

MINNESOTA RIVER VALLEY STRATEGIC PLAN

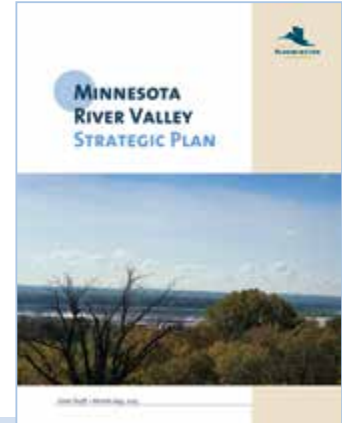


January 25, 2016

City of Bloomington, Minnesota

MINNESOTA RIVER VALLEY STRATEGIC PLAN

The Minnesota River Valley Strategic Plan (MRVSP) focuses on lands in the Minnesota River Valley owned by the City of Bloomington. The City maintains an up-to-date version on its website: BloomingtonMN.gov. For further information contact the Planning Division, Bloomington Civic Plaza, 1800 West Old Shakopee Road, Bloomington MN 55431-3027, PH 952-563-8920.



Contacts and Credits

City Council

December 2015

Mayor	Councilmembers	Jack Baloga	Tim Busse	Dwayne A. Lowman
Gene Winstead		Cynthia Bemis Abrams	Andrew Carlson	Jon Oleson

Parks, Arts and Recreation Commission

December 2015

Gordie Holm	Marie Holm	Zach Lee	Jim McCarthy	Peter Moe
Ben Murphy	Gregg Thompson	Matias Figari		

Planning Commission

December 2015

Craig Nordstrom	Kelley Spiess	Roger Willette	Budd Batterson	Kalli Bennett
Ted Fischer	Tom Goodrum			

City Staff Advisory Committee

December 2015

Randy Quale, <i>Manager of Parks and Recreation</i>	Julie Farnham, <i>Senior Planner</i>	Liz Heyman, <i>Planner</i>	Mark Morrison, <i>Recreation Supervisor</i>	Jen Desrude, <i>Civil Engineer/Development Coordinator</i>
Jim Gates, <i>Deputy Public Works Director</i>	Kirk Roberts, <i>Traffic and Transportation Engineer</i>	Jim Eiler, <i>Maintenance Superintendent</i>		

Disclaimer: The MN River Valley Strategic Plan includes original content as well as content “borrowed” from other plans and reports generated previously by the City of Bloomington, MnDNR, USFWS, Hennepin County and others. The City would like to express our sincere appreciation of all the work done previously by others to enrich this strategic plan document!

Table of Contents

FINAL PLAN JANUARY 25, 2016

Contacts and Credits

Executive Summary

1. Purpose and Vision

- 1.1 Introduction
 - 1.2 Purpose of Plan
 - 1.3 Vision and Goals
 - 1.4 Guiding Framework
 - 1.5 Public Outreach Process
-

2. Historical Context

3. Jurisdiction and Management

- 3.1 Land Owners
 - 3.2 Other Active Organizations
-

4. Existing Conditions

- 4.1 Ecosystem Context
 - 4.2 Natural Resources
 - 4.3 Cultural and Historical Resources
 - 4.4 Existing Activities
 - 4.5 Existing Facilities
-

5. Opportunities and Challenges

- 5.1 Overarching Opportunities and Challenges
 - 5.2 Goal Related Opportunities and Challenges
-

6. Implementation Plan

- 6.1 Top Priorities
 - 6.2 Implementation Steps
-

List of figures

1. Purpose and Vision

Figure 1.1: Location of Minnesota River Valley in the City of Bloomington

Figure 1.2: City-owned Land in the Minnesota River Valley

Figure 1.3: Interrelationship of Goals and Principles

2. Historical Context

Figure 2.1: Timeline of Historic Events

3. Jurisdiction & Management

Figure 3.1: Property Ownership in the Minnesota River Valley

Figure 3.2: Minnesota Valley National Wildlife Refuge Units in the Metropolitan Area

4. Existing Conditions

Figure 4.1: Prairie Pothole Region

Figure 4.2: Biomes of Minnesota

Figure 4.3: Land Cover Quality (from MnDNR)

Figure 4.4: Known Historic Sites in the Minnesota River Valley

Figure 4.5: Existing Minnesota River Valley Access Locations

5. Opportunities and Challenges

Figure 5.1: Regional Trail Connections to the Minnesota River Valley

6. Implementation Plan

Figure 6.1: Area Covered by Memorandum of Understanding

List of tables

Figure 6.2: Priority Project Sequence and Duration

4. Existing Conditions

Table 4.1: Major and Minor Trailheads

Table 4.2: Neighborhood Access Points

6. Implementation Plan

Table 6.1: Estimate of Consultant Fees

Table 6.2: Minnesota River Valley Parkland Acquisition/Trail Easement List

Table 6.3: Estimated Capital Costs for Typical Trailhead Improvements

Appendices

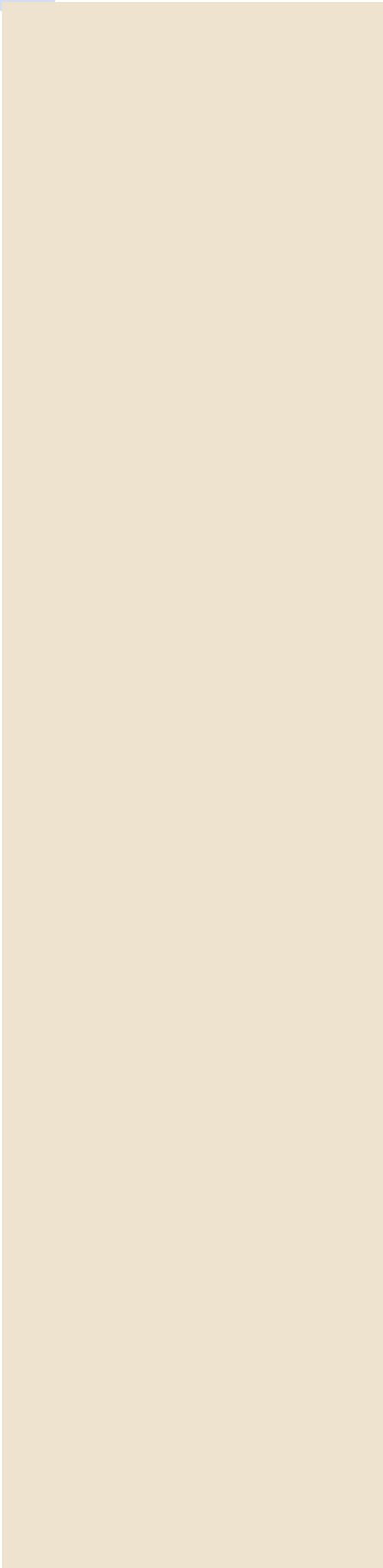
- A. Public Outreach Summary
- B. Known Minnesota River Valley Historic Sites in Bloomington
- C. System Plan Outlines

Executive Summary

The Minnesota River Valley forms the entire 13-mile southern border of the City of Bloomington. While it is one of the city's most unique and compelling assets, there has been limited intentional analysis and documentation, at the City level, of the benefits and opportunities it provides. Recognizing this, the City Council directed staff to assess how to enhance and better utilize this significant resource.

The Minnesota River Valley Strategic Plan summarizes the findings of this initial broad-based assessment. This Plan focuses on the City-owned land in the river valley, though recognizes the multiple stakeholders and partners with interests in the river valley. The Plan describes the historic, ecological, and existing conditions context of the river valley in Bloomington and identifies key opportunities and challenges to be addressed.

This Plan establishes a framework of strategic actions to undertake over the next few years to identify and prioritize projects and actions the City can undertake to achieve the Plan vision and goals: to enhance awareness, appreciation, and enjoyment of the Minnesota River Valley in a manner that balances resource preservation with appropriate access and utilization.



Section 1

PURPOSE AND VISION

The Minnesota River Valley Strategic Plan is directly tied to the vision, mission, and value statements articulated in the City’s Strategic Plan. Specifically, the Plan supports the following Strategic Plan value statements:

- We choose to shape the future rather than reacting to a changing environment.
- We are stewards of our environment, promoting sustainability of our many resources and the creation of inviting public spaces.

For more information on the City’s Strategic Plan please visit: blm.mn/ImagineBloomington

1.1 Introduction

The Minnesota River Valley (“River Valley”) defines the 13 mile southern border of the City of Bloomington, Minnesota, as shown in Figure 1.1. Most of this nearly 4,100-acre area is public land. The rugged character and remote expanses of the River Valley provide residents of Bloomington convenient access to numerous opportunities for nature-based recreation. Visitors can learn about Minnesota’s wildlife, plant communities, and rich cultural heritage while experiencing a sense of solitude uncommon in the midst of an urban area. However, many residents have a limited awareness of this gem of natural beauty – located literally in Bloomington’s backyard.

Figure 1.1 Location of the Minnesota River Valley in the City of Bloomington

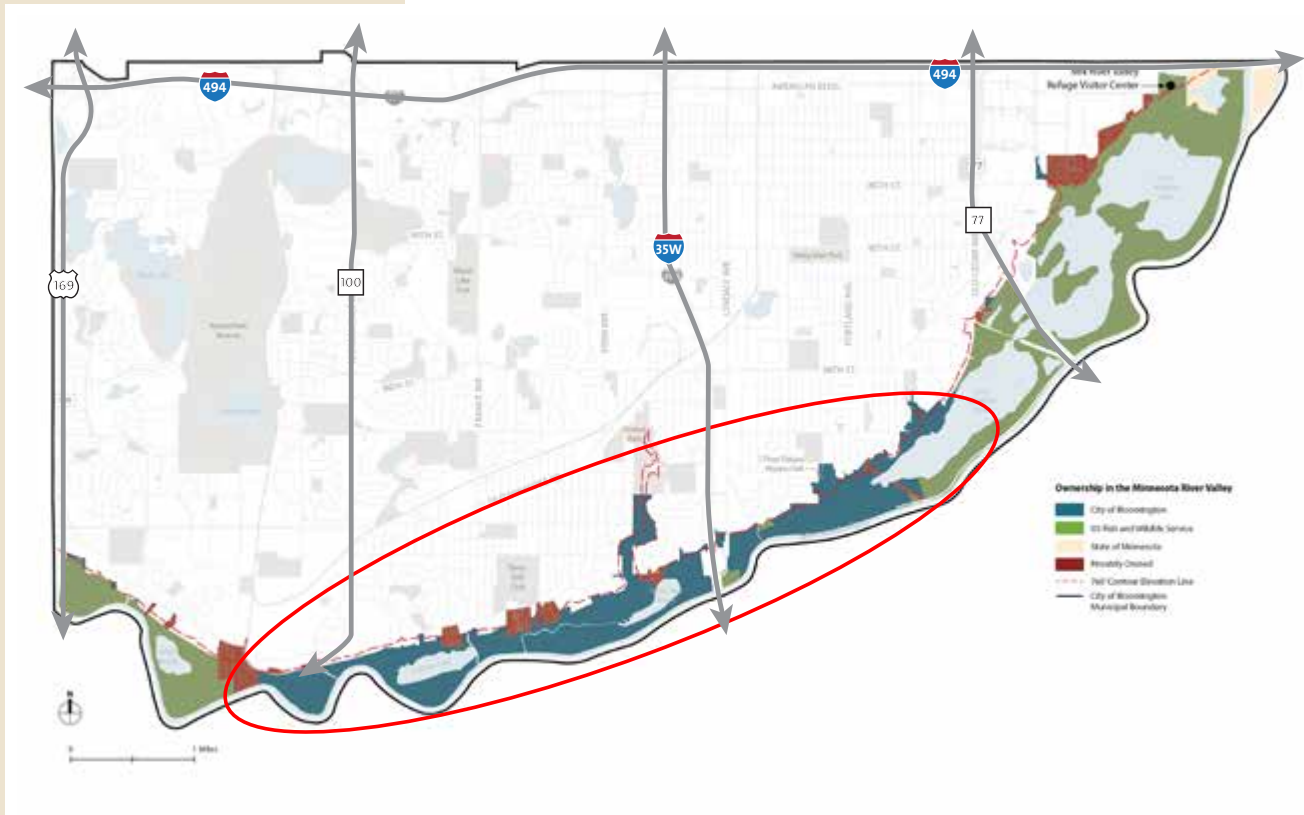


1.2 Purpose of the Plan

The *Minnesota River Valley Strategic Plan* (the “Plan”) creates an implementation framework to enhance awareness and access to the River Valley within the City of Bloomington while providing ongoing environmental protection and stewardship. The Plan is intended to provide strategic guidance and establishes priorities for implementation of more detailed action plans. The Plan focuses on city-owned land within the River Valley, shown on Figure 1.2, and is organized into the following sections:

1. Vision and Goals
2. Historical Context
3. Jurisdiction and Management
4. Existing Conditions
5. Opportunities and Challenges
6. Implementation Plan

Figure 1.2 City-owned Land in the Minnesota River Valley



1.3 Vision and Goals

The City envisions a future where citizen awareness, understanding, and access to the River Valley is expanded, but managed, to ensure the unique natural resources and character of the River Valley are protected and enhanced.

Minnesota River Valley Strategic Plan Vision Statement:

To enhance awareness, appreciation, and enjoyment of the Minnesota River Valley by ensuring that City-owned land in the River Valley is used and managed in a manner that balances resource preservation with appropriate access and utilization.

Bloomington Parks and Recreation Division Mission Statement:

The Mission of the Bloomington Parks and Recreation Division is to enhance the quality of life, health and wellness of our patrons through innovative and diversified parks, arts, recreation, leisure and cultural opportunities. This is accomplished through the stewardship of the community's parks and natural areas, and through the provision of quality recreational facilities and programs at an affordable price.

1.4 Guiding Framework

Goals for the Minnesota River Valley

The four goals listed below provide the framework for approaching the opportunities and challenges within the River Valley. The four goals are interrelated, though not prioritized. All play a role in achieving the Plan vision.

- **Enhance access to recreational opportunities in the River Valley.**

Public access to the River Valley is provided by both the City of Bloomington and the United States Fish & Wildlife Service (USFWS). The Plan identifies existing access points, challenges related to access, and future opportunities to enhance access for a broad spectrum of users.

- **Increase awareness and understanding of the River Valley environment.**

There is limited awareness of the important role the River Valley plays in our ecosystem, the historic context of the River Valley, and the recreational opportunities available within the River Valley area. Increasing citizen awareness and understanding is important to building community support for the continued stewardship of the River Valley.



High quality stream environment.

- **Improve utilization of land and resources in the River Valley.**

Use of the River Valley must be considered in the context of this unique and varied river and bluff environment. It is essential to find the right balance between accommodating visitors and protecting the natural amenities that draw visitors to the area.

- **Ensure protection and preservation of natural and cultural resources in the River Valley.**

The River Valley is a significant feature in the natural landscape and cultural history of Bloomington, the region, and the State. The Plan identifies the major challenges and opportunities to protect and preserve the natural and cultural resources in the River Valley, so they remain intact and flourish well into the future.

Guiding Principles

The City sees all four Plan goals as complementary - many of the recommendations in this Plan serve multiple goals. For example, planning for a coordinated signage system will not only increase awareness of the River Valley but will also enhance access. However, the City also recognizes that activities associated with the four goals have the potential to come into conflict with each other. For example, providing increased access for residents has the potential to work against resource preservation activities. Furthermore, the City recognizes that the multiple agencies, organizations and citizens working to protect and enhance the River Valley may have

Figure 1.3 Interrelationship of Goals and Principles



different priorities and missions. To mitigate these divergences, this Plan aims to abide by the following principles:

- **Mutual Respect and Cooperation**

Multiple agencies, organizations, and citizens have interests and share common goals regarding the use and protection of the River Valley. It's critical that we all work together to achieve these goals. The framework set by the Plan aims to coordinate the efforts of all interest groups in the River Valley to maximize effective and efficient stewardship in the River Valley.

- **Balanced Approach**

The prioritization of goals and implementation steps must be considered in the context of many, sometimes divergent, interests. The Plan will set the framework to ensure the trade-offs and impacts of agency and resident actions are fully understood and considered. The City will also work to ensure that there is ample opportunity for many voices to be heard as planning for the River Valley continues.

1.5 Public Outreach Process

During the development of this Plan, a variety of techniques were used to involve stakeholders in the strategic planning process. These are described below. See Appendix A for more information on these meetings and summaries of the input received.

Community Stakeholder Meetings

City staff held multiple meetings with representatives from community groups with specific interests in the River Valley including the Izaak Walton League, Minnesota Off-Road Cyclists (MORC), the Bloomington Historical Society and Friends of the Minnesota River Valley.

***What we learned:** There is a large, diverse and engaged group of stakeholders who are already doing work that supports the City's goals for the River Valley. The City should build on this work as project planning and implementation in the River Valley continue.*

Agency Stakeholder Meetings

City staff held multiple meetings with representatives from government agencies who work on projects in the River Valley including the USFWS and the Minnesota Department of Natural Resources (MnDNR). Regional park and recreation partners were also invited to participate, including staff representing: Three Rivers Park District, Dakota County, and the Metropolitan Parks and Open Space Commission.

What we learned: *The multiple government agencies operating in the River Valley share the City's goals of balancing access and environmental stewardship in the River Valley. They also endorsed the recommendation to start the Natural Resource Plan before the other priority projects highlighted in the Plan. Lastly, we learned that ensuring open communication between these agencies is essential to future successful projects in the River Valley.*

Site Visits with Elected Officials

In January of 2015 City staff conducted tours of the River Valley with members of the City Council to familiarize Councilmembers with the opportunities and challenges and highlight the various access points into the River Valley.

