

Planning Objectives

Building on over 25 years of previous effort, the Minneapolis Park and Recreation Board and its partnering agencies, Hennepin County, the MCDA, and the City Planning Department, had clear planning objectives prior to the start of the Upper River Master Plan process.

Grand Rounds

The Park Board stated that “the primary objective is a Master Plan for the development of a riverside park corridor to connect with existing park systems to the north and south. . . .” (Request For Proposals, 1997). Since its inception in the 1880s the Minneapolis Park Board has had a long record of success in developing parks, parkways, and trails—the total system of integrated parkways known as the Grand Rounds. The most celebrated of these have been greenway amenities surrounding the City’s water bodies, including the Chain of Lakes, Minnehaha Creek, and East and West River Parkway. Park planners have long recognized the natural affinity and interest people have in water features. Given the steep topography of the Lower Gorge, the East and West River Parkways along the Mississippi could be developed early in the City’s history without vying with competing land uses. The Central Riverfront, however, was the industrial heart of the Minneapolis for a hundred years; yet, when milling declined and ended at the falls, most of the riverbank became vacant and available. In 1989 the Park Board and other agencies celebrated the extension of West River Parkway through the historic milling district, past the Hennepin Avenue Bridge, to its present terminus at Plymouth Ave. Therefore, the Upper River Master Plan is to address one of the final links in the Grand Rounds system: an extension of park amenities north along the Mississippi.

Access

Access to the riverfront is currently restricted by the large number of parcels in private ownership. On the west bank, even public streets that extend to the river edge are frequently closed off by fencing and parked trucks. Heavy industrial sites on both banks are dangerous places for non-employees, with equipment moving bulk material, and many trucks entering and exiting. While previous plans have called for areas to observe activities such as barge loading, none have been constructed, and finding access to such observation areas would in itself be difficult. Carrying trails away from the riverbank and around such industries would put trail users onto adjacent truck routes. Conflicts are unavoidable. Moreover, water is the attraction and trails should provide visual and physical access to the river. Following Park Board policy, purchase of property is the preferred means of gaining public access. Where public ownership conflicts with other goals, yet space is available for trails, easements are a second option.

Riverway Street System

In addition to parks and recreational trails, the Minneapolis park system continues to develop parkways for passenger vehicles. Original parkways were first constructed as carriageways for horse-drawn vehicles, with the resulting streets setting a clear boundary between public and private space. Park Board standards call for narrow drive lanes, restricted connections to local streets and arterial thoroughfares, and no commercial truck traffic. Traditionally, parkways have followed along water courses. An increasing concern is the level of traffic on parkways being used as commuter routes. A key objective for the Upper River plan is to extend West River Parkway past Plymouth Ave. up the west bank to connect with Webber Parkway and North Mississippi Regional Park, and connect to the east bank via the Camden Bridge to St. Anthony Parkway.

On the east bank, Marshall Street is the logical boundary for new riverfront parks, and as such, there is a desire to convert Marshall into a parkway. As part of a complete riverway street system, improvements to streets leading to the riverfront will encourage local identification with the river and extend the benefits of new park amenities back into adjacent neighborhoods. Regional access routes for vehicles can be provided on thoroughfares with river bridges. Previous plans have called for improved local access streets, referred to as “greenway windows” or “gateway streets,” that would include new landscaping and infrastructure that facilitates pedestrian and bicycle movement to the river.

Objective:

- ✓ **A riverside park corridor.**

Objective:

- ✓ **Public ownership of riverfront parcels.**
- ✓ **Continuous riverside recreational trails on both banks.**

Objective:

- ✓ **Parkways along both banks of the river.**
- ✓ **Integrated riverway street system.**
- ✓ **Enhanced streets leading to the river.**

Ecological Restoration

While much of the rationalization for the early park movement focused on human needs for fresh air and light in crowded urban areas, the growth of environmentalism in the last decades of the twentieth century has added water quality improvements, landscape restoration, and the provision of habitat for wildlife as key concerns. The historic use of the Upper River as a place of industry is challenged by local residents, concerned about both the river's health and the environment in their own neighborhoods, as well as organized environmental groups. The Mississippi River is seen in terms of its intrinsic value as one of the great rivers of the world, and the Upper River as an area where the continuity of the river as an ecological system has been degraded, yet could be restored through a directed effort.

