



Friends of the Mississippi River

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

June 1, 2007

Dear Hennepin County Commissioners,

I am writing to you regarding the Midtown Greenway bridge across the Mississippi River that has been proposed by Hennepin County.

Friends of the Mississippi River (FMR) is leading citizen organization working to protect and enhance the ecological, cultural, historical, scenic and recreational assets of the Mississippi River Corridor. FMR has 1,400 members, over half of whom reside in Hennepin County, and we work with more several hundred volunteers annually who pick up trash, remove invasive species and restore native habitat along the Mississippi River Gorge in Minneapolis.

Although we support the idea of a bicycle crossing and applaud the efforts and successes to date in creating the Midtown Greenway, FMR believes that a new crossing in the Mississippi Gorge could have significant and irreversible impacts to one of the most scenic places in the Twin Cities. The Mississippi River from St. Anthony Falls to the mouth of the Minnesota River is the only true gorge on the entire 2,300+ mile length of the Mississippi. Traveling south from the Franklin Avenue Bridge, paddlers, bikers and hikers encounter a truly unique natural and cultural wonder with forested bluffs, limestone cliffs, abundant wildlife, three historic bridges, and the ruins of the Meeker Island Lock & Dam. From the water, one can easily forget that the gorge runs through the heart of the biggest city in Minnesota.

A new modern bridge, as shown in the design concept that was published in the newspaper, would disrupt the scenic, natural and cultural environment of the gorge. Our specific concerns are as follows.

Scenic Impact – The proposed bridge, especially the tall towers on each end, would create a visual obstruction to views of the gorge from the bluffs, the water and the Lake Street Bridge.

Wildlife Impact – Over 150 species of birds have been documented in the gorge, and tall towers may have an impact on birds, especially during migration when the river corridor is used by 40% of North American waterfowl and 60% of all North American bird species.

Historic Resources Impact – The Meeker Island Lock & Dam ruins, which is listed as Nationally Significant by the National Register of Historic Places, is located in the same place as the proposed new

bridge. As the first lock and dam ever built on the Mississippi River, the Meeker ruins offer an important way to interpret significant local, regional and national history. A newly developed trail and riverside park in St. Paul that will celebrate the ruins is near completion, and a new bridge could severely impact the visual experience and historic context intended for visitors to the new park.

Financial Impact – The cost of the new bridge is estimated at \$12 million dollars – almost half as much as the Greenway itself. There are numerous needs and opportunities for bicycle and pedestrian trails in Minneapolis (like north of downtown along the river!) and limited funding. FMR believes that \$12 million would be better spent on projects that offer greater benefits for bicyclists and pedestrians and have no adverse impacts to the Mississippi River Gorge.

We are concerned that the County has aggressively moved forward with planning, designing and funding a new bridge without having seriously explored the potential of a using the existing historic bridge. According to the railroad, the County has never submitted a written proposal.

We are disappointed that a project of this magnitude and potential impact on the Mississippi River has proceeded as far as it has in the planning and development stages before notification or consultation with key public and private stakeholders has taken place. It is only within the last 30 days that Minneapolis Park and Recreation Board commissioners, the National Park Service, Mississippi National River and Recreation Area, Friends of the Mississippi River and other interested parties learned of the existence of the project. When we did hear about the project, it was not in a formal communication from the County outlining the status of the project and seeking comments, but rather from our members who called to inquire about the crews doing surveying and soil borings in the park.

We believe there are other options for achieving the worthy goal of getting cyclists and pedestrians across the river and we strongly urge the County to take the following steps:

- Submit a formal proposal to the railroad regarding shared-use and/or re-use of the existing bridge, and enter into formal negotiations for such use.
- Develop a set of alternatives (with feasibility and approximate costs) for the community to evaluate. The options should include doing nothing (i.e. continue crossing at Lake/Marshall) and using the existing bridge, as well as potential designs for a new bridge.
- Hold stakeholder meetings to ensure that all community groups and individuals (on both sides of the river) can participate in planning for a potential crossing in the gorge and evaluate the various alternatives.
- Conduct an Environmental Impact Statement to evaluate the impacts of all the alternatives on the river environment. A robust visual impact analysis should be conducted as part of an EIS and would be an important step in helping the citizens form an opinion about the advisability of a new bridge.

- Conduct a Section 106 review for potential impacts to a nationally listed historic resource in a National Park.

Thank you for your thoughtful consideration of these concerns. Please feel free to contact me if you have any questions or would like to discuss this issue in more depth.

Sincerely yours,

A handwritten signature in black ink that reads "Whitney L. Clark". The signature is written in a cursive style with a large, looped 'W' and a long, sweeping 'C'.

Whitney L. Clark
Executive Director

Cc: Minneapolis City Council Members
Minneapolis Park and Recreation Board Commissioners
Minneapolis Mayor RT Rybak
Saint Paul Mayor Chris Coleman
Saint Paul City Council Member Jay Benanav
Paul Labovitz, National Park Service, Mississippi National River and Recreation Area
Tim Springer, Midtown Greenway Coalition
Lea Schuster, Transit for Livable Communities
Seward Neighborhood Group
Longfellow Community Council
Prospect Park East River Road Improvement Association
Merriam Park Community Council
Desnoyer Park Improvement Association