



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

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August 8, 2017

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 1,800 active members, and more than 3,000 volunteers who care deeply about the river's unique resources. FMR has long 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 proposed sale of a portion of River Heights Park. While we have no opposition to the city's need for a new firehouse or increased revenue, we strongly believe that selling public parkland to accomplish these needs is a poor choice for our National Park and IGH residents.

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 be [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 eight 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. While no other potential parkland is available, there are numerous locations where fire protection services could be located.
- 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).

Funding

We understand that the city is looking to save money and generate revenue. However, the City's Park Maintenance Operating Budget Funding Pro-forma (PDF pg. 129), indicates that

River Heights Park will not cost the city significant maintenance until 2028. Therefore, keeping the park would not be a significant burden to the city and the community wide benefits of natural parkland should outweigh the revenue the city could generate from selling eight acres of land.

Restoration Opportunity

The plan suggests that the city will “develop forest restoration plan” (pg. 88) for River Heights Park. We would strongly encourage the restoration of this important site within the MNRRA corridor. We have two professional ecologists on staff that write management plans and implement them all along the MNRRA corridor. We would be happy to work with the city to pursue funding, complete a restoration management plan and engage community members in restoring and enhancing the site, so it will support a greater diversity of wildlife and pollinators. We also are 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.

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, x11) or Alicia Uzarek, Policy Advocate (auzarek@fmr.org, x29) with questions or comments.

Sincerely,

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

Irene Jones
River Corridor Program Director