



*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](http://www.fmr.org)  
[info@fmr.org](mailto:info@fmr.org)

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Dear Commissioners:

Thank you for the opportunity to comment on the proposed Mississippi Dunes park concepts. Since 2017, Friends of the Mississippi River (FMR) has been actively involved in planning for the future of Mississippi Dunes, and we look forward to continued involvement over the coming years.

Friends of the Mississippi River is a non-profit organization with a mission to engage community members and other stakeholders to protect, restore and enhance the Mississippi River and its watershed in the Twin Cities Region. We represent thousands of people in the metropolitan area who care deeply about the river, including a growing membership of over 2,700 people, more than 3,200 volunteers, and 2,000 advocates engaged each year.

FMR has enjoyed a long partnership with the city of Cottage Grove and its residents. We lead habitat restoration projects at Ravine Regional Park, Camel's Hump, River Oaks, Settler's Island, and the Grey Cloud Dunes Scientific and Natural Area (SNA). Cottage Grove residents volunteer with FMR to help protect and restore these unique places. We have invested a total of almost \$400,000 in State grant funding in assisting with Park management at these City parks. In addition, we have a long-standing commitment to restoration and management at the 3M property which has brought over \$300,000 to this land within the City limits.

In summary, we are disappointed with the proposed park concepts. We hoped to see a much larger park that could serve as a regional destination for riverfront recreation while enhancing vital wildlife habitat. The city of Cottage Grove has a tremendous opportunity at Mississippi Dunes for something much bigger than the presented concepts. We urge you to pursue it.

### **Unique ecological and recreational potential**

The Mississippi Dunes property has excellent potential to serve as a recreational and ecological oasis in the rapidly developing Twin Cities metro area. There is no other place like it for many miles along the Mississippi. Many species of rare plants and animals rely on the adjoining SNA as critical habitat. There is a compelling opportunity to expand this habitat

through additional acquisition, restoration, and management of portions of the Dunes property.

Furthermore, the Mississippi Dunes site also holds a high potential for recreation. Many Cottage Grove residents have stated their frustrations over the City's lack of riverfront parks and boat access. The city's November 2020 River Access Strategy Report names Mississippi Dunes as the best opportunity to respond to this community need, noting the site's size, significant shoreline, existing roads and utilities, and adjacency to the SNA, as well as the involvement of partners eager to help preserve and fund a park. *There is no other property in the City that boasts this kind of potential.*

### **Missed opportunity for a destination park**

Because of this potential, FMR has worked for several years with the city, county, DNR, and property owners to put together a plan that would allow the majority, if not all, of Mississippi Dunes to be preserved as public open space. Through this process, we believe enough funds have been identified to purchase a significant portion of the property from the owners at fair market value and to donate the land to the City as a park.

Most Mississippi River communities would be thrilled for the chance to create a destination riverfront park on land provided at no cost to the City. And yet, Cottage Grove appears to prefer an extensive private development at Mississippi Dunes, seeking only a narrow strip of land that can only serve as a small neighborhood park. As a consequence, the City will only be providing a park that serves primarily as an amenity for future residents of this development. It will not be the kind of destination that attracts and unites the whole community.

The city has significant leverage at Mississippi Dunes because this property would require a comprehensive plan amendment, rezoning, and plat approval for development to proceed. Due to the ecological significance of the adjoining SNA and remaining native habitats on the Dunes property and documented sightings of endangered and threatened plants and animals, it will also likely require completion of an Environmental Assessment worksheet. That represents the kind of leverage that the City could use to pursue a more significant park that delivers what Cottage Grove residents have long sought. And a park of that caliber would raise the property values of, and tax revenue from, surrounding homes.

Funds exist to help the city accomplish this vision. We hope that you will not pass up this opportunity.

## **Lack of ecological significance**

As shown in the three different scenarios of the Master Plan, the park will provide very minimal ecological/habitat value. As noted above, the adjacent SNA is home to many rare plant and animal species under threat from declining habitat. Expanding this habitat into an adjoining area would be a highly effective conservation response.

However, the proposed park is too small to accomplish this. With so little space and so much resident demand for developed recreational amenities, little land remains for habitat. The areas that do exist are too small and highly fragmented to provide significant ecological value.

The park could provide better habitat if it were larger and served as a buffer between the SNA and developed areas. A buffer could be created by clustering undeveloped areas along the east side of the property. The current layout instead places high-density housing between the SNA and the new parkland. This design fragments the habitat areas and increases the intrusion of people, pets, paved surface runoff, etc. into more natural areas.

## **Comments on recreational amenities**

We would also like to offer a few comments specific to the amenities shown in the three park concepts. All three concepts include a lot of structures and activities in a small space. This is the result of allowing so little park acreage and again, this reduces the park's ecological potential and provides little wildlife habitat.

A more extensive park would provide room for recreational amenities that would attract residents from throughout the City. More acres would allow for a significant network of trails for hiking, cross-country skiing, and nature observation.

We'd like to see more detail about the clubhouse/fitness center shown in options 1 and 2. We have concerns about siting a publicly owned and operated amenity in the middle of a single-family housing development. Community centers are usually located more centrally, where many residents can access them. The most likely outcome here is that this building would primarily serve immediate neighbors, not all Cottage Grove residents. The city should be cautious about public investment in something that could end up functioning primarily as an amenity for a private development. Any clubhouse sited in the middle of the development should be funded by the developer.

The canoe/kayak campsites in Option 1 are unlikely to appeal to paddlers given their proximity to the boat ramp and other development. The Dunes property does contain excellent high ground sites overlooking the river in the southeast corner of the property that would be attractive to canoe campers but the concept plan doesn't locate them there. Also, with a park this small it is unlikely that overnight camping would be compatible in such close proximity to residential development.

Mississippi Dunes presents a once-in-a-generation opportunity to create a destination riverfront park for all Cottage Grove residents. FMR and many other partners stand ready to help fund and plan such a park. We urge you to reject the current park concepts and state a clear intention to pursue the larger park that residents want and deserve.

Thank you for your dedication to parks, the environment, and your community.

In partnership,



Whitney L. Clark  
Executive Director



Lisa Mueller  
Land Conservation Director



Colleen O'Connor Toberman  
River Corridor Director