



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

101 East Fifth Street
Suite 2000
Saint Paul, MN 55101

651-222-2193
www.fmr.org
info@fmr.org

October 7, 2021

Dear Mayor Bailey and Council Members:

Friends of the Mississippi River (FMR) is proud to have a longstanding partnership with the City of Cottage Grove. Together, we have restored many places that are jewels in the City's park system (Cottage Grove Ravine Park, Settler's Island, Camel's Hump Park and Open Space, River Oaks Park). We hope to continue working together, and we hope our partnership will extend to a new park at Mississippi Dunes.

At our September 24 meeting with Mayor Bailey, Jennifer Levitt, and Zac Dockter, we shared more details about FMR's available funds to assist with land acquisition and restoration at Mississippi Dunes. We want to share this same information in writing with you.

At this time, FMR has the following funds available:

Outdoor Heritage Fund: \$250,000

FMR regularly applies for and receives appropriations from the state Outdoor Heritage Fund (OHF, or "Legacy Amendment" funds). We have \$250,000 appropriated for habitat acquisition at Mississippi Dunes.

For FMR to demonstrate the expected outcomes to the Lessard-Sams Outdoor Heritage Council and remain eligible for future funding, the City's Mississippi Dunes park would need to include at least 15 acres of wildlife habitat. This is based on the assumption that these funds would be, at a minimum, matched by County Land and Water Legacy funds, effectively doubling the habitat acres our OHF grant can acquire. These funds are eligible only for land that will be permanently managed as natural habitat, and cannot be spent for the acres that will include paved trails, playgrounds, picnic tables and other typical community park features.

With FMR's track record of securing OHF funds (including for several other sites in Cottage Grove), we have strong confidence we could secure additional OHF funding in subsequent appropriations to create a natural resource management plan and implement restoration for any acres acquired and designated for habitat at Mississippi Dunes.

As with most funders, an independent appraisal is required for the use of OHF funds. The acquisition price must be aligned with the appraised value, not a property owner's asking price.

FMR Land Protection Fund

FMR also has its own modest fund to support the acquisition of valuable habitat near the Mississippi River. In order for us to consider contributing this resource to the Mississippi Dunes property, we would expect the City to expand its planned 33-acre city park by at least an additional 15 acres of wildlife habitat beyond those acquired with OHF funds. FMR's Land Protection Fund dollars would not have all of the restrictions as OHF funds (e.g. OHF restrictions on paved trails), but we would still expect it to secure meaningful acres of property that would be permanently managed as wildlife habitat and open for public use. Again, we assume these funds would leverage Washington County Land and Water Legacy dollars for habitat.

Other Potential Funding Sources

As we have discussed, other public and private funding sources are likely available to support park acquisition, restoration, and management. Potential funders include the Washington County Land and Water Legacy Program, 3M's PFAS settlement for natural resources, and DNR Natural and Scenic Area grants.

Regarding the 3M settlement funds, as you know, priority two of the settlement agreement designates \$20M for "*projects that restore and enhance aquatic resources, wildlife, habitat, fishing, resource improvement, and outdoor recreational opportunities in the East Metropolitan Area*". Recent conversations with the trustees lead us to believe that these funds will likely be available within a few months. The acquisition and development of the Dunes would appear to be an excellent fit for the intended uses of these funds.

A partnership with The Conservation Fund or a similar entity could help bridge timing gaps during acquisition. The Conservation Fund has indicated an interest in supporting this project.

We know that pursuing the funding needed will take time and effort. FMR is very experienced in assembling funds for land protection and remains willing to assist you. If the City can demonstrate a strong commitment to acquiring additional open space at Mississippi Dunes, FMR will be happy to provide our expertise, staff time, and relationship network to help make your goal a reality.

We continue to urge you to extend the Mississippi Dunes master planning timeline. A longer planning process would allow more resident engagement with the plan as well as more time to fully explore funding options. We know that you share our belief that Mississippi Dunes is a

very rare opportunity for Cottage Grove. The City may not have another chance to create a marquee waterfront park of this size for decades to come.

The Mississippi Dunes represents a once-in-a-lifetime opportunity to secure significant public open space along the river for the use and enjoyment of future generations of Cottage Grove residents. Very few large undeveloped parcels of land with Mississippi River frontage remain in the Twin Cities metropolitan area. This decision about the future of the Dunes falls at a time of surging demand for public parks and natural areas. At the same time, habitat loss is driving steep declines in many species of wildlife, especially the native grassland birds now using the site who require larger habitat areas for breeding.

As you proceed with planning and development at the Mississippi Dunes, your constituents will be counting on you to do everything in your power to secure public access and environmental values in this very special place. We stand ready to assist you in this effort and look forward to partnering with you to create a beautiful new public park that we can all be proud of.

Sincerely,

A handwritten signature in black ink, reading "Whitney L. Clark". The signature is written in a cursive style with a large, looping initial "W".

Whitney L. Clark
Executive Director

Cc: Jennifer Levitt
Zac Dockter