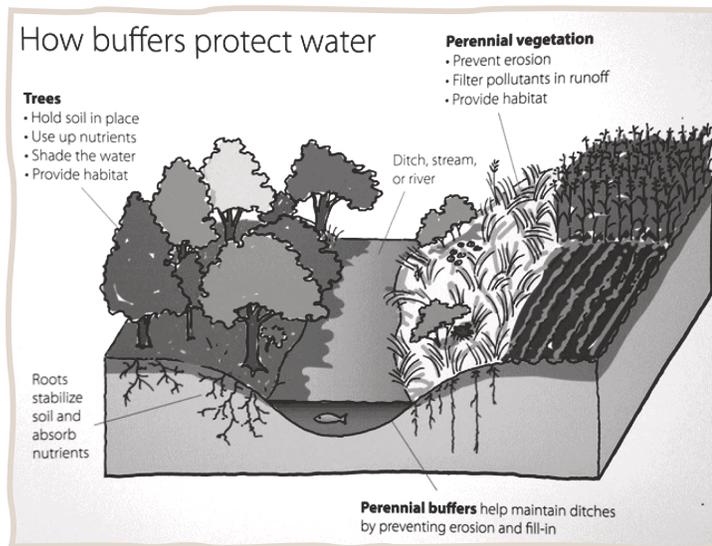
West Side Flats: The West Side Flats Master Plan Update has been approved by the Planning Commission and will go before City Council for approval in April 2015. FMR served on the Community Advisory Group and led the effort to ensure building heights would not block the majestic Mississippi River valley views.



A view of the majestic St. Paul River Valley from Mounds Park. Photo by FMR Staff.



Proposed redevelopment in the Highland Neighborhood. Illustration by Pioneer Press.



The Natural Resources Conservation Service (NRCS), a federal agency that works with farmers, estimates that vegetated buffer strips can remove or intercept 50% or more of the nutrients and pesticides in runoff, 60% or more of some pathogens, and 75% or more of sediment. The deep roots of the native plants are preferred for buffers to help stabilize stream banks and reduce erosion, while also promoting the infiltration of rain into the soil.

Habitat corridors, cleaner water, stream bank stabilization, and healthier fisheries – a combination of benefits that the NRCS refers to simply as “Common Sense Conservation.”

New emphasis on an old idea

The idea of perennial vegetation along waterways isn't new. Starting in 2000, FMR launched a program to help landowners plant native grasses, forbs and trees along the Vermillion River and its tributaries. FMR subsequently pushed for proactive buffer requirements throughout the Vermillion River watershed. The group also successfully led the push for a statewide Shoreland Buffers program that provided financial and technical assistance to landowners from the Board of Water and Soil Resources (BWSR).

Tim Koehler, senior programs advisor for BWSR, notes the concept has been around for a century, and the use of riparian buffers has been actively promoted through state and federal conservation programs for more than 30 years. Since 1989, Minnesota rules have required a 50-foot buffer in agricultural areas along all public watercourses on the “Public Waters Inventory.” That list, however, doesn't include every basin with standing or flowing water.

Another part of state law requires a 16.5-foot buffer along drainage ditches, but only when certain conditions are met. According to BWSR's Koehler, only 20% of drainage ditches in the state fall under that requirement. The two laws together apply to only about 36% of the watercourses in Minnesota, leaving nearly two-thirds unprotected. On top of that, enforcement of the rules, which is delegated to counties, is spotty to nonexistent. According to the state, only 6 of Minnesota's 87 counties are fully enforcing the 50-foot

shoreland ag buffer. Other sources indicate only about half a dozen counties have undertaken a thorough review of where buffers are required and followed up with landowners who are not in compliance.

The governor's proposal would address both deficiencies, requiring permanently vegetated buffers along most waters, and providing for stronger state oversight of enforcement.

Farm country in the big city

Why, one might ask, should an organization focused on the Mississippi River as it flows through the seven-county Twin Cities metro region care about what a farmer does hours away in Watonwan County? FMR's water programs director, Trevor Russell, answers that question in three words: the Minnesota River. The state's namesake river drains water from nearly 17,000 square miles of some of the richest, most intensely farmed land anywhere, water that carries tons of sediment and a steady stream of phosphorus and nitrogen from agricultural runoff, discharging it all into the Mississippi a few miles downstream of Minnehaha Park at Fort Snelling.

“The largest share of sediment, nitrates and phosphorus pollution in the Mississippi River is coming from the Minnesota River basin,” Russell says. “We can't achieve water quality standards in the Mississippi until we address agricultural pollution in the Minnesota.”

While some of the issues around agricultural pollution stem from federal farm policy, a topic on which the state has little say, promoting the use of riparian buffers is something the state can do to make a difference, says Jeff Strock. A professor and soil scientist at the University of Minnesota's Southwest Research Center in Lamberton, Strock has seen firsthand the water quality benefits that can result from different approaches to land management and crop production. Riparian buffers are just one practice in a toolbox that also includes alternative designs for drainage ditches, different methods of tillage, restoring wetlands, planting different crops, and more precisely tailoring the amount of fertilizer to what crops need. No one technique alone is sufficient to address nonpoint agricultural pollution.