What we learned: *The tours illustrated how vast the River Valley area is and the range of existing facilities and their physical condition. Tour participants witnessed first-hand that even in winter, the River Valley draws visitors. One of the consistent observations was the need for more attractive and coordinated signage to increase awareness as well as enhance the user experience and sense of safety.*

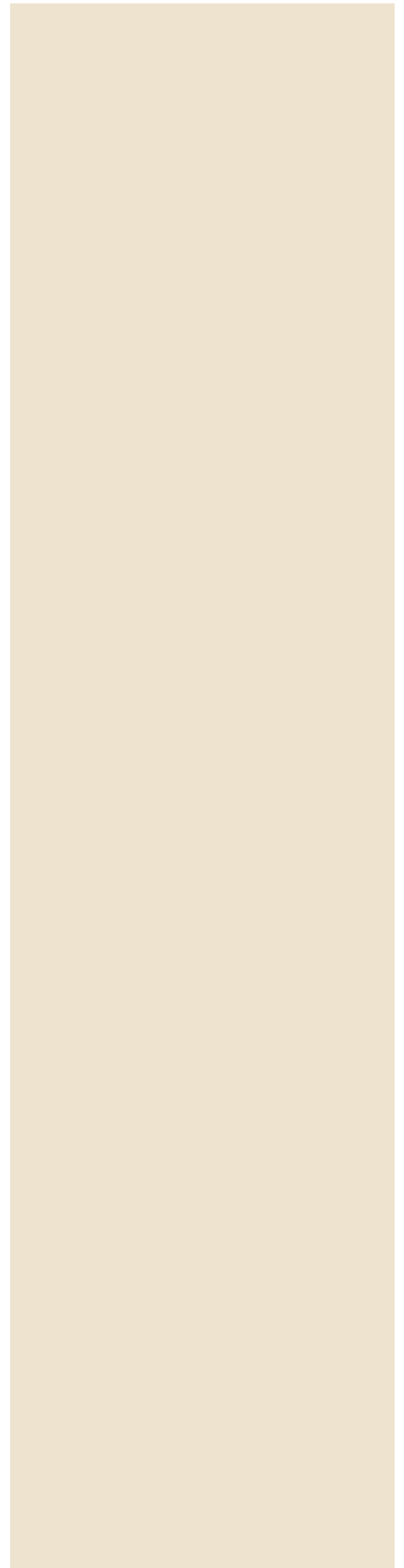
Community Open Houses and Online Surveys

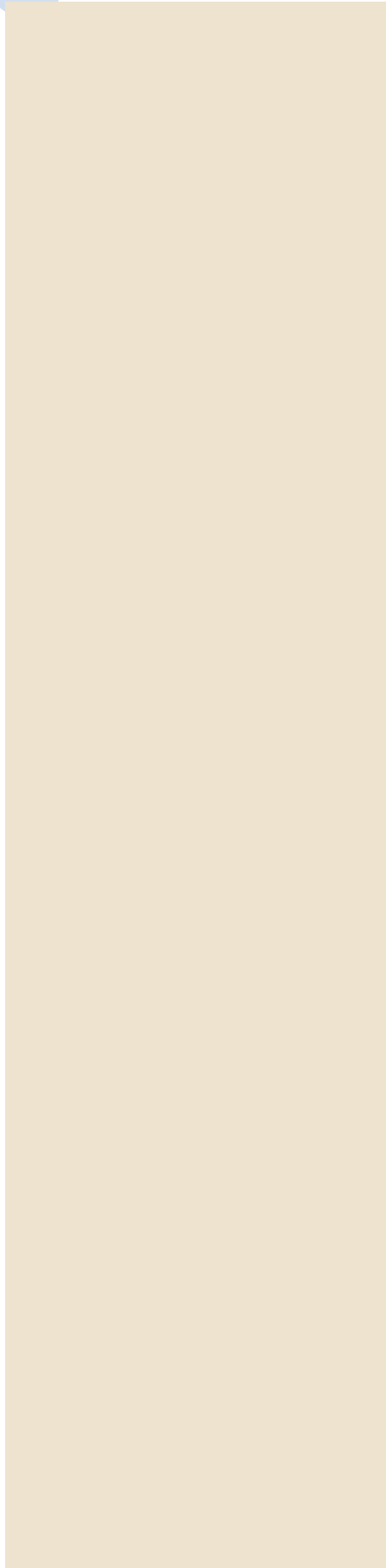
The City hosted two community open houses and posted two accompanying online surveys to solicit input from the public during the strategic planning process. The first open house and online survey, Summer 2014, focused on what activities participants enjoyed in the River Valley. The second open house and online survey, Summer 2015, asked participants to prioritize recommended implementation tasks. It is important to note that the data and opinions gathered via the open houses and surveys are not statistically significant – the data only provide a sample of information reflecting the interest of a limited number of engaged respondents. For more detail on the input received at open houses and online surveys see Appendix A.

What we learned: *From the first open house and online survey we learned that the majority of respondents visit the River Valley to hike, walk, observe nature and wildlife, or mountain bike. Participants were also interested in improving and maintaining existing access points and in keeping the landscape in the River Valley as natural as possible. From the second open house and online survey we learned that respondents support preparing the Natural Resource Plan before other recommended priority tasks.*

Additionally, from the discussion at the open houses and from the comments received via the online surveys, we learned that there is confusion regarding how the MnDNR Minnesota Valley State Trail fits into the strategic planning process. Staff heard from many people that

both support and oppose the State Trail project and these comments were shared with City commissions and the City Council. However, while the City of Bloomington supports the project, this strategic planning process does not provide detailed recommendations regarding the State Trail design or alignment, primarily because the State Trail project is led and funded by the MnDNR. For more information on the State Trail process see page 5.3.





Section 2

HISTORICAL CONTEXT

Many generations of Native Americans have called the River Valley home – relying on the River Valley’s rich resources for sustenance, shelter and transportation. Archaeological sites have been discovered in Bloomington spanning each of the three main traditions or periods of Native American presence in the River Valley. Specifically, the Dakota Indians had numerous villages in the Bloomington area all of which were greatly affected by the arrival of white European explorers and settlers.

European exploration of the Upper Mississippi River basin began in 1673 when French explorers Louis Joliet and Jacques Marquette reached the river near what is now Prairie du Chien, Wisconsin. Over the next 100 years the Mississippi River basin and its tributaries, including the Minnesota River, were explored by French fur traders as well as other European explorers who were beginning to make their way into the American West. In 1805, the River Valley was officially ceded to the U.S. government via the Louisiana Purchase. As a result, more white settlers were attracted to the region. The U.S. government encouraged this settlement and fortified the area with strategic defenses, including Fort Snelling. With the completion of the Fort in 1825, the Minnesota River became a very important strategic waterway to the West.

Throughout this time period relations between white settlers and Native Americans were contentious and often violent. Through a series of questionable treaties, such as Treaty Traverse des Sioux, the U.S. government took control of almost all of the Native American land in the River Valley. This culminated in the U.S. Dakota War of 1862 – a bloody six week war between the U.S. government and several bands of Dakota. The war ended with a mass execution of 38 Dakota men on December 26, 1862, in Mankato, Minnesota, and the majority of the Dakota people were exiled from the state.

Meanwhile, white settlers continued to flood into the lower River Valley, establishing cities and towns. These settlers also relied on the rich resources of the River Valley. The river served as an important transportation artery for the settlers. Steamboats were the primary means by which goods were moved between the newly established Minnesota River cities until the expansion of railroads into the area in the 1860’s and 70’s.



Gideon Pond



Samuel Pond

In 1834 Gideon Pond and his brother Samuel came to Minnesota to teach Christianity to the Dakota. The Ponds received government permission to establish a mission school near Lake Calhoun (current Minneapolis), where Chief Cloud Man’s band of Dakota spent their summers. Beginning in 1839, conflicts between the Dakota and Ojibwe prompted Cloud Man to move his village to a spot near the Minnesota River in present day Bloomington. The village was one of several in the area, including the villages of Black Dog (Burnsville) Shakpe (Shakopee), and others. Gideon Pond moved to join them in 1843, establishing the Oak Grove Mission that would operate until 1852. Today, this site is one of three Bloomington properties that is listed on the National Register of Historic Places.

Throughout the 20th century the river transitioned from a transportation corridor into a recreation area enjoyed by the people of the Twin Cities. Prior to a large portion of the River Valley gaining Federal Wildlife Refuge status in 1976, the area was utilized for other purposes, including housing duck hunting camps and gun clubs for area hunters. Today, walkers, bikers and birders are the primary users of the Minnesota Valley National Wildlife Refuge (MNVNWR) and City-owned land in the River Valley.

A timeline of important events in the settlement of the River Valley is illustrated in Figure 2.1.

Figure 2.1 Timeline of Historic Events

EUROPEAN SETTLEMENT

Humans have called the Minnesota River Valley in Bloomington home for millennia. Many generations of Native Americans have called the Minnesota River Valley home while European settlement of the Minnesota River Valley began in the late 1600s. Since then, the human population in the river valley has continued to grow.



French explorers Louis Joliet and Jacques Marquette reach the upper portion of the Mississippi River. (Photo 3).

1673

1600

1700

1800

The Lower Minnesota River is acquired by the U.S. Government as part of the Louisiana Purchase. 1805

U.S. government takes control of 100,000 acres of Dakota land at the intersection of the Mississippi and Minnesota Rivers via disputed treaty negotiations. 1805



Treaty Traverse des Sioux 1851

State of Minnesota is admitted into the Union. 1858

Township of Bloomington is established. 1858

War Department begins building a chain of forts between Lake Michigan and the Missouri River, including Fort Snelling. 1815



Gideon Pond establishes Oak Grove Mission near Chief Cloud Man's village. 1852

U.S. Dakota War 1862

City of Bloomington incorporated 1960

Dan Patch Railroad bridge is constructed 1908

Steel "camel-back" Cedar Avenue bridge is constructed. 1920

Bass Ponds are created

New Cedar Avenue bridge is constructed 1979



Rehabilitation of Old Cedar Avenue bridge begins. 2015

Planned opening of the Bloomington section of the Minnesota River Valley Trail. 2017



Minnesota Valley National Wildlife Refuge is created. 1976

Memorandum of Understanding between the City of Bloomington and the U.S. Fish and Wildlife Service is signed, governing shared responsibilities in the Minnesota River Valley 1998

U.S. Fish and Wildlife Services is established within the U.S. Department of Interior 1940



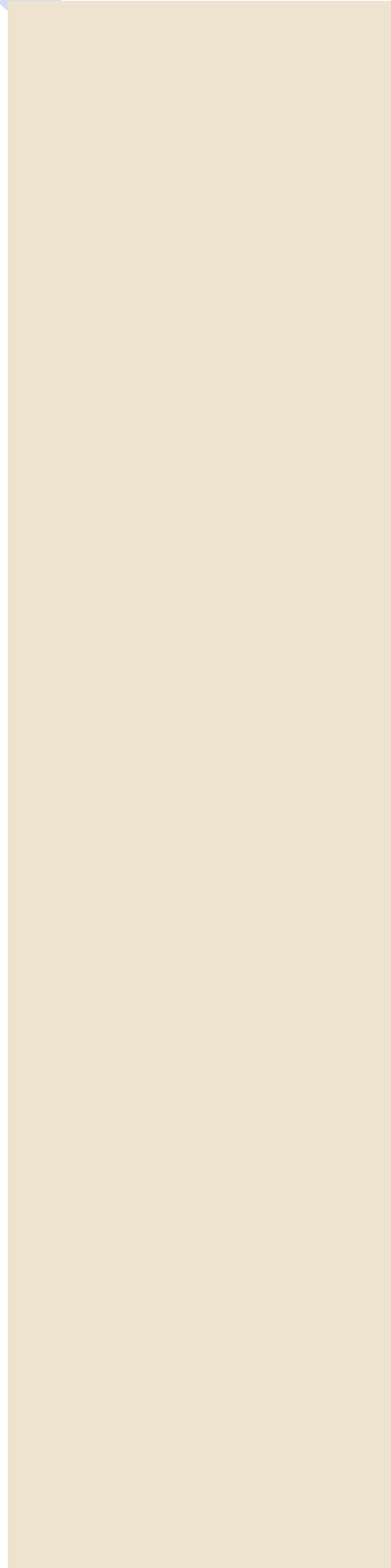
Construction of Fort Snelling is completed. 1825

Bloomington Ferry opens. 1849

Peter and Louisa Quinn, Bloomington's first white settlers, are sent by the government to teach farming methods to the Dakota Indians living near Fort Snelling. 1843

Chief Cloud Man, a Dakota chief, moves his village to a spot near the Minnesota River in present day Bloomington. 1839

First Bloomington Ferry Bridge is constructed. 1889



Section 3

JURISDICTION AND MANAGEMENT

A combination of public agencies, non-profits, community groups and private citizens own land or are involved in activities directly related to the River Valley. Roughly 4,109 acres of River Valley land are located within the City of Bloomington. The vast majority (3,406 acres) is publicly owned.

For purposes of this Plan, the “River Valley” is broadly defined as the land below the bluff line. However, portions of several city parks located above the bluff line; abut and/or provide physical connections to the River Valley, including: Forest Glen Park, Mounds Spring Park, Parker’s Picnic Grounds, Pond-Dakota Mission Park, and Central/Moir/Harrison Parks.

While this Plan focuses on the City-owned land, it also takes into consideration portions of the River Valley located in the City that are owned by others. The jurisdiction and roles of the key partners directly involved with the River Valley are described below.

3.1 Land Owners

The majority of the River Valley below the bluffs is designated for public park and conservation uses. Two government agencies own and have jurisdiction over most of these lands – the City of Bloomington; and the USFWS, as shown in Figure 3.1.

City of Bloomington

The City of Bloomington owns 1,131 acres of land in the River Valley, roughly divided east and west of I-35W. Much of the City-owned lands are maintained in a natural condition. Facilities provided on City-owned land include neighborhood access points and trails, signage, and access roads for park and utility maintenance. Approximately 400 acres of City-owned land east of I-35W is managed by the Minnesota Valley National Wildlife Refuge (MNVNWR) under a Memorandum of Understanding (MOU) with the USFWS. Updating the MOU is identified as a priority action to commence in 2016. This is discussed in greater detail in Section 6 and Appendix C.

Bluff Protection

In 1982, the City of Bloomington adopted the Bluff Protection Overlay District to establish regulations to protect the Minnesota River bluffs from development impacts. The regulations prohibit development below the 760-foot contour elevation, shown as a red dashed line on Figure 3.1.



Steep bluffs define the Minnesota River Valley in Bloomington.

United States Fish and Wildlife Service (USFWS)

The USFWS, a federal agency within the Department of the Interior, owns approximately 2,100 acres and, through the MOU, manages portions of the city-owned lands along the Minnesota River. These lands are part of the larger Minnesota Valley National Wildlife Refuge (MNVNWR) that extends from Fort Snelling State Park upstream to the City of LeSueur, Minnesota in sometimes non-contiguous parcels of protected wildlife habitat. The MRVNWR is organized into management units, as illustrated in Figure 3.2. The Long Meadow Lake unit is located in Bloomington.

The mission of MNVNWR is to restore and manage the ecological communities of the Lower River Valley and its watershed while providing environmental education and wildlife dependent recreation. To fulfill this mission, the Refuge provides natural and cultural resource protection, biological monitoring and restoration, environmental education, interpretation, and urban outreach, wildlife-dependent recreation, and maintenance for the lands it manages.

MNVNWR facilities in Bloomington include a Visitor Center and headquarters, trails and trailheads, informational and interpretive kiosks and signage. The MNVNWR staff are working closely with the City of Bloomington on the Old Cedar Avenue Bridge restoration project and collaborate with numerous landowners and stakeholders in the River Valley as well as the Twin Cities metro area in order to accomplish their mission.

Figure 3.2 Units of the Minnesota Valley National Wildlife Refuge in the Metropolitan Area