The river is made of the water flowing into it, with two major components to this watershed: the moving water and the land it travels over and under. Improvements to the ecology of the Upper River must address the quality of water entering the river and the condition of banks. New regulations regarding the retention and filtration of storm water have been written since the period of initial urbanization of the Upper River area. The master plan must meet and exceed these standards. Likewise, new techniques have been developed for the "bioengineering" of riverbanks, utilizing living plants to stabilize banks, reduce soil erosion, and create new habitat. However, it is not possible to create a pristine landscape: the Upper River is not the Lower Gorge. It has been an area of heavy-industrial use for 125 years, providing benefits to the city and region but at a cost. Large segments of the Upper River have areas with soils known to be contaminated with petroleum products, heavy metals, PCBs, VOCs, and other chemical wastes. There are a number of leaking underground storage tanks that threaten groundwater. Much of the west bank is also fill, including sawdust, industrial-wastes, and post-consumer garbage. Remediation of contaminated sites is essential to a comprehensive master plan.

Economic Development

In association with park development objectives, the partnering agencies also seek a number of interrelated economic development goals. The Minneapolis Community Development Agency (MCDA) and City Planning Department work together to realize policy goals set by the City Council. These policies are meant to shape long-range strategies, specifically in the areas of land use and public infrastructure. Because the Upper River master plan addresses a large segment of the city, the land-use plan must balance policy directives in regard to employment opportunities, business retention and development, and housing. One clear directive is to grow the city's population by providing new opportunities for housing. Another long-standing goal is to encourage development of industrial and service businesses that utilize land in an efficient way, that is by providing a high number of jobs per acre, and pay wages that will sustain families and an overall quality of life in the city. Hennepin County, through the establishment of a partnership with the City under the Hennepin Community Works program, is also committing resources to address issues of tax base and employment development through investment in infrastructure, specifically new public amenities such as greenway corridors. All the partnering jurisdictions have an interest in strategic approaches to halt the decline in north and northeast Minneapolis, and consider the Mississippi River a potential amenity to attract new private investment.

Urban Design

A comprehensive approach for the Upper River seeks to reveal the underlying potential of the land along the river. Planning for the ambitious goal of a continuous riverfront park creates other opportunities and questions: If heavy industry is phased out then what is the optimal use of land adjacent to new parks? How should future development be configured to take advantage of inherent opportunities? What cultural artifacts should be preserved and how should they be used? What is the best balance of land uses and how can conflicts be mitigated? In addition to these questions of related development, there is the question of how the parks themselves should be programmed. Given the size and cost of the new parks, they must be considered regional facilities. The river in Minneapolis should also be considered a total system, and just as the underlying geology and history cause distinctions between the three planning regions, the planning process needs to discover what will make the Upper River a unique destination, offering different experiences from the Lower Gorge and Central Riverfront.

Objectives:

- ✓ **Stabilize the riverbank and revegetate for wildlife habitat.**
- ✓ **Provide areas for stormwater retention and filtering.**
- ✓ **Identify contaminated sites and suggest approaches to remediation.**

Objectives:

- ✓ **Create opportunities for new housing.**
- ✓ **Increase employment levels and density.**
- ✓ **Develop new tax base and stabilize neighborhoods.**

Objectives:

- ✓ **Establish urban design principles to guide future development.**
- ✓ **Balance land uses and minimize conflicts.**
- ✓ **Explore alternatives for park features and destinations that recognize the area's unique opportunities and culture.**