



Friends of the Mississippi River

360 North Robert • Suite 400 • Saint Paul, MN 55101 • 651/ 222-2193 • www.fmr.org

March 19, 2008

Mayor Tom Swain
City of Lilydale
1011 Sibley Memorial Highway
Lilydale, MN 55118

Dear Mayor Swain, Commissioners, and Councilmembers:

Friends of the Mississippi River (FMR) is a local non-profit citizen-based organization that works to protect and enhance the natural and cultural assets of the Mississippi River and its watershed in the Twin Cities. We have 1,400 active members, and 1,000 volunteers who care deeply about the river's unique resources.

We write to you as you consider the possible sale of the former Thompson property, along with the associated rezoning of the property, and an associated update to your Comprehensive Plan.

We understand that the City of Lilydale has some very serious financial challenges, and that the sale of this property was proposed as one method of addressing those challenges. As profoundly real as those financial challenges may feel to a small city such as Lilydale, it is worth remembering that those challenges are ultimately short-term. We understand, for example, that the City's financial woes are expected to improve demonstrably in just three years time. In comparison to that short timeline, the use of this land as a open space was clearly intended to be "permanent".

The City's own March 16th, 1978 ordinance is unambiguous: it shows the land registered as a gift to the City, and "dedicated as permanent open space". The troubling ethical issues raised by the possible development of this land overshadows any questions of whether it is financially advantageous or legal.

Most obviously, this decision will cause potential land donors in Lilydale and elsewhere to think twice before deeding such land to public stewardship, complicating the trust needed to

protect important lands throughout the area. But moreover, transferring this land complicates the ability of both Lilydale and neighboring communities to take measures to protect some of the very natural and scenic qualities that drew many residents to Lilydale in the first place.

To date, Lilydale has been known as a tree-filled City perched on the bluffs of the Mississippi. Development has for many years complemented and co-existed with that image of your city. But such perceptions are temporal, and whether you heed them or not, your citizens are alerting you that a critical shift in perception is underway.

By mail, over one hundred of your residents have tried to underscore an important reality. There exists a subtle point where the very qualities that drew residents to the City are threatened by an overabundance of development, threatened by being “loved to death”.

The Mississippi River valley is a unique river resource of regional and national importance. The parcel in question is one of the few uncompromised wooded hillsides left in the area. Because of the slope of the land, even the DNR under its limited authority determined that intensive use of the land would be inappropriate. Even limited use of the land risks compromising the bluffside, and creating additional concerns about water and runoff on the north side of Sibley Highway.

And so, the reality remains that this land was donated as “permanent open space”. As the stewards of this land, and this city, the ethical obligation binds you to stand by the terms by which the land was conveyed to you. And so we request you take two actions.

First, we urge you to stand by your obligation to keep this land as open space, and therefore vote no to rezone this property, and vote no on any effort to change the property’s designation from park in your Comprehensive Plan.

And second, we urge you to take a more comprehensive view of how to manage bluffland along the Mississippi River corridor. As you consider updates to your Comprehensive Plan, we urge you to adopt goals and policies that nurture a comprehensive approach to the natural assets found along the upper bluff. That can be achieved in coordination with other stakeholders such as Mendota, St. Paul, and Mendota Heights.

Indeed, many organizations might assist you in these efforts, but only if your action as a council leads others to believe that such assistance will not be in vain, that you will act in good faith as a trusted partner.

We appreciate your time and serious consideration about this matter, and welcome any questions you may have for us. Please don’t hesitate to give myself or River Advocate Bob Spaulding a call at 651-222-2193 at any time to discuss other ways we may be of assistance to you.

Best regards,

Whitney L. Clark
Executive Director