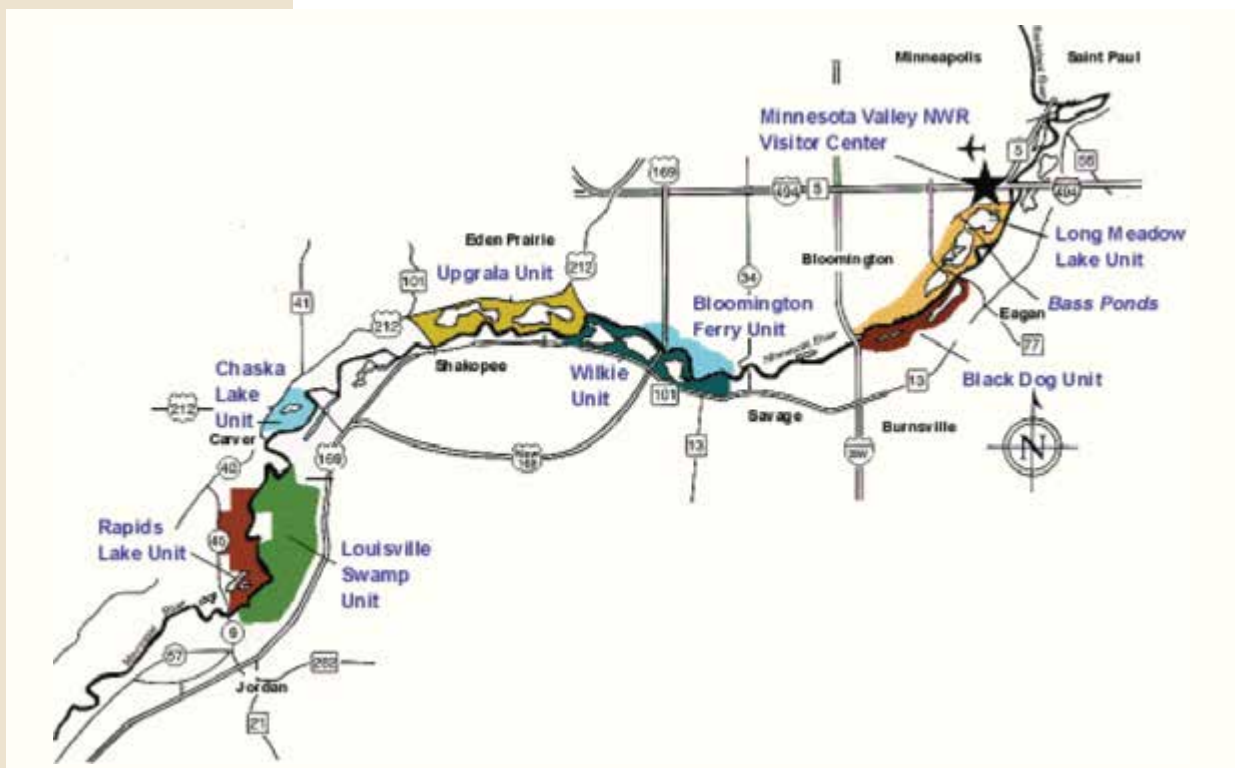
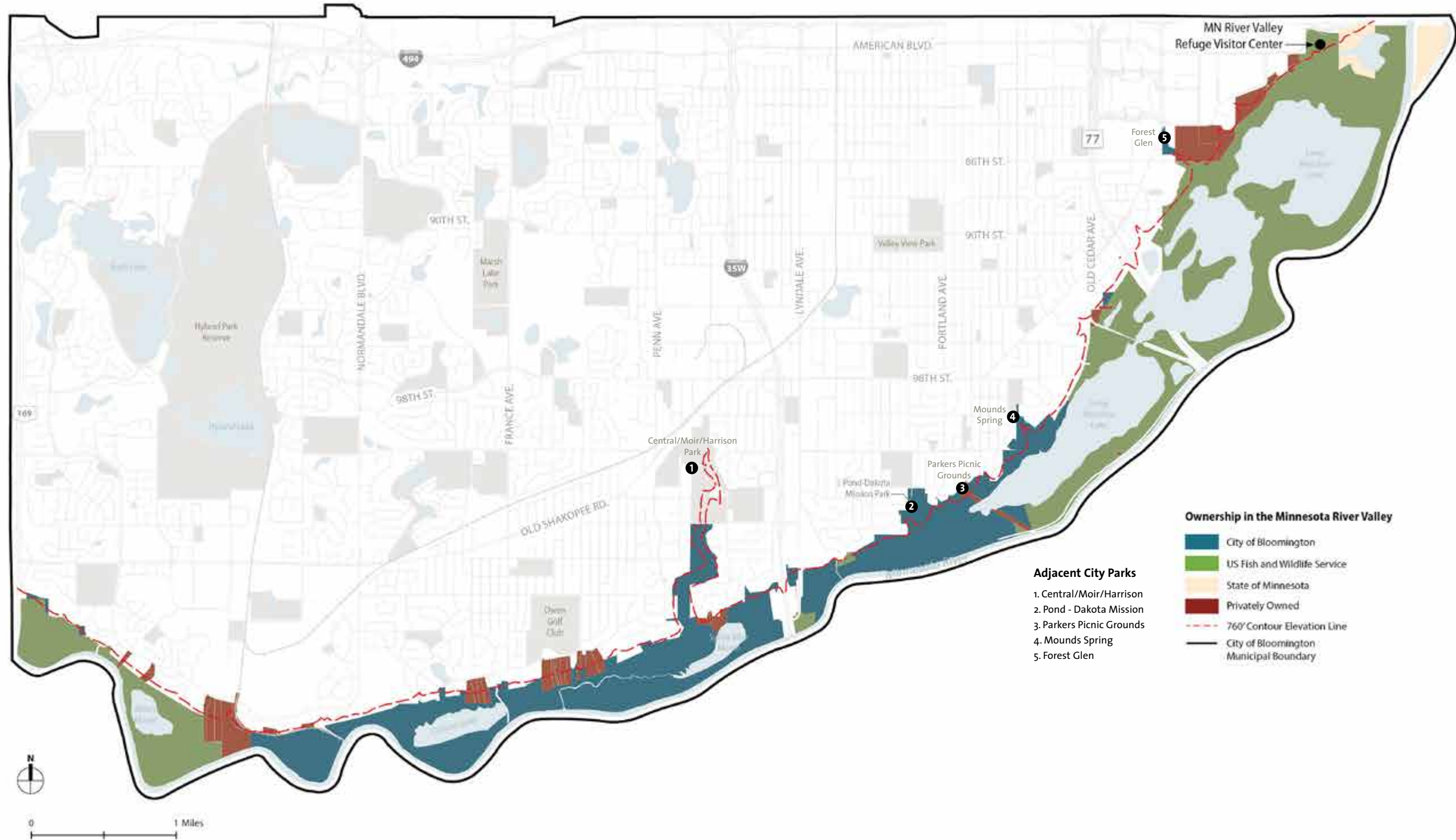
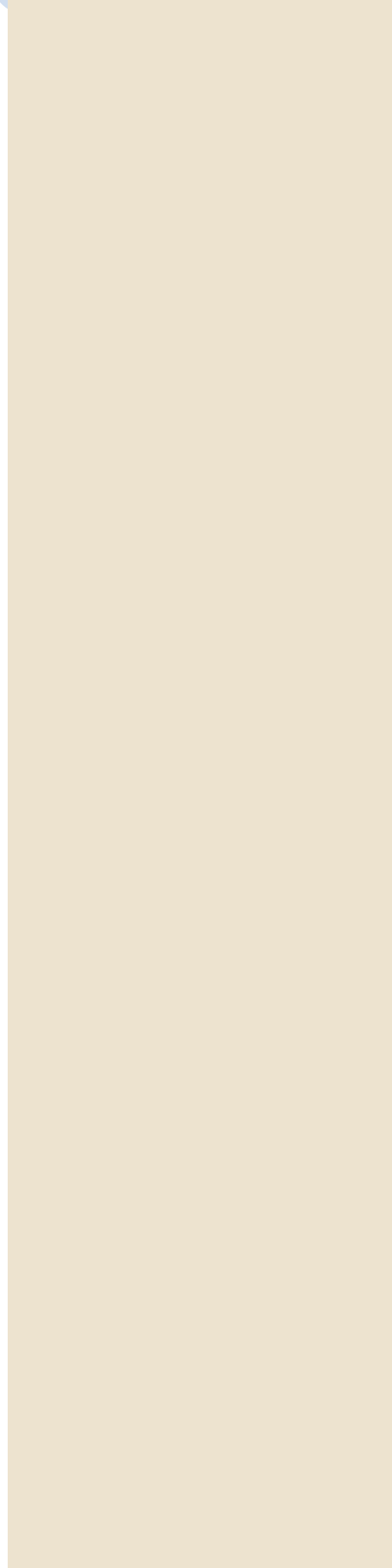


Figure 3.1 Property Owners in the Minnesota River Valley





Other Property Owners

Approximately 800 acres in the River Valley within the City of Bloomington is owned by others, as shown on Figure 3.1 and described below:

- **Private Owners** - About 700 acres in the River Valley are under private ownership. Owners include the Twin Cities and Western Rail Road Company, private citizens, and organizations like the Minnesota Valley Chapter of the Izaak Walton League. Most of the privately held land is located along the top of the bluff, although portions extend below the bluff line into the River Valley.
- **Public Owners** - The Minnesota Department of Transportation (MnDOT) owns approximately 85 acres south of I-494 in the far northeast corner of Bloomington, as well as other areas of public right-of-way at the I-35W, Highway 77 and Highway 169 river crossings.

3.2 Other Organizations Active in the Minnesota River Valley

Minnesota Department of Natural Resources (MnDNR)

While the State-operated MnDNR does not own any property in the River Valley, the agency is in the process of planning for the construction of the Bloomington segment of the Minnesota Valley State Trail. Much of the 72-mile trail has already been constructed. The Bloomington segment of the State Trail is planned to begin at the MNVNWR Visitors Center in the northeast corner of the City and end at the Bloomington Ferry trailhead in the southwest corner of the City. To accomplish the construction of the trail, MnDNR must obtain permission to locate the State Trail corridor on land owned by the City, USFWS, and other property owners. This will be formalized in agreements with both the City and USFWS to define roles and responsibilities related to the design, implementation, and ongoing operation and maintenance of the State Trail facility. As a State facility, MnDNR will be responsible for maintaining the State Trail facilities. More information on the State Trail is provided on page 5.3.

Lower Minnesota River Watershed District

The area of the River Valley located within the City of Bloomington is under the jurisdiction of the Lower Minnesota River Watershed District. The Lower Minnesota River Watershed District provides regulatory oversight regarding impacts to water resources.

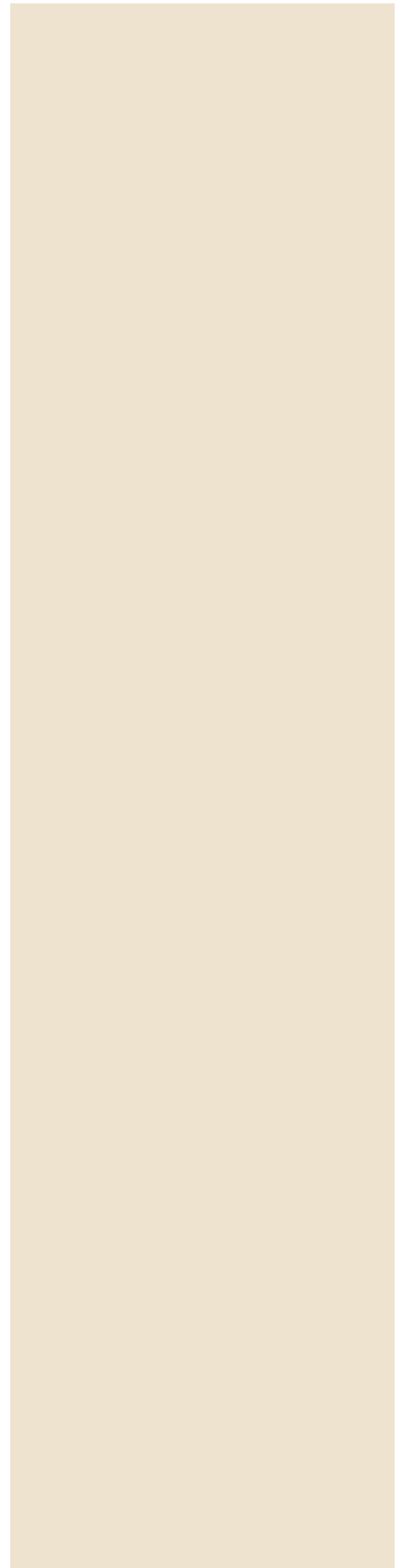
Three Rivers Park District (TRPD)

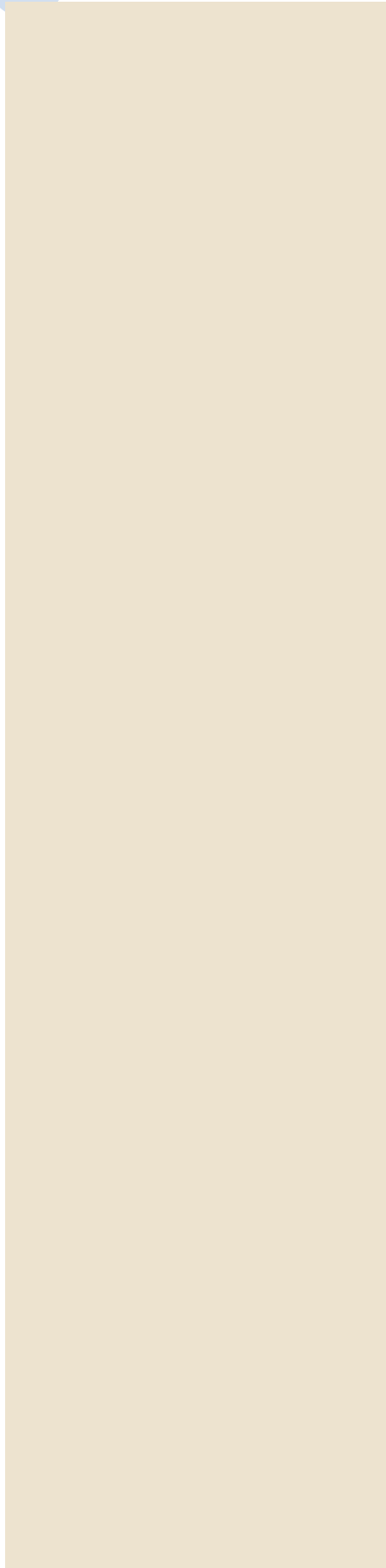
Three Rivers Park District develops, operates and manages regional-oriented park and trail facilities in Hennepin County. Three trails in Bloomington, wholly or partly under the jurisdiction of TRPD, will connect to the River Valley. These include: Nine Mile Creek Regional Trail, Nokomis-Minnesota River Regional Trail, and the Hyland Trail (see Figure 5.1).

Special Interest Groups

In addition to the governmental agencies described above, there are several non-profit, special interest, and citizen-based groups with an active interest in the River Valley. These groups provide a variety of services including community outreach and awareness, education, maintenance, and host events. City has ongoing working relationships with the following groups and utility companies:

- Izaak Walton League of America – Minnesota Valley Chapter
- Minnesota Off-Road Cyclists (MORC) - Minnesota chapter of the International Mountain Bikers Association (IMBA)
- Friends of the Minnesota River Valley
- Pond-Dakota Heritage Society
- The Bloomington Bicycle Alliance (BBA)
- Parks and Trails Council of Minnesota
- Utility Companies and Agencies
 - Xcel Energy
 - Metropolitan Council Environmental Services (MCES)
 - Centerpoint Energy





Section 4

EXISTING CONDITIONS

The River Valley offers visitors a sense of escape from the man-made urban environment. It's a place where visitors can be immersed in the landscape surrounded by an array of plants, animals, and natural features, some of which are not found anywhere else in the region. Understanding the existing conditions in the River Valley is an important step in planning for the area's future. This section of the Plan details what is known about the area's existing natural and cultural resources as well as existing recreational facilities and uses.

4.1 Ecosystem Context

To get a broad view, this section briefly describes the River Valley in context relative to North America, the Midwest, and the Twin Cities metropolitan region.

Prairie Pothole Region

The River Valley is located in the lower stretches of the vast Prairie Pothole region, which extends across the northern plains of the United States and Canada. The region is characterized by thousands of shallow wetlands, known as potholes, created by glacier activity approximately 10,000 years ago. This region stretches from central Iowa to Canada, as shown in 4.1. The Prairie Pothole region is one of the largest critical bird habitat areas and waterfowl

Figure 4.1 Prairie Pothole Region



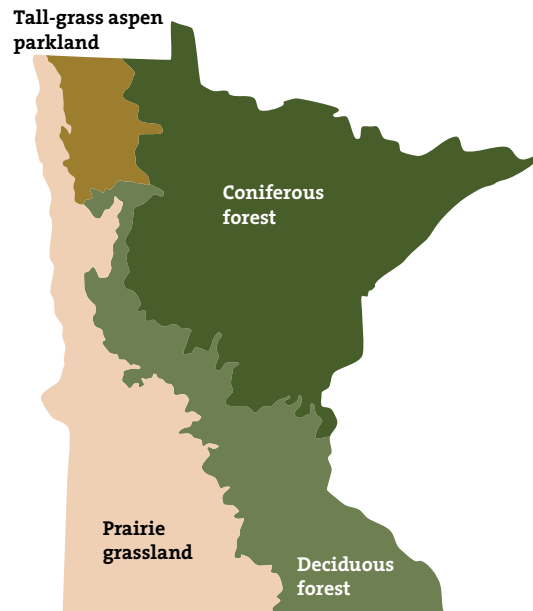
**Prairie restoration plantings at
Pond-Dakota Mission Park**

production regions in the country. In addition to supporting waterfowl hunting and birding, prairie potholes absorb surges of rain, snow melt, and floodwaters thereby reducing the risk and severity of downstream flooding.

Mississippi Headwaters/Tall-grass Prairie Ecosystem

The Mississippi Headwaters/Tall grass Prairie ecosystem covers much of Minnesota and North Dakota, with small sections extending into Iowa and Wisconsin. This ecosystem incorporates four major biomes (i.e. areas with similar climate, plants and animals): tallgrass prairie, mixed-grass prairie, eastern deciduous forest, and northern coniferous forest. These biomes are roughly divided into four zones across Minnesota (see Figure 4.2). The western stretch of the River Valley passes through prairielands before reaching the deciduous forestlands that encompass the Twin Cities Metropolitan region.

Figure 4.2 Biomes of Minnesota



Twin Cities Metropolitan Region

The River Valley forms one of the largest contiguous natural areas in the metro region. While it is an important natural resource and recreational destination, it is also an important freight transportation corridor served by barges. The River Valley has special significance for Bloomington, because it forms the City's entire south/southeast border; it is figuratively and literally the City's "backyard"!

4.2 Natural Resources

The River Valley contains a vast number of native plant communities, unique soils, and habitat for various animal species. The diversity and quality of ecological resources make it a unique and special regional resource.

Ecologically Significant Areas

Ecologically significant areas are those areas that have a high likelihood of hosting native species of plants and animals. The River Valley's ecologically significant areas need to be taken into careful consideration when making decisions about land use in the River Valley to ensure they are protected from fragmentation and degradation. Among the types of natural areas found there are:

- Mixed Emergent Marsh
- Lowland Hardwood Forest
- Black Ash Swamp
- Water Lily Open Marsh
- River Mud Flats
- Oak Forests
- Wet Meadow
- Willow Swamp
- Floodplain Forests

Each of these areas contains its own unique characteristics and resident plant and animal species. The following areas have been identified as having high potential to support rare plant and animal species:

- Mixed emergent marsh
- Water Lily Open Marsh
- Willow Swamp
- Oak Woodland/Brushland
- Floodplain Forest

A natural resources inventory prepared by Hennepin County (see sidebar) identified the location of these natural areas, and used a MnDNR rating

Natural Resources Inventory of City of Bloomington

In 2007, Hennepin County Department of Environmental Services conducted a detailed natural resources assessment within the City of Bloomington. The project classified and assessed the relative ecological quality of the remaining natural and semi-natural areas in Bloomington and recommends potential natural resources management considerations. *The Minnesota Valley Strategic Plan* draws on this report. Please visit Hennepin County's website to read the entire report, www.hennepin.us/environment.



Minnesota River floodplain forest

By the Numbers - Plants and Animals in the River Valley:

- 50 species of mammals
- 30 species of reptiles and amphibians
- 120 resident bird species
- 130 migrating bird species
- 12 species on the Federal endangered species list
- 100+ species on the Federal and State threatened and sensitive species list

system to assess the relative quality of the plant life within each area. As shown in Figure 4.3, large portions of the River Valley are considered ‘Good,’ the second highest land cover quality rating. This rating indicates the processes in the natural community are intact, but there are signs of past human impacts. It also indicates relatively low levels of exotic species present. However, significant portions of the City-owned land are ranked ‘Moderate’. This ranking indicates obvious past disturbances, but the areas are still clearly recognizable as a native community.

Animals and Plants in the River Valley

Native Species

The lower River Valley is home to numerous species of native plants, mammals, fish,



Blanding’s Turtle



Great Blue Heron

reptiles and amphibians. It is also one of the largest and most important bird habitats in the Upper Midwest, with more than 250 different species of birds migrating through or residing in the River Valley each year.

Endangered Species

More than a dozen species on the Federal Endangered list have been found in the River Valley including plants, fish, mussels, and insects. Hundreds more floral and faunal species on federal and state threatened and sensitive species lists also reside in the River Valley, including the Blandings Turtle, shown above. Preserving intact high-quality habitat is important to ensuring their survival.