“It's going to take all of these things to meet water quality standards,” Strock says. “One size doesn't fit all, and there isn't any silver bullet.” It's not just a matter of asking farmers to change their production methods or the crops they plant. Some of the monocultural corn production in the Minnesota River watershed is fueled by the demand for livestock feed and Americans' appetite for meat. We may need to examine our own habits as well as those of farmers.

“These are really complex and interconnected systems,” he says. “There are a lot of different changes that have to happen, from producers to consumers.”

Reasonable expectations

Both Strock and BWSR's Tim Koehler are quick to point out requiring riparian buffers in agricultural areas may mean transitioning some land from annual to perennial crops. They also acknowledge water pollution has costs as well. The question boils down to who pays for what, and what is reasonable.

Ribbons of habitat for water quality, continued from page 6

Recent analysis by the Environmental Working Group found riparian buffers in Iowa could go a long way toward achieving that state's water quality goals while having minimal impact on farmers. In the five Iowa counties examined, they found only 11% of farmers would be affected by requiring a 50-foot buffer, and 71% of those would only need to convert an acre or less of cropland to perennial cover – leading the group to refer to buffer requirements as “low-hanging fruit” – something relatively easy and inexpensive to implement,

but paying big dividends in terms of water quality. FMR executive director Whitney Clark thinks that's even more so here in the state where the Father of Waters starts its long journey south.

“Governor Dayton deserves praise for putting forward a proposal that's bold but pragmatic,” Clark says. “Requiring a baseline of care for the land in relation to water quality is a reasonable expectation that everyone ought to be able to get behind. It's a real opportunity to make major progress on what's been an intractable problem.”

Saying Goodbye To Joe Walton

by Tom Lewanski



Joe Walton. Photo by Karen Schik.

It is with mixed feelings that we must say goodbye to ecologist Joe Walton. During his four years at FMR, Joe gained valuable experience as a field ecologist. During this time he developed many Natural Resource Management Plans and managed numerous restoration projects, all of which have benefited the Mississippi River. Joe also contributed greatly to the work environment at FMR with his positive attitude and quick smile. The Mississippi River and FMR are both better because of the time he spent here. We are pleased that he will be taking his knowledge and experience to do very similar work for Dakota County. We know that his ecological work in this south metro county will continue to benefit the great river. Thank you Joe and good luck in your new job.

FMR Welcomes New Director of Development Sara DeKok

Friends of the Mississippi River is pleased to announce the hiring of its new director of development, Sara DeKok (pronounced de-cook). For the past 12 years Sara has served as director of development and associate director of Gathering Waters, Wisconsin's alliance for land trusts. In her new role she will lead FMR's development office and oversee efforts to strategically expand the organization's impact by increasing revenue from philanthropic sources. “I'm so excited to be able to jump in and help to grow this organization that I admire so much,” said DeKok. “I believe there's great potential to build on FMR's strong reputation in the community to have an even greater impact.”



FMR Director of Development Sara DeKok and daughter Aspen.

Sara has a longstanding interest in natural resource protection. She holds a Masters of Science in conservation biology and sustainable development from the University of Wisconsin. Shortly after joining the staff, Sara and her husband Sean welcomed the newest FMR member into their family. Daughter Aspen Hazel was born in late January. Welcome Sara and welcome Aspen!

Ronnie Brooks Joins FMR Board of Directors



Ronnie Brooks joined the FMR Board in January.

Friends of the Mississippi River welcomes Ronnie Brooks as the newest member of its Board of Directors. Brooks has a sparkling resume of involvement in civic affairs. She is the founding director of the James P. Shannon Leadership Institute, a program of the Amherst H. Wilder Foundation, providing a yearlong renewal experience for foundation and nonprofit organization leaders. She also consults on strategic planning, leadership development, and nonprofit organization governance and management. When working in Minnesota state government, first as director of research for the Senate Majority and then as a Special Assistant to the Governor, she served on the Minnesota Environmental Quality Board. Brooks has a longstanding fascination with and love for the Mississippi River. “I feel privileged to be living so close to one of the world's great and storied rivers. I hope to play some small part in helping others to learn about, enjoy, and preserve the health and beauty of this resource” she said.



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Why Give to FMR?



"The simplicity of it all is that the Mississippi River is the most important water resource in our country. We also happen to have both our breweries within blocks of it in Downtown and NE Minneapolis and we believe it enhances the communities we inhabit. It's safe to say we wouldn't be here today without the Mighty Mississippi."

- Fulton Brewing, *Business Member*



"I support FMR because of its commitment to stewardship of the shared resource that is the Mississippi River. And just like the river offers many uses for different people, FMR works for the river in a variety of ways including public outreach, environmental restoration, and urban watershed planning. A great resource deserves great advocacy."

- Tyler Teggatz, *Monthly donor*



"We both grew up in the '70s and in river cities and we saw the pollution that we were on the path to inheriting. We believe that current generations have a responsibility to make the environment better for the future of our community. We support FMR because it is a local conservation organization that implements a science-based approach to effectively restore the river to health."

- Amy & Chip Pearson,
Mississippi Riverkeeper supporters

If you would like to learn more about giving and membership opportunities at FMR please contact John Briel, Development Associate, jbriel@fmr.org.

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