



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

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Carrie Christensen, Senior Planner  
Minneapolis Park and Recreation Board  
2117 West River Road  
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Dear Carrie:

Thank you for the opportunity to comment on the Graco Park concept plan.

Friends of the Mississippi (FMR) has been closely involved in riverfront land transitions and park development in the Above the Falls area for 25 years. We appreciate our long-standing partnership with MPRB and are happy to participate in MPRB's work to transition Graco Park from its former industrial use to a fully developed park with recreational and ecological benefits.

We're largely pleased with the draft concept. The concept supplements, rather than duplicates, the amenities offered at Boom Island Park. Visitors will have opportunities to touch the river and enjoy a nature-oriented experience while also having amenities that improve accessibility and year-round use. The proposed park building will offer the gathering space and programming opportunities that are missing from Northeast Minneapolis' riverfront park network.

Other positive elements of the park concept include the 8<sup>th</sup> Avenue bike/pedestrian underpass, a natural shoreline with buildings set far back from the riverfront, and inviting entrance areas from adjacent streets.

We're also happy to see an emphasis on habitat. Boom Island Park provides extensive mowed grass areas for recreation; we'd like to see Graco Park offer different settings for both humans and non-human wildlife to enjoy.

We have a few recommendations for small changes to the plan that can maximize the park's ecological benefit without reducing visitor enjoyment:

## **Contiguous habitat areas**

Habitat areas provide the most benefit when they are as large and contiguous as possible. It is well known that many species of birds and mammals require large contiguous habitat areas for foraging and nesting, and that the less edge habitat that exists in a particular unit, the less plagued by invasive species and other ecological issues the unit can be. Minimizing edge habitat is extremely important for the long-term viability of the natural areas at Graco Park.

The proposed habitat areas on the north and south ends of the park (15) could be improved by grouping structures and amenities elsewhere. For instance, moving both the northwest picnic shelter (5) and the boat rental structure (6) into the park's central lawn and incorporating the original locations into the native habitat areas would maximize the benefits of the habitat areas without limiting the usability of the central lawn, limit human activity in the natural areas, and reduce the need for mowing by clustering amenities.

Relocating the potential future building (2) to be closer to the MPRB building and performance green would also improve the northern habitat area. Not only would a building fragment the habitat in that unit, but we're concerned that investment in habitat restoration around this potential building could be limited or delayed due to the uncertainty of when and how the building will be built. By relocating the building site, MPRB can more confidently invest in the northern habitat restoration area without worrying that the restoration will be damaged by future construction. This arrangement would also increase the size of the contiguous habitat area.

The proposed habitat restoration area just west of the plaza is likely too small and too heavily trafficked to provide significant habitat benefits, but it could be valuable as an educational native plant demonstration garden with interpretive displays. The Mississippi Watershed Management Organization's outdoor spaces are a good example.

## **Habitat types**

This area of the riverfront may have originally been more prairie-like in nature with fewer trees than shown in the concept. The habitat restoration areas should adhere to that pre-colonization landcover state as closely as possible while still providing tree stands where needed for visual screening (such as along the Graco property line), shade, recreation, and some habitat. An oak savanna might fulfill all of these goals. FMR is happy to advise on habitat types in more detail as planning advances.

## **Hall's Island**

We're pleased that MPRB has decided to restrict visitor access to Hall's Island to protect the island's habitat functions. As park use increases, some visitors will surely swim or boat to the island anyway. MPRB should monitor this activity and consider design changes, signage and

education, staff monitoring, or other deterrents should human use become damaging to the island.

FMR is proud of our partnership to restore and maintain natural areas through the MPRB park system, including at nearby Ole Olson and Nicollet Island parks. We would be happy to assist MPRB with restoration and management of the natural areas at Graco Park as well.

We look forward to our continued work together.

For the river,



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