



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

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Tyler Pederson
Minneapolis Park & Recreation Board
2117 West River Road N
Minneapolis, MN 55411

Re: Comments on the Mississippi River Gorge Regional Park Master Plan

Dear Mr. Pederson,

Thank you for the opportunity to comment on the draft Mississippi River Gorge Regional Park Master Plan.

Friends of the Mississippi River (FMR) is a local non-profit organization that works to protect, restore and enhance the Mississippi River and its watershed in the Twin Cities metropolitan region. We have more than 2,700 active members, 3,500 volunteers and 2,000 advocates who care deeply about the river's unique resources.

FMR takes an active interest in working with municipalities, counties, state government, and other stakeholders to help shape and influence decisions that impact the health of the river. FMR was founded and continues to play a leadership role in ensuring that the public resources of our National Park —the Mississippi National River and Recreation Area (MNRRA), are preserved for current and future generations to benefit from.

As you know, FMR is also an active and ongoing partner with MPRB in planning and caring for the Gorge, where we have played a leadership role engaging volunteers in ecological restoration and clean-up activities for the past two decades. We have also kept a close eye on development surrounding the park to ensure that the outstanding scenic qualities of the Gorge are preserved for all to enjoy.

In general, we support the draft plan, and we appreciate the work of MPRB staff, the consultants and the Community Advisory Committee to develop the plan. In particular, we are pleased to see the following things included.

- New park development that will activate the northern part of the park and attract visitors from a variety of ages and backgrounds

- Recognition that the southern half of the park should remain natural with minimal park development
- Good discussion about the possibility of dam removal and how that could impact and/or benefit the regional park
- Plans to improve and connect natural surface trails and the Winchell Trail
- Plans to only allow pedestrians on the natural surface trails on the west side of the river
- Plans to remove invasive species and conduct ongoing restoration and management of native plant communities and wildlife habitat
- Expansion of wayfinding and interpretive signage to enhance the visitor experience

We do have a few concerns and recommendations that we'd like to see addressed in the plan.

Stronger emphasis on the ecological significance of the gorge

The only gorge on the entire length of the Mississippi River has incredible ecological significance. The steep limestone bluffs and forested river bottoms provide diverse native plant communities, quality habitat and refuge for myriad species of birds and other wildlife.

Through the Twin Cities, the Mississippi River is used as a migration flyway for 40% of North America's waterfowl and more than 60% of all bird species. In the gorge in Minneapolis, local ornithologist David Zumeta has identified more than 150 species, including 45 nesting species.

These ecological qualities are what make the gorge unique and special and should be given stronger emphasis throughout the plan. While this is certainly mentioned in the text, the idea of preserving and protecting the unique ecological features, and of restoring and enhancing these features, should be at the forefront of any discussion of park improvements.

We recommend stronger prioritization of ecological protection of natural areas be included throughout the document. We also recommend the use of native plants and trees for all landscaping that is not turf. Orchard trees should not be planted unless they are native to the area.

More prescriptive goals for the Oak Savanna to ensure remnant prairie is preserved

Within the gorge, the Oak Savanna site at 36th Street has incredible diversity and ecological integrity. MPRB, FMR and others have conducted restoration activities at the site for decades and it is critical that this natural area be planned with great care.

At the center of this special site is a remnant prairie. Remnants hold seed banks that are far superior to a restored or planted prairie and once they are gone, it's forever.

The Oak Savanna map on page 6-26 does not clearly show where the remnant prairie is located and the planning concepts on page 6-27 do not provide direction about preserving the remnant.

The current references are "F. Landscape restoration: repair and restore eroded slopes" and "I. Close unintended natural surface trail segments and restore landscape." This is not adequate to ensure the prairie is protected.

We recommend indicating the remnant prairie on the map with a "J" and adding to the list of planning concepts: *J - preserve the remnant prairie with ongoing restoration, controlled burns and elimination of trails that cut through the prairie*

We also urge you to explicitly restate the CAC recommendation that any plans or investments at the Oak Savanna should prioritize ecological restoration and management above human usage.

Clear direction that natural surface trails are to remain pedestrian-only in perpetuity

The plan does indicate that natural surface trails are currently pedestrian only, but it is less clear that the plan is for them to stay that way. We support the three recommendations voted on by the CAC at the December 2018 meeting:

1. Existing natural surface trails shall be pedestrian-only
2. Explore the potential for additional natural surface trails, for different uses, on the east side.
3. The Winchell Trail should be clarified, the extension of it should be studied, and it should be pedestrian only for perpetuity.

This issue was very controversial and the CAC spent considerable time listening to community members, discussing and deliberating about trail use, and we recommend that you include all three recommendations. We were not able to find explicit reference to numbers 1 or 3 in the plan.

FMR does not support multi-use, shared use or mountain bike natural surface trails in the gorge on the west side of the river, south of Franklin. The area is too narrow to construct trails that would accommodate mountain bikes without grading and disturbing the sensitive habitat and erodible soils. Furthermore, these trails provide a quiet contemplative environment that is treasured by many park users. Places like this are rare in an urban setting, and we encourage MPRB to restrict these trail improvements to pedestrian use only.

Thanks you again for the opportunity to weigh in on this important planning process. We commend you for your effort and we look forward to continuing our partnership to manage and restore wildlife habitat in the gorge.

If you have additional questions or wish to discuss the content of this letter, please don't hesitate to contact us.

Sincerely,

Irene Jones
Senior Policy Advocate
River Corridor Program