



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

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October 14, 2021

Dear Commissioners:

Friends of the Mississippi River (FMR) appreciates the opportunity to comment on the Upper Harbor Terminal (UHT) draft park concept plan.

FMR has actively participated in planning for the future of UHT for many years and has been deeply involved in this phase of redevelopment planning. Colleen O'Connor Toberman represented FMR on the Minneapolis Park and Recreation Board's (MPRB) UHT Community Advisory Committee (CAC). Through this opportunity to serve on the CAC and engage in the UHT planning process in many other ways, many of our ideas and perspectives are reflected in this draft plan.

The UHT park planning process is complex. We acknowledge the long-standing disparities in parks, river access, and environmental quality to which North Minneapolis residents have been subjected. We wholeheartedly affirm that North Minneapolis residents need and deserve great riverfront parks. This has been a core value at FMR for over 25 years.

But we also know that creating new parks in the context of other development, particularly in an area geographically separated from most current Northside residents, must be done carefully. We agree with the plan's statement that "it is important to understand, that investment, even in amenities that are truly wanted, may not be beneficial to community members who are vulnerable to negative impacts of change."

Well-intended efforts may bring about undesired consequences. We are concerned that many elements of the UHT development will not serve current North Minneapolis residents first and foremost. MPRB should not be complicit in this kind of development that could result in displacement and gentrification.

We support the concept plan's values, program model, and design principles that endeavor to center Northside residents and mitigate potential negative impacts of park development. The community feedback included in the plan seems aligned with what we have also heard from residents, and the concept plan in turn seems aligned with that feedback.

Our primary concern about a “slow” or “just green enough” park development process is that it could be abandoned partway through. MPRB’s existing master planning process isn’t necessarily designed for a park like UHT: a park where significant planning and evaluation, not just implementation, are needed on an almost-constant basis. It would be too easy for the UHT park to be moved aside as other priorities emerge or logistical challenges arise, even if intentions are good.

To do this at UHT and in North Minneapolis would be a profound betrayal. MPRB needs to stay committed to continuous engagement, planning, and funding at UHT for many years to come. We encourage you to examine whether MPRB’s systems and practices need to change to support this mode of park development, and if they do, to make those changes now. What will you do to earn the community’s trust that UHT will receive robust care and investment in the long term?

Many of the ideas in the draft concept plan will stretch MPRB in new directions, such as employment capacity-building, securing higher levels of BIPOC and neighborhood participation in construction, and supporting Indigenous architecture projects. We understand that these new initiatives may encounter logistical and policy roadblocks. We urge you to pursue them anyway, with support from the highest levels of MPRB to navigate these challenges effectively and efficiently. These ideas shouldn’t be left on the shelf.

We’d also like to commend the MPRB staff and consultants, led largely by Kate Lamers, who have worked on this plan. Coordinating with the city and city’s development team on this large project has no doubt been demanding. The community engagement process was complex and brought out reactions and recommendations that may have seemed contradictory on the surface but were often rooted in similar experiences of distrust and disinvestment. We have profound respect for the project team members who worked very hard to include all stakeholders and present an innovative concept plan that reflects the complexities present at UHT.

We encourage the Board of Commissioners to affirm the hard work and passion that the community and MPRB project team have given to the UHT park planning process. We ask you to not only approve this concept plan, but to publicly commit to the long-term work of implementing this plan, revisiting it often, and investing in ongoing improvements at UHT in close partnership with the community. This is an important opportunity for MPRB to build public trust and demonstrate its commitment to equity.

For the river,

A handwritten signature in black ink that reads "Colleen O'Connor Toberman". The signature is written in a cursive, flowing style.

Colleen O’Connor Toberman  
River Corridor Director