Invasive Species

Non-native (i.e. exotic) and invasive species can be found in many areas of the River Valley. Flora such as purple loosestrife, leafy spurge,

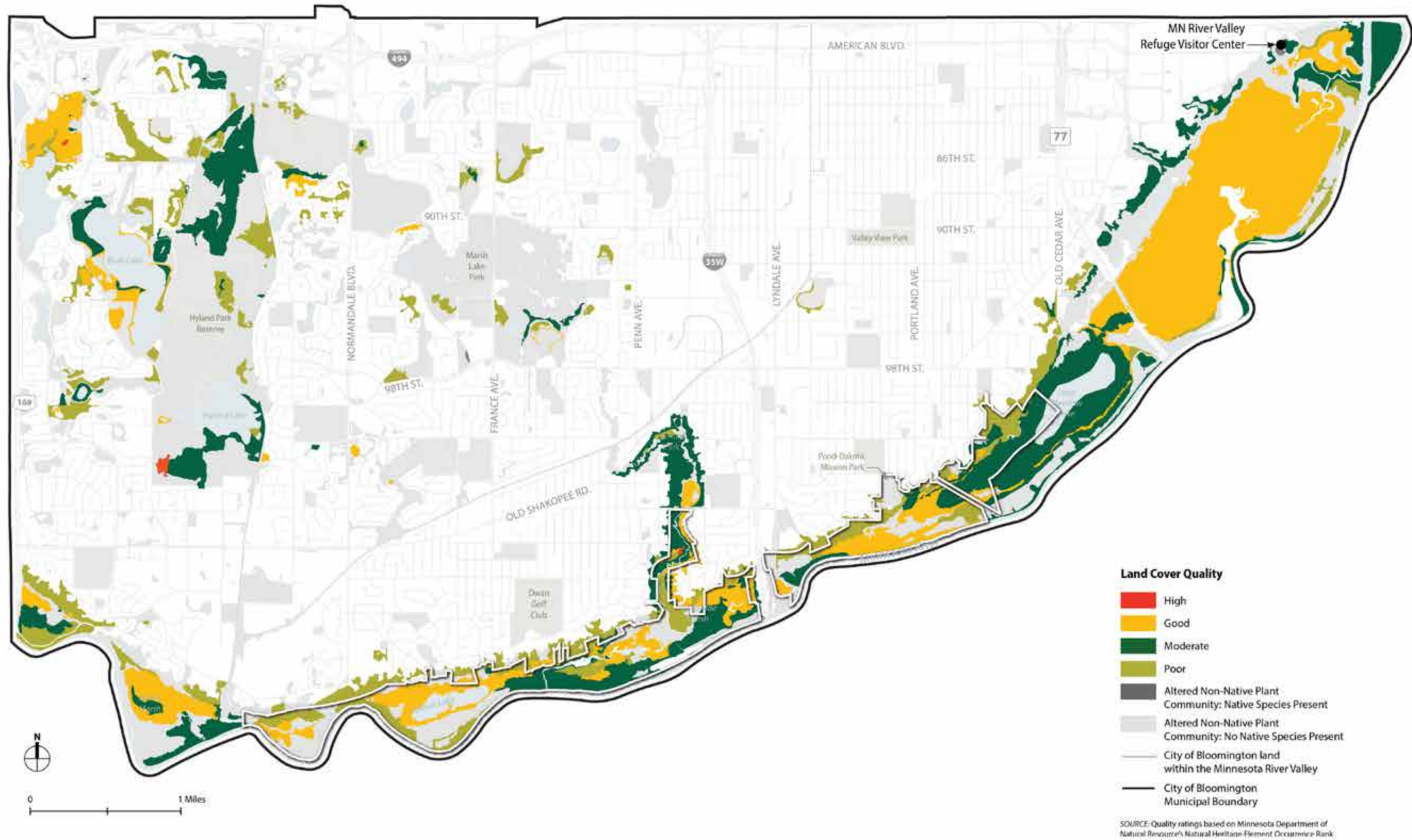


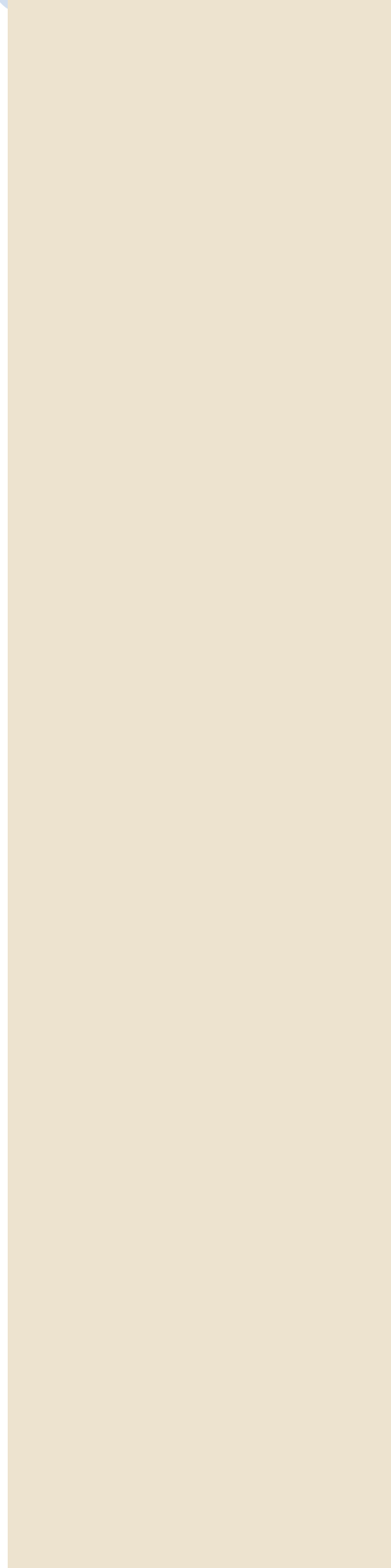
European Buckthorn



Garlic Mustard

Figure 4.3 Land Cover Quality





garlic mustard, and European buckthorn are among the more aggressive non-native species that compete with native plants for important resources for survival. There are multiple ongoing efforts led by the City of Bloomington and other organizations to remove and control invasive species in the River Valley.

4.3 Cultural & Historic Resources

As described in Section 2, Bloomington has a long, rich cultural connection to the River Valley. Evidence of this history remains in the many known historic sites and areas shown in Figure 4.4. Expanding awareness and understanding of the cultural history of the River Valley is an important goal of this Plan. At the same time, these resources must be protected from degradation and treated with care and respect. For a more complete description of the cultural and historic sites highlighted in Figure 4.4, please see Appendix B.

4.4 Existing Activities

Most visitors to the River Valley engage in some form of nature-based outdoor recreation, education, or historic/cultural activities. This is consistent with general park use trends as noted in the call out box on page 4.11. Existing activities provided in the River Valley fall into three broad categories:

Trail-based Uses

Trails are the most popular means for visitors to access and explore the River Valley. While the number of trail users increase during the warm weather months, trails are used year-round. Existing trails are primarily used for:

- **Hiking** - Existing trails are popular with hikers who enjoy the secluded natural setting.
- **Trail Running** - The changing topography and natural setting make the River Valley trails an outstanding location for trail running.
- **Mountain Biking** - The River Valley trails are a popular destination for mountain bikers in the metropolitan area. The single track trails along the bluff appeal to both recreational and highly-skilled bikers. The River Valley is increasingly used year round for mountain biking as fat tire bikes have become more popular. Fat tire bikes can be ridden in snow and are not hindered by the loose sand on many of the trails in the warmer months.



Winter “fat tire” bicyclist



Demonstration of 19th century log-cutting technique

Pond-Dakota Mission Park

The primary City facility in the River Valley focused on historic and cultural-based interpretation is Pond-Dakota Mission Park, which is the site of the historic Oak Grove Mission and the 1856 Gideon and Agnes Pond House. Programs are offered year-round that highlight the life and times of the Ponds, the Dakota people, and the missionaries who worked with the Dakota people during the mid-nineteenth century. For information on other sites see Figure 4.4 and Appendix B.

- **Cross-Country Skiing and Snowshoeing** - Existing trails in the River Valley provide opportunities for skiers and snowshoers in the winter although trails are not groomed (i.e. tracked) for these specific activities.

Cultural and Nature-based Activities

Many visitors come to the River Valley to participate in some form of nature-based recreation. This can range from informal, individual use, to formally organized group or educational programs offered by natural resource professionals. Popular activities include:

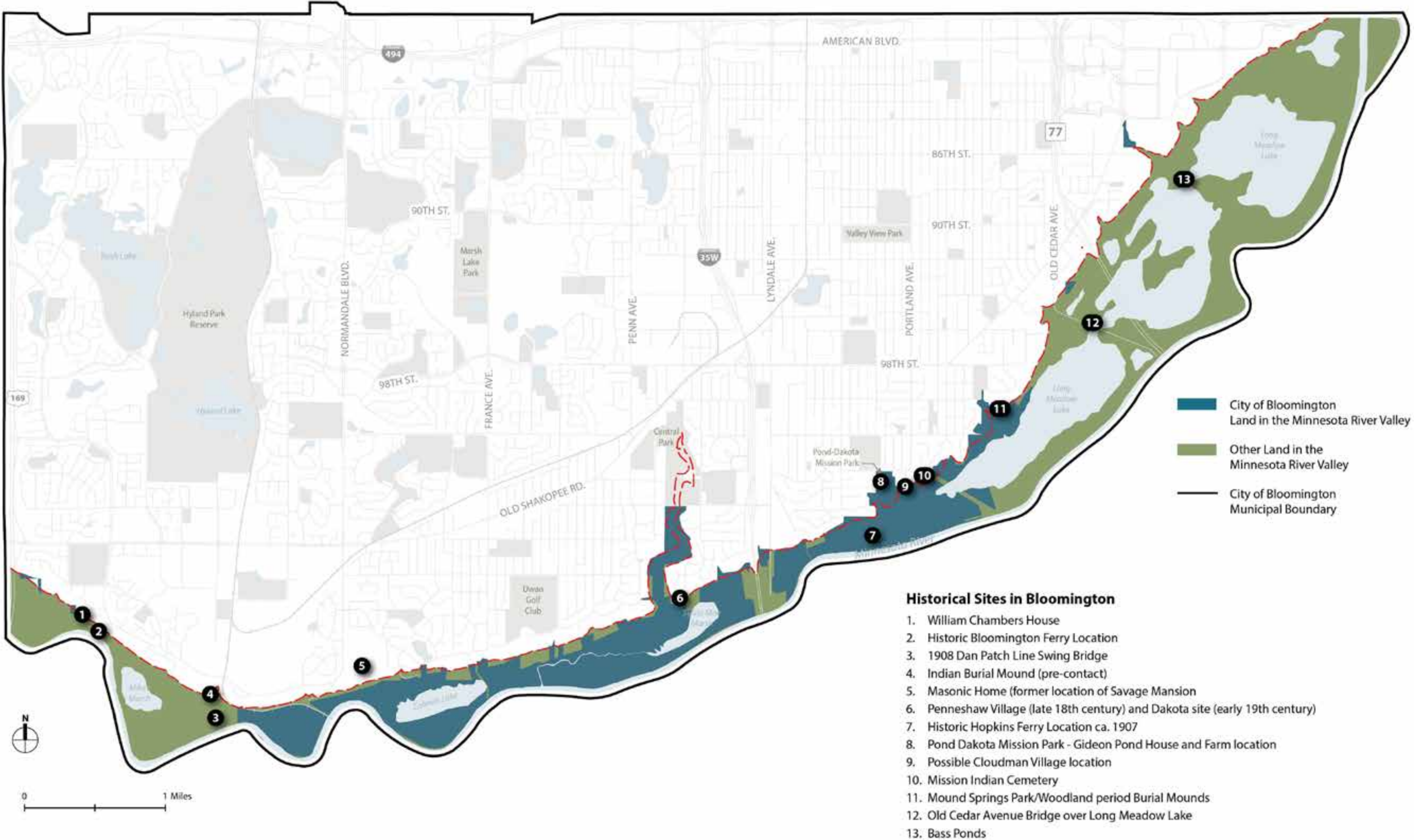
- **Bird-Watching and Wildlife Observation** - The River Valley's large and varied habitat is home to many species of birds and animals that attract bird watchers and wildlife observers year round. While these activities do not require special facilities, amenities such as benches, interpretive or educational signs, and boardwalks or observation platforms enhance visitor comfort and experience.
- **Photography** – The interface of nature and cityscape as well as abundant bird and wildlife make the River Valley a wonderful area to photograph. It is also used as a backdrop for portrait photographers, family photos, and occasional commercial photography and videography. Commercial photography and videography require a special use permit when conducted on national wildlife refuge property.
- **Environmental Education and Interpretation** – The River Valley functions as an outdoor classroom for local and regional schools. Public informal learning opportunities for all ages are provided by MRVNWR staff and volunteers, as well as other organizations through scheduled interpretive programs such as nature hikes, bird walks, and other.
- **Historical and Cultural Education and Interpretation** - There are numerous historical and cultural sites in the River Valley ranging from pre-settlement sites, to Native American burial grounds, to settler homesteads. Education and interpretation related to these sites are generally provided through organized events, guided tours, and special facilities, such as interpretive signs.

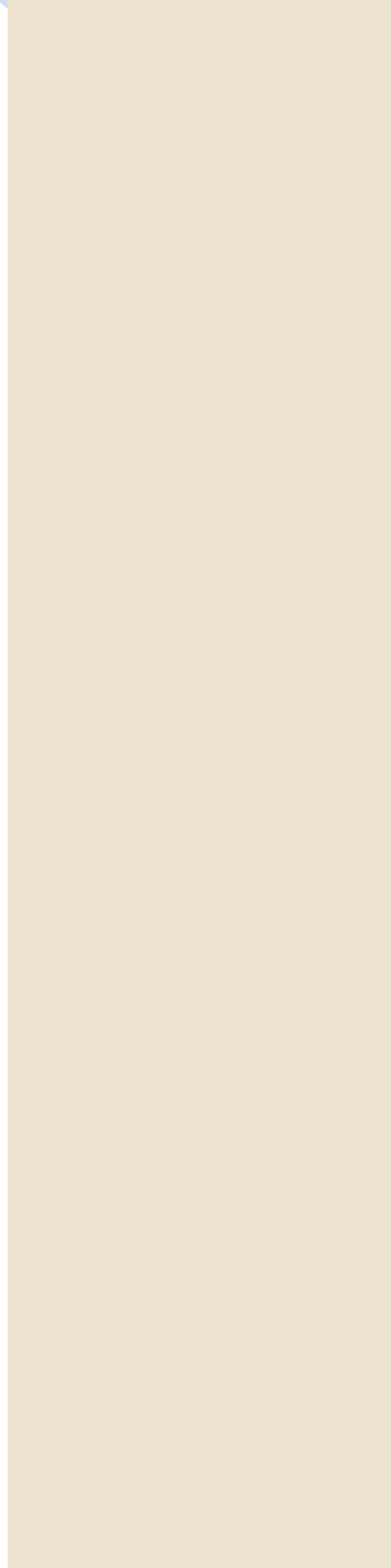
Water-based Recreation

The City property in the River Valley has frontage on both the Minnesota River and several inland lakes (Long Meadow Lake, Coleman Lake).

- **Boating** - Boaters, canoeists, and kayakers can access the Minnesota River at the USFWS's Russell A. Sorenson Landing, located at the terminus of Lyndale Avenue just east of the I-35W bridge. USFWS currently restricts boats on inland lakes, including Long Meadow Lake and Coleman Lake, due to disturbance of wildlife and waterfowl.

Figure 4.4 Location of Important Known Historic Sites



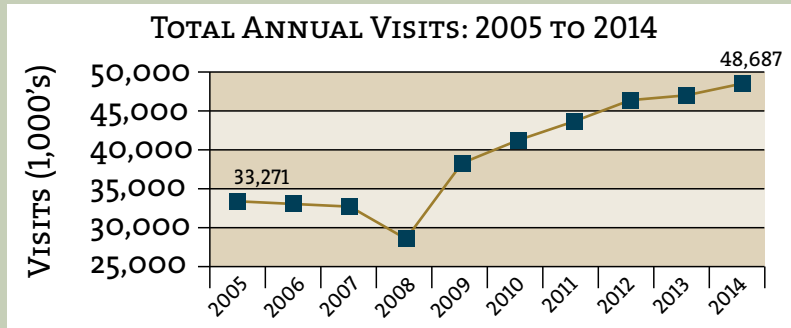


Park Land Usage Trends

The City of Bloomington relies on data from the Metropolitan Council and Three Rivers Park District for annual park usage data and trends.

Metropolitan Council 2014 Annual Use Estimate

The Metropolitan Council's 2014 Annual Use Estimate shows that annual visits to the regional park system have increased dramatically over the last ten years. In 2014, an estimated 48.7 million visits were made to the Metropolitan Regional Parks System, a 3.3 percent increase from 2013, and a 46 percent increase from the approximately 33 million visits made



in 2005. However, the report also shows that between 2013 and 2014 estimated visits to the regional park system located within the City of Bloomington (Hyland-Bush-Anderson Lakes Regional Park Reserve) declined slightly from 742,200 to 700,900 annual visits. Despite this small decrease, regional park usage within the City remains strong.

The 2014 Annual Use Estimate also shows the popularity of trail-related activities. The report estimates that 27 percent of the total visits to the regional park system were visits to the regional trails – a 5.8 percent increase over 2013 trail use levels. This large percentage of trail-related visits is reflective of the fact walking/hiking and biking were the top activities enjoyed by visitors to the regional park system.

Three Rivers Park District 2013 Residential Survey

Three Rivers Park District 2013 Residential Survey gives a more detailed perspective on current participation and future interest in outdoor recreational pursuits in the metropolitan area. The statistically significant 2013 general population survey (margin of error of +/-3.2 percent) shows that the highest number of respondents (52 percent) list

ACTIVITY	CURRENT PARTICIPATION
Hiking or walking	52%
Fishing	50%
Picnicking	45%
Biking on Paved Trails	33%
Biking on Unpaved Trails	22%

hiking/walking as the outdoor recreation activity they participate in the most. The survey also found that biking on paved trails has a higher participation rate than biking on unpaved trails. This may reflect the fact that there are more opportunities to bike on paved trails than on unpaved trails within the Three Rivers Park District system.

While these two studies were not specific to the City of Bloomington, it is logical to assume that local preferences for recreational activities would be similar to the preferences of the metropolitan region.

Shaping – not just responding – to trends

While the Metropolitan Council and Three River Park District reports show that walking, hiking, and bicycling are popular pastime of park users, numerous studies have identified that obesity and lack of physical activity are critical health issues. As a City that is dedicated to shaping – not just responding – to trends, Bloomington is looking to make public investments that make it easier for residents to add physical activity to their daily life. One of the easiest ways this can be accomplished is to invest in facilities that make walking and biking easy, attractive, and safe. According to the American Heart Association, research has shown that the benefits of walking and moderate physical activity for at least 30 minutes a day can help reduce risk of coronary heart disease, improve blood pressure, maintain body weight and lower the risk of obesity, reduce the risk of breast and colon cancer, reduce the risk of non-insulin dependent (type 2) diabetes, and improve mental wellbeing. Walking is not only the simplest way to help improve health, it is also the cheapest. The City sees improving access to the Minnesota River as a way to increase the number of Bloomington residents that incorporate daily moderate physical activity into their lifestyles.

