

Minnesota River Valley Master Plan Focus Group Meeting

July 22, 2014

4-6 p.m.

1. Introductions

- a. Julie Farnham: City of Bloomington
- b. Jim Gates: City of Bloomington
- c. Tim Sandy: Sustainability Coalition
- d. John: Resident
- e. Vonda Kelly: Bloomington Historical Society
- f. Larry Granger: Bloomington Historical Society
- g. Matt Moore: MORC
- h. Dennis Porter: Former PARC member, ATP Taskforce
- i. Reed Schmidt: MORC
- j. Mark Morrison: City of Bloomington
- k. Alison Evans: City of Bloomington

2. Purpose/Overview of the MN River Valley Plan

- We are here to undertake a Master Plan for the MN River Valley in order to create better public awareness and utilization of the valley. Also, we would like to preserve and protect the natural lands. This meeting is a part of the public engagement process which also includes online surveys, partner and focus group meetings and open houses. This plan will focus on the City owned land.

3. Topics for Input and Discussion:

a. Project Vision and Goals:

- Enhance access, increase awareness, improve utilization and protect and preserve

b. Access Opportunities:

- Different types of access points such as a trailhead or just an access point. Does the map provided have an appropriate amount of access points/trailheads? Should there be improvements made? Currently, the Old Cedar Ave bridge area is being considered as an option for a major trailhead working with the U.S. Fish and Wildlife Service to undertake that project. This may include updated parking, enhancing trails and connections and potentially a restroom facility.
- Jim: Primary trailheads are at the 169 bridge, 35W with MN DOT reconstructing the bridge beginning in 2017 that would create a path there and the Old cedar ave bridge. Any funding left over from the bridge rehabilitation could be used toward trails.
- Matt: is there a plan to connect through fort Snelling state park?
- Jim: Right now the DNR did not receive all of the funding that they were hoping for, but plan to construct as much of the trail as they can. It will be constructed in pieces.
- Julie: During the open house there will be an exhibit on the state trail with people from the DNR that have information not available to us tonight.
- Tim: The trailheads, are there existing trail there's today or will they need to be added?
- Julie: Some would require updating others would need additional trails.
- Dennis: if the funding is there, does that mean they will for sure be constructing a paved trail? And once constructed who is responsible for the maintenance of the portion on City land?

- Julie: we are not sure on the decision yet, but as of right now the plan is to have a corridor with two trails. The actual state trail would be maintained by DNR. Connecting trails constructed on City land would be the responsibility of the city to maintain.

c. Utilization Opportunities:

- City staff provided a concept map with utilization ideas not necessarily exactly where they could be located in the MN river valley. Examples included: picnic rounds, campgrounds, marina/boat rentals, mountain bike skills course or bike loop and others. Asked for thoughts or other suggestions. Thoughts on following the rule the Met Council uses as 80% natural and 20 % developed for the City owned property.
- Reed: For any of these uses will there be an environmental assessment done?
- Julie: at this point we haven't identified anything that would require an environmental assessment.
- Tim: The campground seems like a great idea, but most campgrounds are lawn again. I would like to see minimal lawn space and less trees being cut down. I think if a campground would be considered it should fit in with the already natural area and be more primitive.
- John: has there been any consideration of using the trail for cross country skiing in the winter?
- Dennis: Bituminous is not a good surface for cross country skiing and the people with snow shoes would not use a paved trail either. I think a natural surface trail would be the best for everyone. I've talked with bikers and hikers and families and they go to the valley for the natural experience, because they feel like they are a million miles away. They are not looking for another paved trail.
- Larry: We need to get an agreement with the Fish and Wildlife and the DNR to come up with a coordinated plan for the trail development. How can we bring more people in but maintain the natural area and manage the resources? You also need to be ADA compliant.
- Matt: ADA does not require that all facilities be designed and accessible for all people. It is only done where it is practical. I support access for people with disabilities but the idea of a paved trail through the whole length of the river does not seem necessary. I see a great opportunity from Cedar to Fort Snelling. I don't think this should be an all or nothing proposition.
- Dennis: There are not current numbers available for usage of the trail as it is now. There are loads of people that already use the trails. The FWS don't have a great deal of money to maintain and patrol it as it. Without MORC volunteering to do some of the work, it might not be available. Paved trails will be in very rough shape in 5 years. Not every trail needs to be like Lanesboro, we don't need to approach it as a cookie cutter plan.
- Julie: It comes down to a balancing act, how are we all going to work together. Not everyone is going to be happy with everything; there are too many conflicting desires. We have to work with priority areas and work through the challenges.
- Tim: We also need to keep climate change into account as we think decades out. What about extreme weather events and flooding.
- Matt: I live by Lake Nokomis and years ago they put in some water retention ponds and people were upset because they like the open spaces, but after this past June, the ponds did their job and helped prevent the flooding. As a 25 year user, we see many of these spring floods with lots of sediment. Other state trails do not have this same challenge and the topography is different so it should be treated differently.

d. Awareness:

- We want to be aware of the cultural/historical and environmental awareness as well as way finding and branding. This is a balancing act between providing too much information and not even information.
- Mark: There are all sorts of sites up and down the valley and we are trying to create a Dakota interpretive area near the Pond house. We could use smart phone technology and QR codes. When on the state trail, you'll be able to go check out some historical program at the Pond Dakota Park and hopefully get a lot more visitations at this site and others because of the awareness of this project.
- Julie: We are talking with the agency partners to coordinate way finding so it isn't a maze of signs. We would like there to be design coordination within the entire valley.

e. Protection and Preservation:

- Tim: has there been discussion about zones where a particular zone would be more focused on minimally invasive and other zones may be more for recreation activities?
- Julie: We will be. We will identify areas that are priority levels of protection and will be looking at the natural resources inventory to help identify the areas.
- Mark: We would love to hear any other ideas of spaces that you think should be a part of the protected area, outside from the major three already mentioned.
- Matt: Where does the 80-20 come from? I know Hyland has the same idea.
- Mark: The Metropolitan Council provides this guideline for its regional parks.
- Tim: I think a 90-10 would be a better guideline. Start there and go back to 80-20 if necessary. Start with the lower goal. Are you going to manage it is a wildlife reserve with a little bit of development or a park and hope for the best in terms of keeping the preserve.
- Larry: I think we need to get more people involved not just staff. We need to get a commitment to stewardship to the area so they are willing to step forward and do something.
- Matt: I was a part of the Citizen's Advisory Committee for Theodore Wirth Park and it was 3 year process with 22 meetings. It is a significant resource to the city and it's worth the time to get it done right because you don't get a do over.

f. Overview of the project schedule:

- Julie: Will continue to get input from the stakeholders and partners in the upcoming two meetings and open house. Thinking the schedule may be pushed back slightly into next year to get a complete plan together. Next steps would be to create a draft to send out for review and comment and then have another open house.

g. Questions for City Staff or topics that didn't get touched on:

- Larry: If you want to create more public interest, spend more money, offer bus tours to the 3 current trailheads so you can expose people to the river valley and the existing trail.
- Dennis: The MN River Valley trail is already a destination trail. We would like to improve user conflicts but in the long run its draw is its natural environmental feel. There are access points we could have for ADA and other ones for biking. You wouldn't want a paved trail next to the swampy area. A lot of kids want the adventure, go run around in the woods, not a paved trail, that is boring for kids.
- Julie: Take away message of be careful about the amount of development and preserve the natural. This is a special place; don't move too fast to change because you can't get it back.