- **Fishing** - People fish both directly from the water's edge along the Minnesota River and the inland lakes or use the Russell A. Sorenson Landing to fish by boat. The Minnesota River is home to several species of fish including: northern pike, largemouth bass, walleye, carp, catfish and crappie.

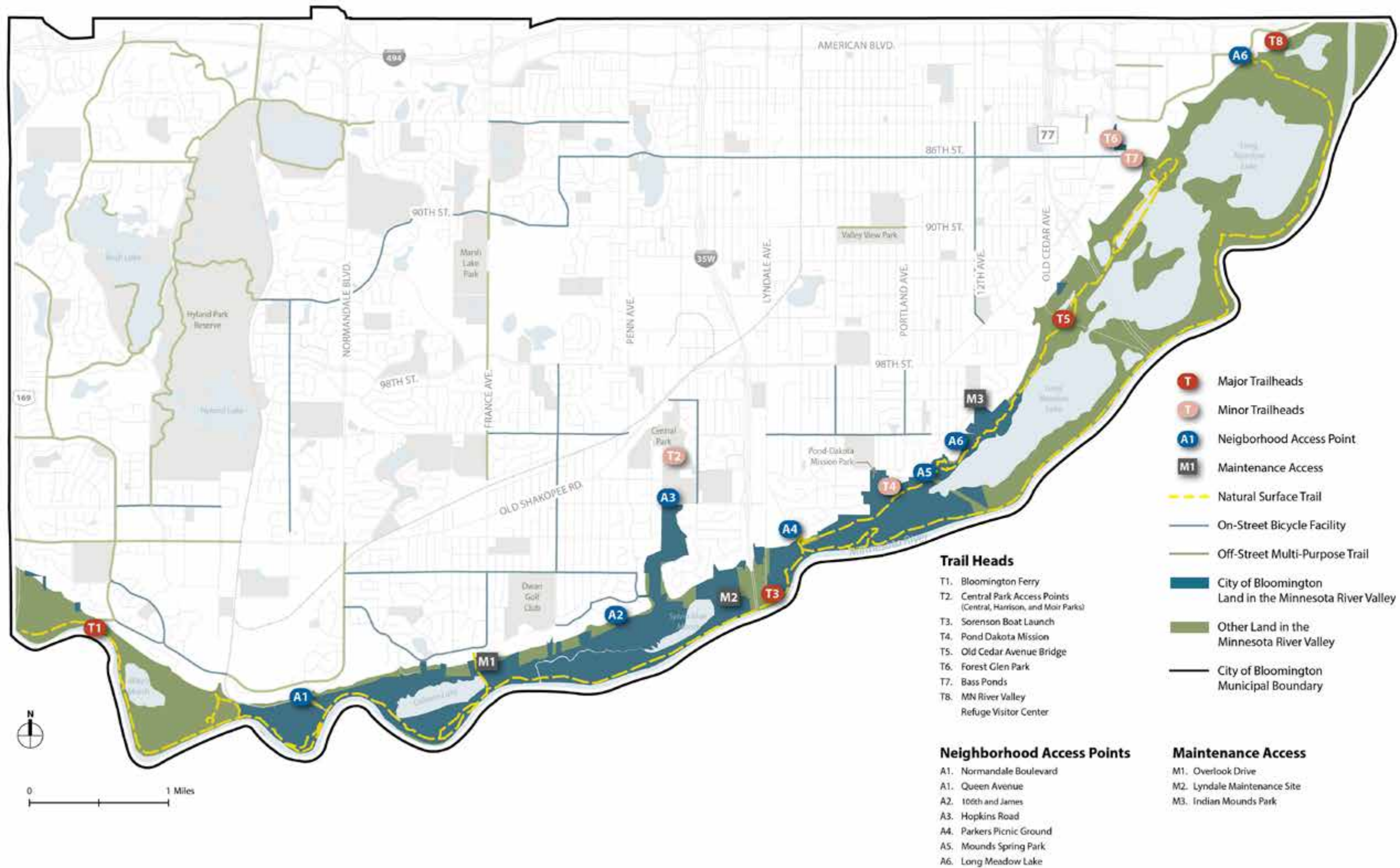
Existing Facilities

There are few man-made facilities located in the River Valley. This is due, in part, to the wildlife and habitat focused mission of the MNVNR. Given the predominance of trail-based uses, most existing facilities consist of trails and access points to enable public use of the River Valley. For purposes of this Plan, public access locations are categorized into two groups: trailheads and neighborhood access points. There are also access locations for maintenance purposes. Existing access locations to the River Valley are shown on Figure 4.5 and described below. These include locations on City property and on USFWS property, where all of the major trailhead are located.

Trailheads

Trailheads are larger, more developed access points. They typically include off-street parking and identity and informational signage. Major trailheads may include pedestrian amenities, such as picnic tables or benches, trash receptacles, lighting, and sometimes public restrooms. They may also include more extensive signage, such as interpretive signs. Minor trailheads have some similar amenities, but generally do not include permanent restrooms and provide limited parking, if any. Major and minor trailheads in the River Valley are described in Table 4.1 and locations shown on Figure 4.5. It is noted that all existing major trailheads are located on USFWS land.

Figure 4.5 Existing Minnesota River Valley Access Locations



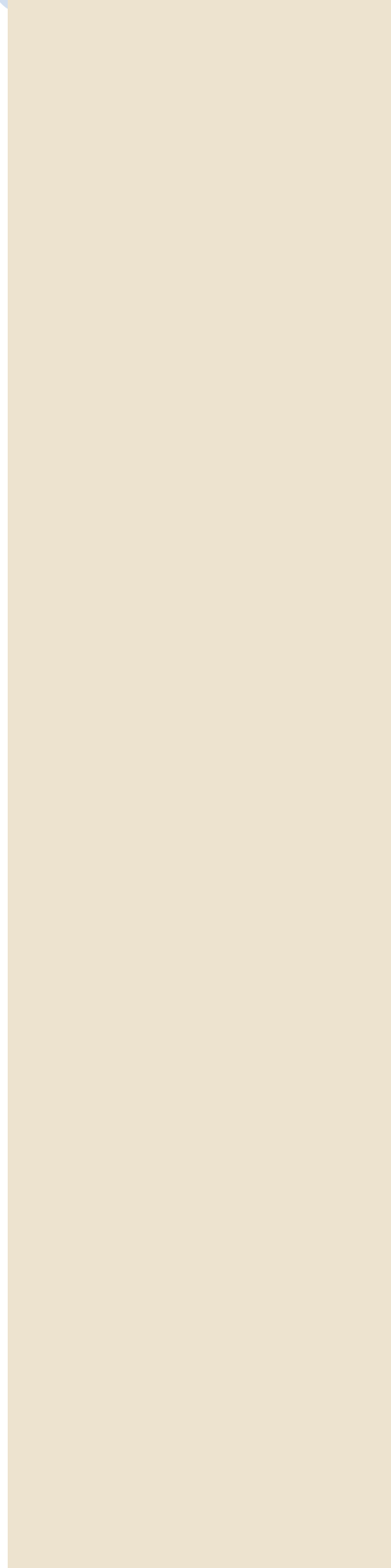


Table 4.1 Major and Minor Trailheads

NAME	JURISDICTION	AMENITIES
MAJOR TRAILHEADS		
Minnesota Valley National Wildlife Refuge Visitors Center	USFWS	MRVNWR headquarter offices and visitors center. Features include an auditorium, exhibit and classroom facilities, restrooms, paved parking lot, visitor information and store, interpretive signs/kiosk.
Old Cedar Avenue Trailhead	USFWS	Paved parking lot, informational kiosk, and trail connections, including boardwalk.
Russell A. Sorenson Landing	USFWS	Paved parking lot, informational kiosk, boat launch, and trail connections
Bloomington Ferry Road Trailhead	USFWS	Paved parking lot, informational kiosk, pedestrian/bicycling bridge over Minnesota River, and trail connections
MINOR TRAILHEADS		
Bass Ponds	USFWS	An upper paved parking lot is available for public use. A lower lot is gated and only opened for special events. Trail connections.
Pond-Dakota Mission Park	City of Bloomington	Parking and trail connections, drinking fountain/bottle filler.
Harrison/Moir/Central Park/106th Street	City of Bloomington	Combination of on and off street paved parking, and trail connections



Large kiosk at Minnesota River Valley National Wildlife Refuge Visitors Center

Neighborhood Access Points

Neighborhood access points are smaller than trailheads and primarily serve residents in the surrounding neighborhood. Generally, they do not provide off-street parking and typically only include identity and informational signage. However, some access points include amenities such as bike racks, benches, and trash receptacles. City-owned neighborhood access points are described in Table 4.2 and shown on Figure 4.5.

Maintenance Roads

Maintenance roads are needed to provide access to public utilities and for emergency vehicles. The City owns and maintains three maintenance roads in the River Valley. Public use of these maintenance roads is prohibited, as



Existing sign at neighborhood access point

Table 4.2 Neighborhood Access Points

NAME	JURISDICTION	AMENITIES
Mound Springs Park	City of Bloomington	Street parking, paved maintenance road and old parking lot, trail connections
Parker’s Picnic Grounds	City of Bloomington	Paved parking, picnic tables, trail connections
Hopkins Road	City of Bloomington	Trail connections
Central Park	City of Bloomington	A pedestrian only trail (paved north of 106th Street) along Nine Mile Creek provides a connection to the River Valley. A small parking lot is provided at 106th Street, informational signs.
Queen Avenue	City of Bloomington	On-street parking, informational signs, pedestrian only trail connection
Normandale Boulevard	City of Bloomington	Trail connections, historic swing bridge over the Minnesota River

the roads are not designed for safe pedestrian or bicycle use and tend to have very steep grades. Maintenance roads are located at Overlook Drive, Lyndale Avenue, and Indian Mounds Park, as shown on Figure 4.5.

Existing Maintenance Activities

The City’s Park Maintenance staff currently perform limited maintenance activities on River Valley lands. Certain tasks are contracted out, such as repairs related to erosion and storm sewer facilities. The City also utilizes volunteer groups to conduct select tasks, most notably the annual “Buckthorn Busts.”

In addition, a significant amount of the trail maintenance in the River Valley is performed by volunteers affiliated with the mountain biking community. These volunteer-led tasks include: brushing, sediment and debris removal, and erosion repairs. The City also periodically contracts for trail maintenance/improvements projects, including trail relocation, boardwalks, diverting water from trails and small footbridges. The City also partners with the Lower Minnesota River Watershed District to undertake water resources improvements that often have the added benefit of addressing trail maintenance concerns.

Following is a representative list of maintenance activities the City currently undertakes in the River Valley. While some tasks are performed according to



Summer trail trimming in River Valley

a set schedule, many are done on an as-needed basis, depending on available resources.

- Grading of maintenance roads (typically once per year)
- Grading of Nine Mile Creek Trail (once per year)
- Storm-sewer outfall inspections (five year schedule)
- Mowing and trimming around signs
- Trash removal
- Invasive species removal
- Periodic erosion repairs (often done by hired contractor)

Signs

There are a variety of signs serving multiple functions throughout the River Valley. Most signs are concentrated at access points. However, signs conveying directional, mileage, and use information are placed intermittently along trails. The majority of signs on City property provide information about the location (identity and context) and use regulations. More extensive signage, including interpretive signs, is provided in select locations such as Pond-Dakota Mission Park.

There is considerable variation in the quality and quantity of signs throughout the River Valley. Many existing signs are in need of maintenance or replacement. Some locations host a large number of regulatory signs that have been added over time in response to specific issues. There is also a general lack of coordination in sign design and installation. As a result, the signs may not effectively communicate important information and, in some locations, create visual clutter that obscures information and detracts from the visitor experience.

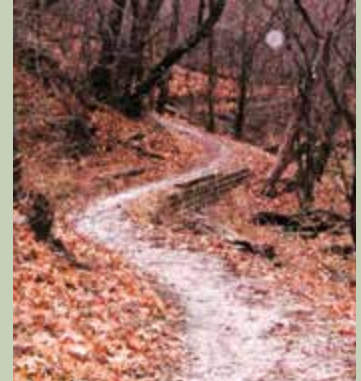


Interpretive sign at Pond-Dakota Mission Park

Trail Types

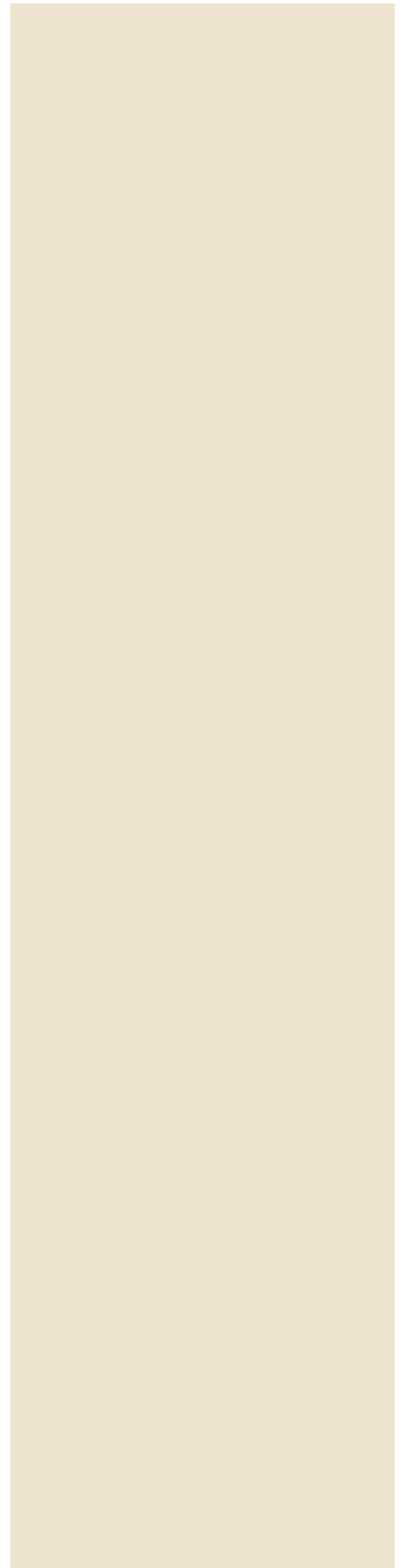
There are a number of trails extending into the River Valley from the access points described above. Some trails traverse the bluff as they meander down into the River Valley bottomlands. The physical attributes of trails (i.e., width, gradient) must be appropriate to the intended use and users to minimize conflicts. This is discussed in greater detail in Section 5. The City provides two types of natural surface trails on its property:

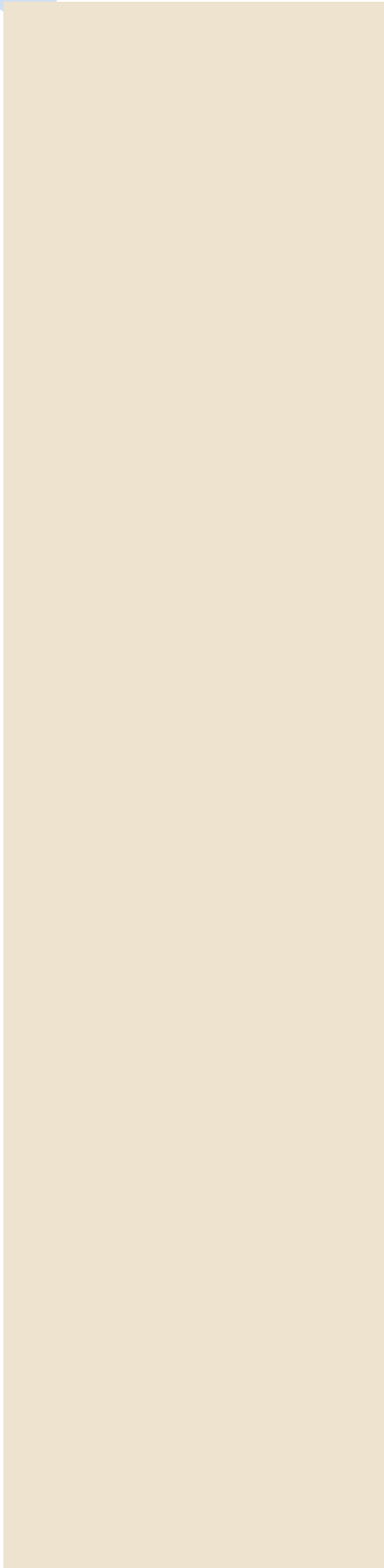
- *Single-track trails that run primarily along the upper bluff areas. These trails are typically two to three feet wide with two to three foot clear zones on each side. The trails have been in place for decades and many started as deer trails. The trails are suitable for mountain biking and hiking, however, they are not compliant with the standards set by the Americans with Disabilities Act (ADA).*



- *Aggregate trails that run along the river bank. Many of these trails are former farm roads and are often twelve to twenty feet in width.*

Neither of these trail types cater to people of all ages and abilities. The steep slopes, narrow widths, and uneven surfaces that are characteristic of natural-surface trails in the River Valley make it challenging for people with mobility issues to access the River Valley.





Section 5

OPPORTUNITIES AND CHALLENGES

The existing conditions in the River Valley present both opportunities and challenges to the City's vision for the area. This section lays out the overarching opportunities and challenges as well as specific opportunities and challenges organized around the four goals.

5.1 Overarching Opportunities and Challenges

Challenges

- **Creating a Seamless Experience**

Jurisdictional control is complicated in the River Valley area. The different agencies that own and maintain land and facilities in the River Valley have different missions, regulations, and sometimes priorities. However, most visitors do not differentiate ownership as they enter and move through the River Valley. The challenge is to sufficiently coordinate facility design, use regulations, and maintenance to create a seamless experience for visitors while adequately communicating various agency's identity, purpose, and jurisdiction.

- **Limited Resources**

Securing adequate funds to make improvements and achieve a basic level of maintenance is an ongoing challenge. Providing additional facilities or programs will require commitment of capital and/or staff resources. It is equally crucial to maintain these investments over time. Currently, limited funds are provided through the City's General Fund for routine maintenance in the River Valley. Periodic capital improvements in the River Valley have historically been funded through the City's Parks Capital Fund.

- **Consistent Maintenance**

All facilities intended for public use should receive a consistent level of maintenance. If the City decides to condone access and use at any location, the facility should be maintained and signed to clearly convey that it is open and safe for public use. Unkept access points (tattered signs, weeds,

broken pavement, etc.) convey a poor image and potentially invite unwanted activities. The challenge for the City is to ensure adequate maintenance funding can be secured for existing as well as any future capital investments made in the River Valley. This is an especially challenging task in the River Valley, because the seasonal flooding of the river bottomlands can create unexpected maintenance needs.



Deferred maintenance detracts from trail access image

Opportunities

● Interagency Cooperation

The City, USFWS, and MnDNR have a strong history of working together to leverage funding and create efficiencies through coordination and cooperation. For example, the City and the USFWS entered into a Memorandum of Understanding (MOU) in 1997 whereby the USFWS assumed responsibility for natural resources and wildlife management on City-owned land east of Lyndale Avenue. The agreement allows the City access to the specialized skills and expertise of the USFWS staff to augment the City's limited resource management capabilities. A pending update to the MOU provides an opportunity to continue to strengthen interagency coordination, so more efficiencies and cost savings can be realized. The MOU update will also clarify use and security regulations, identify opportunities to address conflicting rules and policies, and enforcement coordination.

● Leverage Partnerships

There are many active citizens and interest groups working to enhance and preserve the River Valley. The City has a strong history of working together

with these groups to leverage volunteer time and expertise. For example, in the mid-1980s, the City worked with the Minnesota Conservation Corps to improve and stabilize the single track trails, including the installation of timber retaining walls to support trails. In recent years, the City has partnered with the mountain biking community and area bike shops to assist in trail maintenance and to host fat tire bike races in the River Valley during the winter.

- **Bloomington's Implementing Agency Status**

The City of Bloomington is an implementing agency in the Metropolitan Council's Regional Parks and Trails System. The City currently owns and operates portions of the Hyland-Bush-Anderson Lakes Regional Park Reserve. There is an opportunity to explore if the City's 1,131 acres of parklands in the River Valley could be incorporated into the Metropolitan Regional Parks and Trails System as a Park Reserve. Benefits of Park Reserve designation include:

- Provide additional protections to the River Valley environment and resources. Park Reserve regulations stipulate that at least 80% of the parklands remain undeveloped.
- Promote and market the River Valley as part of the greater Metropolitan Regional Parks and Trails System.
- Provide convenient Park Reserve access for underserved populations residing on the east side of Bloomington. This is consistent with the Metropolitan Council's goal to strengthen equitable usage of regional parks and trails.
- Provide access to additional sources of funding for improvements, operations and maintenance through State and Metropolitan Council grants for Park Reserves.

Minnesota Valley State Trail

The Minnesota Valley State Trail is a Minnesota Department of Natural Resources (MnDNR) project funded by the State Legislature. The trail was authorized in 1969 by the State Legislature to establish a continuous 72-mile trail corridor extending from Fort Snelling State Park to the City of Le Sueur. While much of the trail upstream (i.e., southwest) of Shakopee is in place, the portion from Shakopee to Fort Snelling has not been completed. This is the portion of the trail that passes through Bloomington. In 2014 the State Legislature approved \$2.165 million to construct the Bloomington segment of the State Trail. MnDNR is currently in the process of defining the trail alignment and preparing design documents. Construction of the State Trail is anticipated to begin in 2017, with completion in 2018.

The Bloomington segment of the State Trail will extend between the Minnesota Valley National Wildlife Refuge Visitors Center and the Bloomington Ferry Road trailhead where it will cross the river and connect with the segment located in the City of Savage. The State Trail corridor through Bloomington will contain two trails: a natural surface

trail and a paved ADA-compliant multiple-use trail. Both trails will be constructed, maintained, and managed by the MnDNR. Prior to construction, MnDNR must obtain formal permission to locate the State Trail corridor on land owned by the City, USFWS and other property owners. The MnDNR will enter into agreements with both the City and USFWS to define the process for project implementation and MnDNR responsibilities regarding ongoing operations and maintenance of the State Trail facility into the future.

Why does the City of Bloomington support the State Trail Project?

The City of Bloomington has expressed support for the State Trail for many years. The trail corridor is listed as an important public facility in several City plans including the *Alternative Transportation Plan* and the *Parks and Recreation Master Plan*. Both documents highlight the important local and regional connections the State Trail will provide to Bloomington bicyclists and pedestrians. Furthermore, providing both a natural surface trail and a paved trail is consistent with the City's goal of providing recreational opportunities to a broad spectrum of users. Providing two trails means many user groups, including parents with children in strollers, persons with limited mobility, and mountain bikers, will be able to easily access and enjoy the largest natural area in the City. Lastly, the City believes the State Trail appropriately balances the need to accommodate public access to the River Valley while also ensuring stewardship of the natural environment. For people to connect with nature, they need to get into and directly experience it. The City believes that as more residents access and become aware of this important resource, they will become advocates for its environmental stewardship. Therefore, improving public access is extremely important to the future environmental health and stewardship of the River Valley. The City Council reiterated its support for the State Trail in a formal resolution passed on January 5, 2015.

How does the State Trail fit into the Minnesota River Valley Strategic Plan?

The Minnesota River Valley Strategic Plan (the "Plan") acknowledges the City's support for the State Trail and the need to coordinate with the MnDNR to ensure the final design and construction of the project supports the City's goals for the River Valley. However, the Plan does not provide detailed recommendations regarding State Trail design or alignment, because the State Trail project is led and funded by the MnDNR. Once the MnDNR finalizes its State Trail plans, the City can undertake planning for local trail connections to the State Trail. Preparation of a more detailed Master Trail System Plan is one of the priority recommendations of this Plan (see Section 6). Figure 4.5 illustrates existing local trailheads that will facilitate neighborhood access to the State Trail.

Concerns about the State Trail

The City has received numerous comments about the State Trail as part of the public engagement efforts for this Plan. Concerns have largely focused on the proposal to provide a paved trail in the State Trail corridor. Opponents of the paved trail most frequently cite the following concerns:

- Maintenance challenges presented by frequent flooding
- Loss of vegetation and natural character to accommodate a separate paved trail alignment
- Lack of sufficient funding for construction and maintenance
- Lack of user data to demonstrate need and/or support for a paved trail

Over 3,700 people from across the country have reportedly signed a petition in opposition to the proposed paved trail.

For more information on the Minnesota Valley State Trail please see the MnDNR website at http://www.dnr.state.mn.us/state_trails/minnesota_valley/index.html

5.2 Goal Related Opportunities and Challenges

Goal 1: Enhance access to recreational opportunities

Challenges & Opportunities

- **Access West of I-35W**

As shown in Figure 4.5, the City provides several access points into the River Valley east of I-35W, but access points west of I-35W are limited. The vast majority of properties abutting the River Valley west of I-35W are privately owned. Some challenges in creating new access points include: securing funding to acquire private property or easements, assessing the need for use restrictions, minimizing impacts on the natural environment and surrounding properties, and securing funding to construct and maintain the facility.

- **Maintenance Access Upgrades**

The City and USFWS currently have adequate access to maintain their respective properties in the River Valley. The public is currently not allowed to use these maintenance roads, which are not designed to general use standards. There is an opportunity to explore the possibility of upgrading some of these facilities, so they can be designed for safe use by the public.

- **Enhancing the Trail Network**

There are multiple regional and local trails that provide connections to the River Valley. Existing and proposed regional trail connections, including the Minnesota Valley State Trail, are depicted on Figure 5.1. Fostering these connections will enhance access to the River Valley and greatly expand opportunities for recreational and commuter bicycling. Furthermore, there is an opportunity to explore how new local trails could improve connectivity within the River Valley. The City is in the process of updating its *Alternative Transportation Plan*, which identifies a range of trail facilities throughout the City, including possible future trail connections to the River Valley. Once the State Trail alignment is defined, the City can begin to identify connections between existing trail access points and the State Trail.

- **Enhancing Recreational Opportunities**

The River Valley currently provides a varied array of recreational opportunities. These include, but are not limited to: fishing, boating, nature observation, hiking, mountain biking and trail running. Enhancing recreational facilities to better serve park users experience, comfort and safety should be a priority. The key is to ensure enhancements contribute



Events and Programming in the Minnesota River Valley

River Rendezvous is the largest living history education event in the upper Midwest, with more than 9,000 school kids participating annually. It is held in the Fall at Pond-Dakota Mission Park and focuses on demonstrating the lifestyles of people living in the area between 1830 and 1870.

Winter Fete Celebration includes several major events that take place in the River Valley. These include the Pond-Dakota Winter History Festival at Pond-Dakota Mission Park and the annual Fat Tire Bike races on River Valley trails west of Lyndale Avenue.

Other activities that occur throughout the year in the River Valley include a variety of nature-based and historical/cultural interpretive programs, the annual Dakota Language Camp, and annual Dakota Day celebration.

to, and do not detract from, the character and quality of the natural environment in the River Valley. Introducing new types of activities or facilities should be considered, provided they are an appropriate “fit” within the River Valley or a specific site context. For example, while a mountain biking skills course may be appropriate in the River Valley, lighted soccer fields would be incongruent. Determination of the appropriateness of specific activities and location of supporting facilities should be decided by the various government agencies with authority in the River Valley (i.e., City, USFWS, and MnDNR).

Goal 2: Increase awareness and understanding

Challenges & Opportunities

- **Creating Attractive and Coordinated Signage**

Having multiple agencies and groups working in the River Valley makes it challenging to craft consistent and up-to-date messaging and create a coordinated identity for the River Valley. Currently each agency creates and maintains its own signs, and many existing signs focus on long lists of regulatory restrictions which may make users feel unwelcome. It will be challenging to create a unified signage plan for the area while at the same time incorporating logos and other established signage policies of multiple agencies.

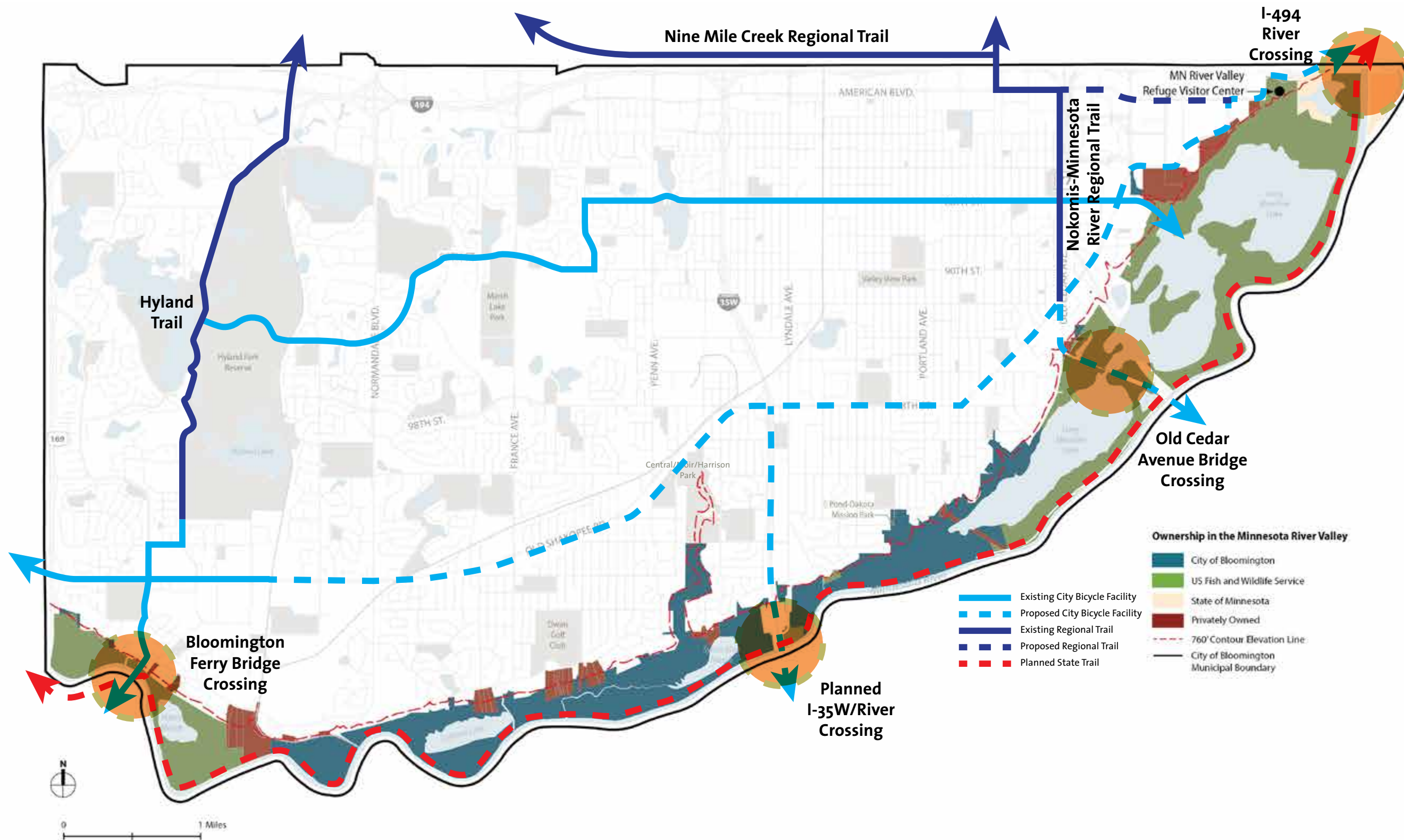
- **Existing Events and Activities**

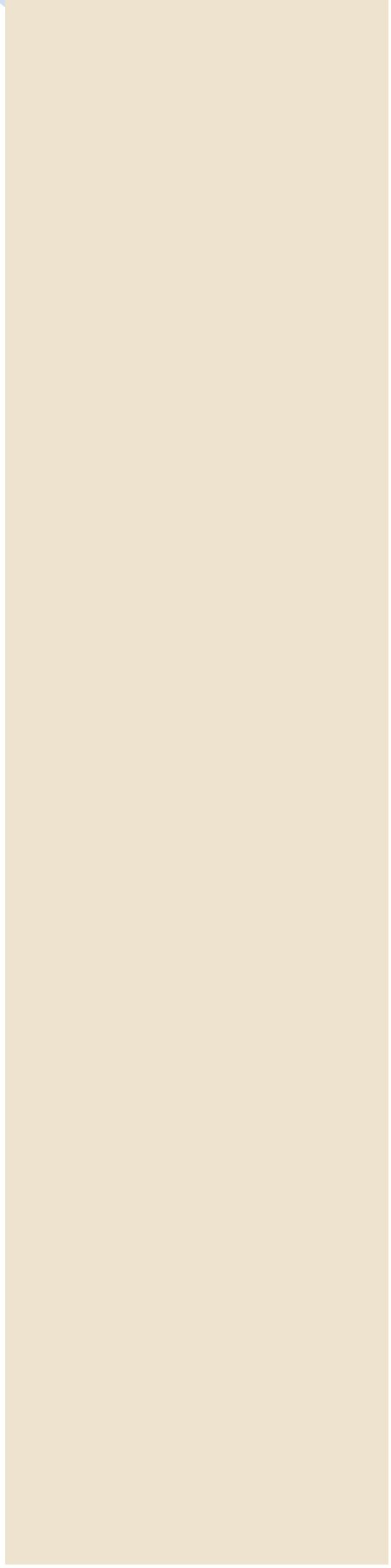
The City, the USFWS, and other groups all host popular and well-attended events as well as cultural and natural resource based education opportunities in the River Valley year round. People who participate and enjoy these events serve as ambassadors of the River Valley by extending awareness to their friends and families. There are opportunities to enhance and expand on programming by working more intentionally with the City’s current partners in the River Valley and continue to explore opportunities to engage with new partners. For example, creative placemaking efforts in the South Loop District provide a great opportunity to engage people in new ways to experience and/or learn about the River Valley.

- **Education and Interpretation**

The City currently provides cultural, historical and natural resource based education and interpretive programming based out of Pond-Dakota Mission Park. There are opportunities to expand programming to other areas of the River Valley and to work with the City’s partners in the River Valley to enhance educational programming. As discussed elsewhere in this Plan, the City should explore opportunities to work with or expand upon the outreach efforts of the USFWS Urban Wildlife Conservation Program.

Figure 5.1 Regional Trail Connections to the River Valley





- **New Technologies**

New technologies have significantly expanded the way information is disseminated and received. For example, phone applications and websites like SeeClickFix allow citizens to easily send reports on maintenance needs in the river valley to the City and USFWS. Likewise, social media can be used to share information on wildlife sightings and “real-time” trail conditions. There is an opportunity to harness new technologies to reach new and broader audience of potential users in the River Valley.

- **Existing Media Outlets**

The City provides several media outlets for community residents to learn about people, places, and events going on in Bloomington such as the Briefing (City newsletter) and Bloomington Today YouTube/cable TV show. There is an opportunity to use these existing platforms to better promote and educate people about the River Valley.

Goal 3: Improve utilization of land and resources

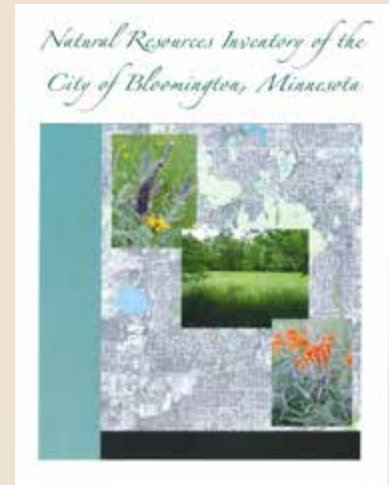
Challenges & Opportunities

- **User Groups Conflicts**

The River Valley draws visitors year round for a variety of activities. Occasionally, user groups have conflicting needs and expectations. For example, bird watchers and nature photographers come to observe the unique species of birds supported by the River Valley’s natural habitat. Bird-watching often requires stealthy, quiet movement within the landscape. On the other hand, the mountain biking community enjoys the ability to traverse rugged terrain in a semi-secluded natural area. The City and its partner agencies are committed to providing opportunities to accommodate a broad spectrum of users in a safe manner. Finding a balance between the different needs and expectations of diverse users groups is an ongoing challenge.

- **Coordinating Use Restrictions**

Each agency operating in the River Valley has its own policies and use regulations. This is challenging, because the different sets of policies and regulations sometimes conflict. Providing consistent regulations is important to simplify enforcement and to establish clear and understandable expectations for users, who generally are not aware of who has regulatory jurisdiction over any particular location within the River Valley.



The *Natural Resources Inventory of the City of Bloomington, Minnesota* provides a wealth of information regarding land cover types, assessments of the ecological quality of specific areas, and recommendations for potential natural resource management considerations. This inventory can be used to establish management plans to protect sensitive plant communities on City property (i.e., calciferous fens, kittentails), undertake invasive species management programs, and removal of deadwood to reduce fire danger. Such maintenance plans are crucial to enhance the overall health of natural resources in the River Valley.



Buckthorn Busts - The Parks and Recreation Division annually invites volunteers to participate in a Buckthorn Bust - an all day event where volunteers assist City staff with removing buckthorn from City-owned lands. Buckthorn busts have occurred for the past eight years at many locations within or adjacent to the River Valley including Parkers Picnic Grounds, Pond-Dakota Mission Park and Forest Glen Park.

- **Public Safety and Park Protection**

The City currently provides very little enforcement of visitor use regulations on City-owned or managed lands within the River Valley. For some potential users, the lack of patrol presence can be a deterrent to use. Providing appropriate resource and visitor protection as well as enforcement of regulations governing appropriate use is a challenge that needs to be addressed with partners.

- **The USFWS Urban Wildlife Conservation Program**

The USFWS is recognizing the need to reach out and engage non-traditional refuge audiences to introduce them to the national wildlife refuge system through relevant nature- and wildlife-based activities. Minnesota Valley National Wildlife Refuge is working with diverse urban communities to help inspire stewardship for their local refuge in particular, and wildlife and their habitat in general. This new way of doing business may expand opportunities for the City and MNVNR to work together to achieve mutual objectives.

- **Minimize “Footprint”**

The City’s overarching vision expressed in this Plan and documented public preference to keep the River Valley as natural as possible are generally consistent. Throughout the public input process, users overwhelmingly expressed their wishes that the City refrain from making significant changes or developing intense park uses in the River Valley. Instead, the City is encouraged to pursue opportunities to improve public use of the River Valley through strategies that rely on minimal physical development. While select improvements are desired to enhance recreational experience and user comfort and safety, they must be balanced against the need to protect wildlife and preserve the natural beauty and environmental integrity of the River Valley.

Goal 4: Ensure protection and preservation of natural and cultural resources

Challenges & Opportunities

- **Striking an appropriate balance**

The City recognizes that increasing the number of people who use the River Valley has the potential to come into conflict with protecting and preserving the natural resources in the area. Managing access and identifying and protecting sensitive resources are crucial. There are times of the year when certain activities should be curtailed; for example bicycling on trails when they are muddy can be damaging. None of the agencies currently

have the ability to monitor and enforce such use limits. Education, clear communication, and consistent enforcement will play important roles in the ongoing challenge to strike an appropriate balance between use and environmental stewardship of the River Valley.

● **Enhancing water quality**

Runoff from development above the bluffline naturally drains through the River Valley to the Minnesota River. Some flows through streams such as Nine-Mile Creek. Stormwater management regulations and facilities are designed to minimize the amount of “dirty” water that reaches the streams and river from upland developed areas. However, large storms with heavy rain can result in erosion of natural areas. Human influences have also changed the water resource system resulting in impacts to the larger ecosystem. The following federally-mandated plans and programs were developed by the City to protect these valuable resources:

- Storm Water Pollution Prevention Program
- Surface Water Management Plan
- Wetlands Management Plan

● **Combating invasive species**

Much of the River Valley environment has been altered through decades of human habitation. Being located in the heart of a metropolitan area and surrounded by developed area, the presence of invasive species is not unusual. Given their ability to quickly adapt to new environments with few natural predators, they take hold and often beat out the native species in the competition for nutrients. Because of their voraciousness, keeping invasive species in check is a constant battle.

● **Available Natural Resource Information**

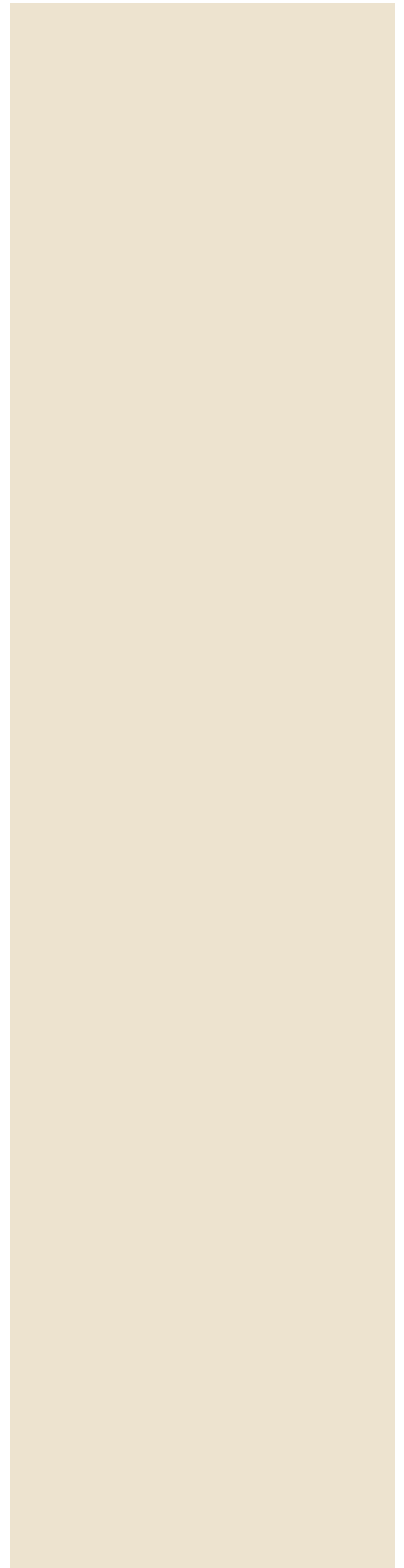
The City benefits from work previously done by Hennepin County, USFWS, MnDNR, and others to inventory and document details of the River Valley environment. The City has the opportunity to use this data as the basis for preparing more detailed resource maintenance and preservation plans as recommended in the Implementation Plan (see Section 6).

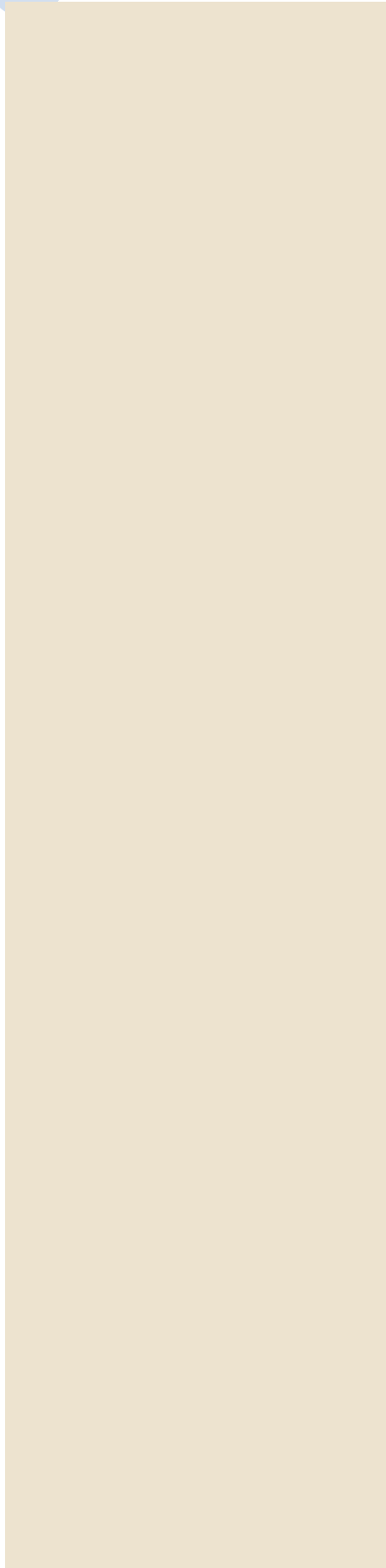


The Russell A. Sorenson landing is a USFWS facility maintained by the City under the MOU

- **Long-standing Partnerships**

The City and the USFWS have a long-standing partnership focused on management of natural resources in the River Valley. This understanding was formalized in a 1997 Memorandum of Understanding (MOU) whereby USFWS committed to conduct certain resource management tasks on City-owned property in the River Valley east of Lyndale Avenue. Following approval of this Plan, the City and the USFWS will engage in updating the MOU. This endeavor presents the opportunity for both agencies to address some of the opportunities and challenges laid out in this Plan, including: coordination of regulations and enforcement and clarification of roles and responsibilities.





Section 6

IMPLEMENTATION PLAN

The Minnesota River Valley Strategic Plan establishes a vision and framework for the protection, preservation and use of City-owned land in the River Valley. This Implementation Plan sets an overall strategy and identifies strategic priorities to achieve the Plan vision and long-term goals. It identifies a timeline, cost considerations and potential sources of funding to carry out identified priority tasks.

6.1 Top Priorities

In the absence of an established framework to enhance and manage this vast resource, it is clear that further study is needed to identify meaningful priorities and accurate cost estimates for potential physical and program improvements. While the City has a history of engaging in projects and activities in the River Valley, there is no comprehensive budget earmarked for capital improvements, programs, or routine maintenance. A commitment of resources must be made to implement the priorities described below and sustain these efforts into the future.

Top priority projects fall into several inter-dependent categories, including:

- System-wide plans
- Process and management related activities
- Awareness activities

There are also activities and projects that are currently underway that relate to or inform the top priority projects listed in this Plan. These ongoing activities and projects should be completed before tackling the listed top priority projects.

System-wide plans

Additional study is needed to fully understand and prioritize specific improvements related to the four systems within the entire River Valley, which include: natural and cultural resources, trails, signs and maintenance. Detailed descriptions of what each of these plans might include are provided in Appendix C. Since these systems overlap, information gathered for one



Existing bridge on Nine-Mile Creek trail



Water quality enhancement project

study may inform and benefit another. Areas where additional study is recommended include:

- **Resource protection plan.** This is envisioned as two companion plans; one focused on natural resources and the other focused on cultural and historic resources. These plans will build on work previously completed by Hennepin County, the USFWS, and others to inventory and document the natural and cultural resources in the River Valley. The purpose of these plans is to more specifically identify and prioritize areas needing protection and define specific actions and best practices needed to achieve the desired level of protection. This plan will also address opportunities for both cultural and natural resource interpretation.
- **Master trail plan.** This plan will build on an inventory and assessment of existing trails in the River Valley conducted as part of the Park Asset Inventory project, currently underway. This plan will identify the need and opportunity for new connecting trail segments, user amenities and facilities, signs, and safety and maintenance concerns. An important aspect of this plan will be to identify where connecting trails are needed between existing City trails and trailheads and the pending State Trail.
- **Master sign plan.** This plan will involve working with other agencies with facilities in the River Valley (i.e., USFWS, MnDNR, Three Rivers Park District) to develop guidelines to coordinate the design and placement of signs as well as the information conveyed. To make the user experience as seamless as possible, regulations, maps, wayfinding, and identity signs need to provide consistent and clear information.
- **Comprehensive maintenance plan.** This plan will identify existing conditions and needs related to routine maintenance of physical improvements (i.e., signs, trails, parking areas, benches, etc.) as well as management of natural resources (i.e., invasive species and erosion control). It will also identify existing and potential partnerships with citizen and interest groups engaged in ongoing maintenance and resource preservation efforts.

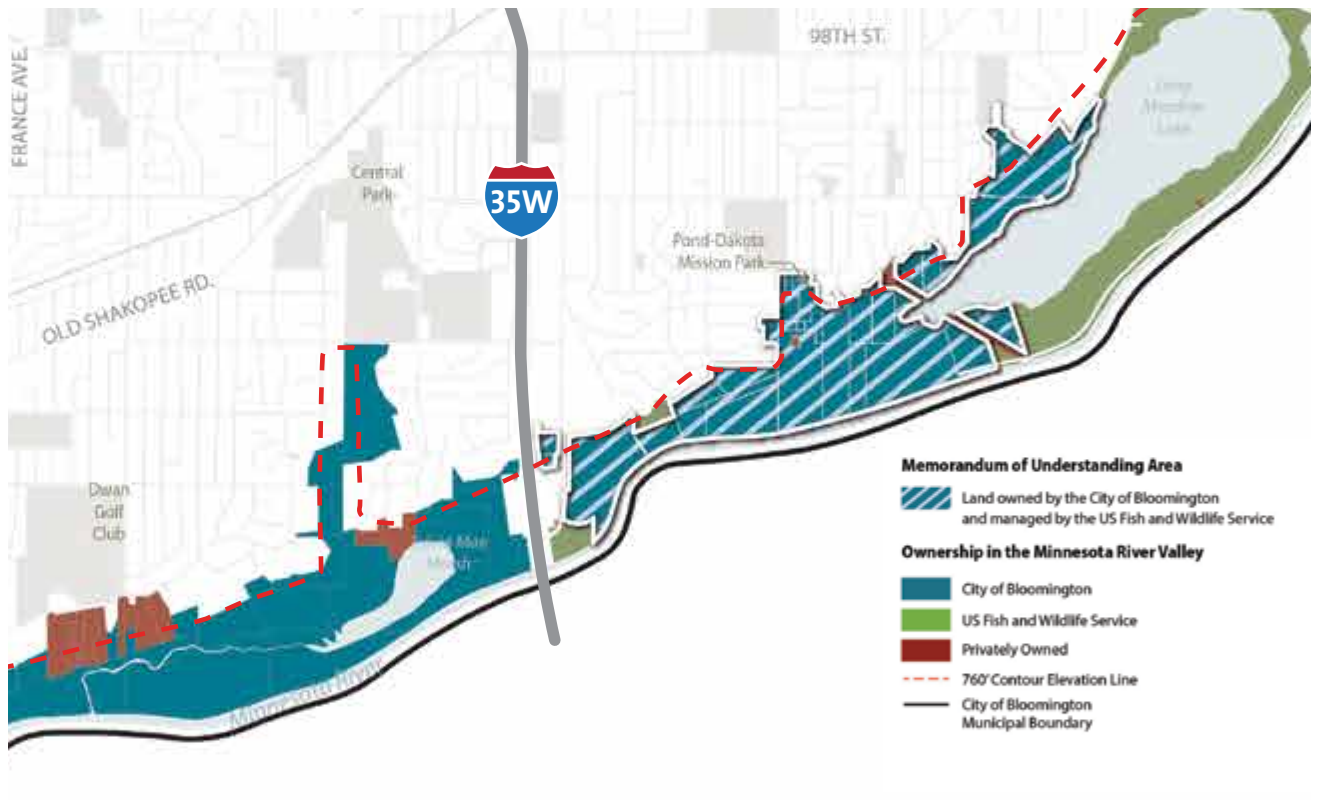
Process and Management Priorities

These include activities that generally involve operations, policy and regulations. They define approaches and often involve working with partners. Some of these are ongoing activities or build on efforts the City is currently engaged in. Most are intended to clarify responsibilities and approaches for activities that are shared or benefit from multiple agency cooperation.

- **Update Memorandum of Understanding (MOU)** – Established in 1997,

the MOU assigns the USFWS responsibility for natural resource and wildlife management on City-owned land east of Lyndale Avenue, shown on Figure 6.1. This benefits the City by providing access to the specialized natural resource skills and expertise of the USFWS staff to

Figure 6.1 Area Covered Under Memorandum of Understanding (MOU)



augment the City’s limited resource management capabilities. The MOU update provides an opportunity to continue to strengthen interagency coordination, improve efficiencies, and realize cost savings.

- **Pursue Metropolitan Regional Parks System designation** – Designating the City-owned land in the River Valley as a Regional Park Reserve would provide additional natural resource protections and make the area eligible for grant funding through the State and Metropolitan Council specifically earmarked for lands within the Metropolitan Regional Parks and Trails System. Bloomington is an implementing agency in the Metropolitan Regional Parks and Trails System and owns and operates portions of the Hyland-Bush-Anderson Lakes Regional Park Reserve. As a Regional Park Reserve, this facility has received grant funding that has been crucial to implementing improvements, operations, and maintenance.



Volunteer groups provide invaluable maintenance assistance

While the process to obtain Regional Park Reserve designation is fairly involved, designation would provide access to resources that would greatly augment the City's capability to protect, maintain, and manage this unique asset. The city-owned lands in the River Valley are not included in the Metropolitan Council's 2040 Regional Parks and Open Space Plan. As such, this is envisioned as a mid-term priority, which would not be actively pursued until the priority system plans are completed. Ideally, much of the information gathered for the proposed system plans can be used in preparation of an application for designation, should the City decide to pursue it in the future.

- **Strengthen partnerships with interest groups** – The City has a solid history of working cooperatively with various citizen and interest groups who are actively engaged in a variety of efforts in the River Valley ranging from natural resource protection, to education and events, to trail maintenance. These partners provide invaluable volunteer time and skills that leverage the City's limited resources. Many of these partnerships operate on an informal basis, as opportunities and needs arise. In some cases, these partnerships could be strengthened by establishing clear expectations and defined roles. For example, MORC, a long-time partner focused on biking in the River Valley, has expressed interest in establishing a more formal agreement with the City – like a MOU – to carry out trail maintenance and user education. To be effective, more formal partnerships may require a higher level of staff oversight.

Awareness Activities

This Plan recognizes that awareness is directly related to the value people place on something. Enhancing awareness and knowledge about the River Valley is crucial to activating interest and understanding of the varied recreational, cultural, and ecological benefits it provides. The City has several current media outlets that provide an excellent means to share information about events and seasonal recreational opportunities in the River Valley. Becoming more intentional in utilizing these – and exploring new – outlets is a relatively low-cost means to building awareness and support.

Ongoing Projects and Activities

The City is currently engaged in several projects related to the River Valley that will have direct impacts on the priority activities described above. Completing these projects before starting on other priorities makes practical sense and will increase efficiency.

- **Parks Asset Inventory** – This is an ongoing Geographic Information System (GIS) based project to inventory and locate existing facilities on city parklands, assess current conditions, and identify potential

improvements. Once completed, it will serve as a valuable tool to prioritize needed physical improvements at specific sites and accurately estimate implementation costs. Specific projects can then be incorporated into the City's annual Community Investment Program (CIP). The inventory of trails and trailheads on parkland in the River Valley is anticipated to be completed in 2016. The results of this inventory can be used to prioritize and budget for physical improvements at specific locations in the River Valley. It will also provide a great foundation for the proposed master trail system plan.

- **Old Cedar Avenue Bridge** – In Spring 2014 the City hired a consultant to develop plans for the rehabilitation of the Old Cedar Avenue bridge. Construction began in Spring 2015 and will continue through Fall 2016, with opening likely in Spring 2017. This trailhead serves as a convergence point for the State Trail, the Nokomis-Minnesota River Regional Trail, and other trails in the Minnesota River Valley National Wildlife Refuge (MRVNR). As such, signs at this trailhead will need to be designed in coordination with multiple agencies. The outcome of this sign design effort can serve as a model for signage that can be used throughout the River Valley.
- **Minnesota Valley State Trail** – The MnDNR is in the process of developing plans for the alignment of the State Trail and its design characteristics. It is prudent to have the State Trail alignment clearly defined before the City attempts to identify the best locations for connecting trails. These connecting trails will be included in the master trail plan effort described above. Likewise, MnDNR will have certain sign requirements that will need to be considered in establishing a comprehensive set of sign design guidelines and use regulations. These will need to be incorporated into the master sign plan described above.



The Old Cedar Avenue Bridge is undergoing rehabilitation

6.2 Implementation Steps

Project Sequence and Duration

Figure 6.2 illustrates the proposed sequencing and duration of the recommended priority projects described above. While the Park Asset Inventory commenced in Fall 2015, work on all other projects is not proposed to begin until 2016, after approval of this Plan. The timeline attempts to arrange the projects according to a logical or “critical path” sequence. This was done because some projects provide valuable foundational information that should be completed before other projects begin. For example – identifying the sensitive resources in the River Valley must be done before identifying where trails or other facilities should be located to ensure

sensitive natural or cultural resources are not disturbed. Similarly, the timeline includes the MnDNR State Trail project because it directly influences some of the proposed priority projects.

According to the proposed timeline, all the priority projects should be completed by the middle of 2018, assuming adequate staff and consultant support resources are available. It is important to recognize that the proposed system plans will identify and prioritize site specific projects that will be implemented in the future. However, during preparation of the system plans, opportunities may arise to move forward with specific projects or programs. These projects will be considered on a case specific basis to ensure they are consistent with goals of this Plan.

Resources and Budget

Historically, the City’s annual budget has not earmarked funds for improvements in the River Valley. Rather, these have been done on an as-needed basis. As such, the priority projects identified in this Plan are not covered by existing funding sources. The detailed descriptions of the priority projects provided in Appendix C estimate staff time and consultant time/fees needed to complete each project. It is anticipated that staff time needed to complete the projects could be absorbed into current staff workloads without significant impacts to other assignments. Thus, the project costs consist of staff time plus fees for limited consultant assistance.

Staff Time

A rough estimate of staff hours needed to complete all the projects over the 2 year period totals approximately 1,250-1,600 hours; the equivalent of about 0.25-0.33 FTE per year. This time would be shared between several staff and departments.

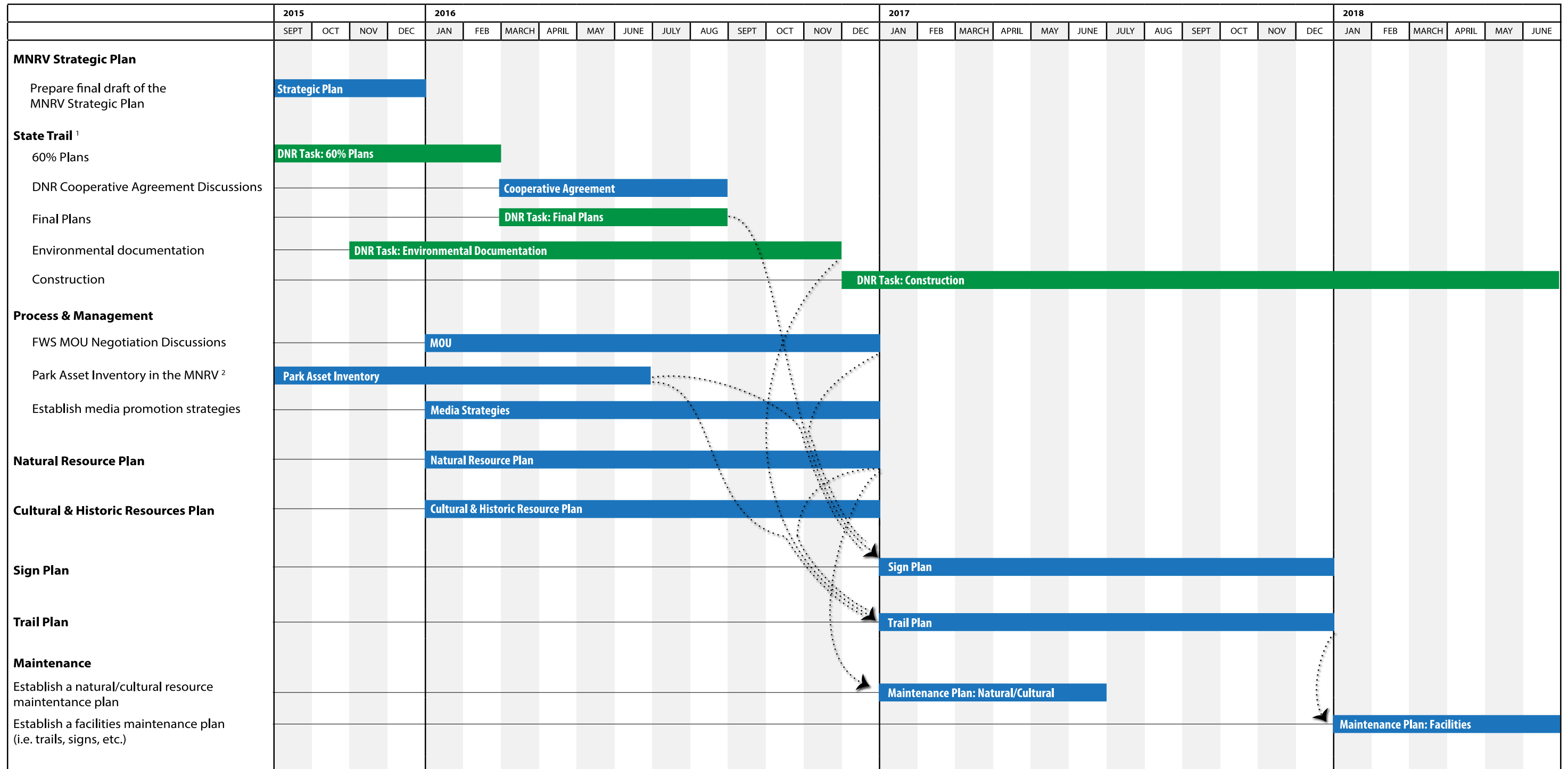
Consultant Fees

A rough estimate of consultant fees needed to complete the priority projects is about \$95,000, not including the \$20,000 already available (2015 budget) to complete the Asset Inventory of the City’s River Valley properties. Based on

Table 6.1 Estimate of Consultant Fees

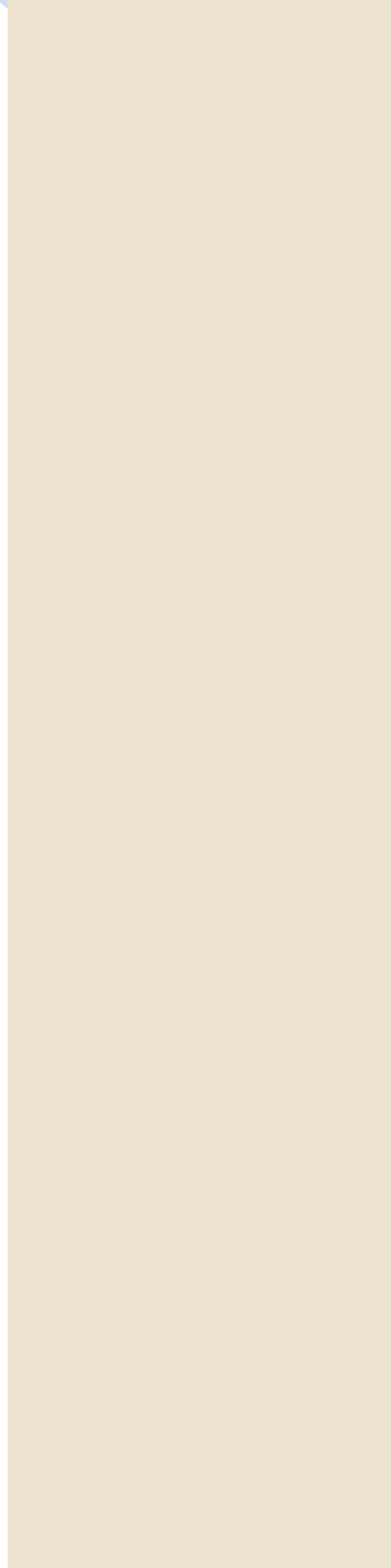
YEAR	PROJECT	CONSULTANT FEES
2015	Park Asset Inventory	\$20,000 (available)
2016	Natural & Cultural Resources Plan	\$20,000
2017	Sign Plan Trail Plan	\$30,000 \$45,000
Total		\$95,000

Figure 6.2 Priority Project Sequence and Duration



NOTES:

- 1. All DNR timelines are speculative.
- 2. Funding for the Park Asset Inventory has already been allocated



the proposed timeline, estimated annual expenditures on consultant fees are summarized in Table 6.1 below:

Future Project Cost Considerations

Completion of the priority projects described in this Plan will identify future site-specific improvements, programs, and maintenance activities to improve City-owned property and facilities in the River Valley so that Bloomington residents and visitors alike can better experience and appreciate this incredible asset. Implementation of site-specific improvement projects will occur over many years and will require a sustained commitment of resources. While this Plan does not identify those future projects – that will be done with each respective system plan - it is important to understand the costs associated with capital improvements, maintenance, operations and programming efforts. Future budgets will need to consider these costs.

Capital Costs

Capital costs are fixed, one-time expenses incurred on land acquisition, facility construction/reconstruction, and purchasing equipment used in rendering services. The City of Bloomington maintains a Community Investment Program (CIP) to plan for capital cost expenditures throughout the City. The CIP has a 20-year horizon and is reviewed annually. It classifies projects into two time frames:

- Short term improvements (0 to 5 five years) which reflect the highest priority improvements and have a realistic opportunity for being funded.
- Mid to long term improvements (6 to 20 years) which include projects that are not currently funded or need further evaluation to more clearly define priority.

Typical capital costs are described in more detail below.

- **Land Acquisition/Easement Costs** - Costs for trail easements or fee titles for land acquisition are dependent upon current property values which serve as a starting point for negotiations with property owners. Table 6.2 describes several privately-owned parcels located within the River Valley that the City and the MnDNR have an interest in acquiring or obtaining easements to complete gaps in the trail system. The estimated 2014 market values for these properties total \$3.12 million.

Table 6.2 Minnesota River Valley Parkland Acquisition/Trail Easement List

PROPERTY	
LOCATION	PURPOSE
East 104th Street	Inclusion in Pond-Dakota Mission Park. City owns surrounding properties.
Overlook Drive	Facilitate future natural surface bluff trail. Only southernmost portions of the properties are needed.
York Avenue	Facilitate future natural surface bluff trail. Only southernmost portion of the property needed.
Humboldt Avenue South	Facilitate future natural surface bluff trail. Only southernmost portion of the property needed.
Hopkins Road	City owns Hopkins trailhead to the northwest as well as the properties to the west, south and east. This property is owned by the USFWS and is isolated from other USFWS properties.

- **Facilities and Infrastructure Costs** - The City currently provides a number of facilities and infrastructure in the River Valley. The vast majority are related to trails and trailheads. To develop accurate estimates of the value of existing facilities as well as new improvements recommended in this Plan, an inventory of existing assets must be completed. As discussed elsewhere in this Plan, an inventory commenced in Fall 2015 that will review trail-based assets on City property in the River Valley.

For illustrative purposes current cost estimates for typical trailhead facilities and infrastructure improvements is provided in Table 6.3. Not all amenities listed are anticipated for every trailhead in the River Valley. The estimates are intended to illustrate the range of improvements that may be considered at any location and associated costs.

Maintenance Costs

Table 6.3 Estimated Capital Costs for Typical Trailhead Improvements

FACILITY	DESCRIPTION	ESTIMATED COSTS *
Trailhead	• Security gate/bollards to restrict vehicle access	\$2,500
		\$2,000
	• Signs (identity, regulatory, maps/wayfinding)	\$2,500
	• Landscaping and plantings	\$1,000
	• Bike rack and concrete pad	\$1,000
	• Bench and concrete pad	\$750
	• Picnic table and concrete pad	\$2,000
	• Bicycle repair station	\$2,000
	• Parking (per space)	\$7,500
	• Drinking fountain (assumes water utility is located within 150' of fountain location)	\$8,500
	• Permanent rest rooms building	\$450,000
	• Chemical toilet enclosure	\$2,000
	• Trash receptacle (wildlife resistant)	\$300
• Security lighting (assumes electrical utility within 150')	\$6,000	
Interpretive signs	Interpretive signs (educational, cultural, history, etc.) (cost per sign)	\$250 to \$750
Reconstruct natural surface trails	Reconstruct trails to address erosion and usability concerns (cost per mile)	\$30,000
New natural surface trails	Construct new trails including plant material removal and grading (cost per mile)	\$80,000
Reconstruct bituminous surface trails	Mill and overlay of existing bituminous trails surface (cost per mile)	\$250,000
New bituminous surface trails	Construct new trails including plant material removal, grading, sub-surfacing and bituminous installation (cost per mile)	\$200,000- \$400,000
*These are 2015 cost estimates. Additional costs for design, inflation and contingency are not included.		

As with all parks in the City parks system, resources for ongoing maintenance must be factored into the overall budget for River Valley improvements. Property and timely maintenance is cost effective as it extends the useful life of infrastructure. As a result, fewer and/or smaller capital investments are needed over time. Routine maintenance is also needed to manage natural resources in a manner that produces a healthy and sustainable environment. Typical natural resource management activities include: invasive species removal, enhancing wildlife habitat, burning prairies, and erosion control. Absent sufficient resource management, the environment can degrade to the point where substantial restoration expenses are required.

One of the recommended priority actions is the development of a comprehensive maintenance plan. Such a plan can reduce maintenance costs because it will identify opportunities to coordinate projects to achieve economies of scale. It will also identify opportunities to leverage partnerships and various funding sources to most effectively apply limited resources to the highest priority projects.

Currently, the City performs minimal maintenance and has no earmarked funding for comprehensive maintenance in the River Valley. Any increase in maintenance activity in the River Valley would require shifting resources from other facilities in the park system or an increase in funding.

Operations and Programming Costs

The City currently expends very limited dollars on operations and programming in the River Valley with the exception of the River Rendezvous program. While the City does provide support for periodic events, educational and interpretive programming, use of the River Valley is an untapped resource for City programming.

The USFWS offers a variety of nature-based educational and interpretive programming through the MRVNWR Visitor Center. It is recommended that the City work with USFWS and the MnDNR to explore opportunities to expand USFWS programming onto City-owned property in the River Valley. The renovation of the Old Cedar Avenue Bridge and trailhead may create spaces conducive to nature-based educational and interpretive programming. This and Pond-Dakota Mission Park would be excellent locations for joint programming opportunities.

In implementing an educational and interpretive programming in the River Valley, the City would likely need to subsidize costs in order to offer a variety of free and fee-based programming.

Funding



Bird-watching programs are popular in the River Valley

This Plan was initiated in response to the City’s recognition that, historically, very few City resources have been focused to one of Bloomington’s most unique assets. Key goals are to increase awareness, access and usage of the River Valley. To achieve these goals, the City must secure ongoing funding to provide quality facilities and experiences for the increasing number of users. This section identifies potential sources of funding for the priority projects described in the previous section, as well as funding related to capital improvements, maintenance, operations and programming of future, site-specific improvements.

Current Funding Sources

The City budgets for planned public improvements through its 5-year Community Investment Program (CIP), commonly known as the “Capital Improvement Plan.” Funding for projects identified in the CIP comes from a variety of sources. Typical funding sources for City park projects include:

- **City General Fund** – the City’s tax-supported General Fund includes funding for maintenance of City parklands including City property in the River Valley. The City for several years has provided maintenance of the Russell A. Sorenson landing boat ramp (i.e., removal of silt following spring flooding) through the General Fund. Maintenance staff also addresses periodic maintenance concerns including repairs at various trailheads and removal of deadfall on trails.
- **Storm Utility Fund** – The storm utility fund has been used to fund drainage and erosion control projects in the River Valley.
- **Park dedication funds** – the City receives park dedication fees when properties are platted for development or redevelopment. Over the past twenty years, the City has received an average of \$200,000 per year in park dedication fees. These fees are then placed in the City’s Parks Capital Fund, which are then used for capital projects within the City parks system, including the River Valley. Park Capital Funds have been used previously to make periodic improvements in the River Valley including trail reconstruction, trail bridge installation and natural resources restorations.
- **Grants** – the City routinely applies for grants to undertake capital improvements in the parks system. Grant funding is available from Federal, State, and Regional/Local sources. The City has used grant funding for projects in the River Valley like invasive species removals and trail construction.
- **City Strategic Priority funds** – The City annually sets aside a portion of



Storm sewer improvements at Mounds Spring Park

the tax levy for specific projects that the City Council deems a priority. The positive performance from the previous year's budget is often added to the Strategic Priority Fund. Occasionally parks projects are funded via Strategic Priority funds.

Potential New Funding Sources

If the City's River Valley parklands were approved for inclusion in the Metropolitan Regional Parks System, the new Park Reserve would be eligible for new funding sources for capital improvements. The State of Minnesota and the Metropolitan Council provide capital funding grants through bonding, Legislative Citizen Commission on Minnesota Resources (LCCMR) appropriations and Parks and Trail Legacy Fund grants for the Metropolitan Regional Parks System. The City also works in cooperation with the Lower Minnesota River Watershed District to undertake stormwater management improvement projects within the River Valley. Funding for these projects is provided by both the City and watershed district.



Appendices

APPENDIX A: **PUBLIC OUTREACH SUMMARY**

[https://www.bloomingtonmn.gov/sites/default/files/
media/Appendix%20A_final.pdf](https://www.bloomingtonmn.gov/sites/default/files/media/Appendix%20A_final.pdf)

APPENDIX B: **KNOWN HISTORIC SITES**

[https://www.bloomingtonmn.gov/sites/default/files/
media/Appendix%20B_%20Final.pdf](https://www.bloomingtonmn.gov/sites/default/files/media/Appendix%20B_%20Final.pdf)

APPENDIX C: **SYSTEM PLAN OUTLINES**

[https://www.bloomingtonmn.gov/sites/default/files/
media/Appendix%20C_Final.pdf](https://www.bloomingtonmn.gov/sites/default/files/media/Appendix%20C_Final.pdf)

