

Frequently Asked Questions about the Minnesota Valley State Trail

The information provided below was compiled by City staff with substantial input from Minnesota Department of Natural Resources (DNR) staff.

What is the Minnesota Valley State Trail (“State Trail”)?

It is a trail project authorized by the State Legislature in 1969 to establish a continuous 72-mile trail corridor from Fort Snelling State Park to the City of Le Sueur. Much of the trail upstream (i.e., southwest) of Shakopee is in place. In 2014, the State Legislature directed the Minnesota Department of Natural Resources (DNR) to develop the Bloomington segment of the State Trail, which is proposed to consist of two separate treadways (one paved, one natural surface) located within one single trail corridor. The Bloomington segment extends from the Minnesota Valley National Wildlife Refuge Visitor Center to the Bloomington Ferry Bridge.

Will approval (or denial) of the City’s Minnesota River Valley Strategic Plan (MRVSP) affect development of the State Trail project?

The MRVSP is not a master plan for the State Trail and approval of the MRVSP has no direct bearing on development of the State Trail plan, which is a State funded, DNR project. City action to approve (or deny) the MRVSP will neither accelerate nor stop progress on development of the State Trail project. While the MRVSP acknowledges City support for the State Trail, it does not provide specific recommendations regarding its design or alignment. DNR is developing the State Trail plan, which will identify the specific trail corridor alignment and details for the design and construction of the two proposed treadways. Additional information regarding trail design is provided below.

How does the Minnesota River Valley Strategic Plan (MRVSP) address the State Trail?

The State Trail is one of many existing or proposed facilities located on city-owned land in the river valley. As such, the MRVSP identifies and describes the State Trail and the City’s support for this project (see pages 5.3-5.4 of the draft MRVSP). The MRVSP also recommends implementation of detailed system plans over the next few years, including a master trail system plan. One outcome of the master trail system plan will be to identify where connections to the future State Trail should be created or improved. This will not be done until after the State Trail alignment and design are finalized.

What is the City’s role in the review and approval of the State Trail?

As noted above, the State Trail is a project authorized by the State Legislature, who, in 2014, authorized funding and directed the DNR to develop plans for the Bloomington segment. The City’s role in the decision-making process is summarized below:

- **Resolution of Support** – DNR requested a formal statement of support for the project prior to proceeding with engineering plans. On January 5, 2015, the City Council adopted a Resolution of Support of “the DNR efforts to proceed with preparation of preliminary and final plans and specifications for the State Trail through Bloomington, including, but not limited to, trail alignment and design, acquisition of needed right-of-way or easements, and peripheral improvements (e.g., bridges, culverts), at no cost to the City”.
- **Joint Powers/Cooperative Agreement** – Prior to commencing construction, DNR will request execution of a joint powers/cooperative agreement with the City. This agreement formally grants the DNR access to develop the State Trail on city-owned land and addresses the City’s

review and approval of the final State Trail alignment; DNR obligations for construction, operations and maintenance; and any special provisions needed for the project.

- **Environmental Assessment** – In accordance with the Minnesota Environmental Quality Board (EQB) rules, DNR, as the project lead, is the Responsible Government Unit (RGU). The RGU prepares the assessment document. The City, as a property owner, will be involved in coordination and review of the environmental assessment. The environmental review process is anticipated to begin in 2016 and take 8-12 months to complete.

Has a User Study Been Completed?

A user study has not been conducted for the State Trail. As with other recreation/infrastructure projects in the river valley (such as the Long Meadow Lake Bridge), a user study is not required by State law and is not a condition of the funding that was designated for the project by the Legislature.

While a study of existing users has not been conducted, the State Trail corridor will include a natural surface treadway (utilizing the existing natural surface trail to the extent possible). Thus, current trail users will not be excluded from using the river valley much as they do today.

In addition, numerous studies and surveys at the regional and national levels point to the continued high demand for trail-based recreation facilities. Much research has been done about the benefits of walking and moderate exercise and the importance of making these opportunities convenient and accessible. More recent research has focused on the health benefits obtained from spending time in natural areas. The MRVSP advocates for improving access to the Minnesota River Valley as a way to increase the number of Bloomington residents that incorporate daily moderate physical activity and access to natural areas into their lives.

Finally, since its authorization in 1969, several segments have been constructed and have been actively used for decades by a wide variety of users. This project as originally conceived, was intended to create a continuous trail corridor from Fort Snelling State Park to the City of LeSueur. The Bloomington segment – the so-called “missing link” – is one of the last segments needed to complete the corridor.

Questions Specific to Trail Design

State Trails developed by DNR typically consist of just one treadway within a designated trail corridor. Many, but not all, State Trails are paved to accommodate a broad spectrum of users, consistent with the State’s mission to provide accessible outdoor recreation opportunities. Given concerns about the loss of the existing natural surface trail in the Bloomington segment of the State Trail, the DNR plans to provide two treadways in this segment of the State Trail: an ADA compliant paved treadway and a separate natural surface treadway. More specific information on the two trail types follows:

Proposed Paved Trail:

- **Why will one of the State Trail treadways be paved?**
 - 1) **Accessibility.** This is a publicly funded, developed, and maintained facility. A paved trail provides accessibility to the broadest spectrum of the general public, who support these facilities through their tax dollars.

- 2) **Multiple uses.** A paved trail also allows for a greater diversity of uses and users ~ from a person pushing a stroller to a person using a walker.
 - 3) **Maintenance.** DNR's experience with paved trails vs. natural surface trails, particularly in floodplains, has demonstrated that paved trails are generally easier to maintain, and hence overall, less expensive to maintain in a floodplain than a natural surface trail. Typically silt deposited by flooding on a paved surface can be brushed or scraped off, while the base of a natural surface trail often needs to be rebuilt. Maintenance may include bituminous repair or replacement as necessary in certain circumstances. The State Trail will be designed and constructed to minimize this need.
- **How wide will the paved trail be and what design standards will be followed?**
 - The typical pavement section DNR uses for multiuse recreational trails is 14-feet in width (this includes the 10-foot trail itself and 2-foot wide gravel and/or grass shoulders); the pavement is laid above 6-12 inches of granular base.
 - The State Trail design will follow AASHTO, MnDNR, MnDOT, and IMBA (International Mountain Bike Association) standards.
 - **Will any special design elements be added to make the paved trail more flood resistant?**
 - Flood damage is typically restricted to local areas where the water flow has both velocity and runs perpendicular to the trail alignment. DNR will take into account existing elevations, alignment, and trail surfaces and strive to minimize vulnerability to flood damage. Armoring shoulders may occur in certain locations, as well installing culverts under low spots.
 - **What are the projected annual maintenance costs for paved trails?**
 - On other State Trails the annual maintenance costs are approximately \$770-\$1000 per mile per year with a great degree of variability depending on weather. DNR is unable to specify a specific dollar amount for this trail as maintenance budgets are determined on a biennial cycle prescribed by the Legislature. The State is solely responsible for maintenance, though is willing to accept assistance.
 - **What maintenance tasks are included in the projected annual maintenance costs?**
 - Typical items covered by DNR's budget for routine maintenance include:
 - Trail surface management (sweeping, crack sealing, pothole repair, debris removal),
 - Vegetation management (mowing, brushing),
 - Signage maintenance (painting, replacement, graffiti),
 - Trail infrastructure maintenance (fencing, culverts, bridges, benches, etc.).
 - **What additional maintenance tasks are performed on State Trails located in floodplains? Does the annual maintenance budget cover flood damage repairs or are these considered emergency repairs?**
 - Typically on trails in floodplains DNR removes sediment on an annual basis. Any damage above this would be considered an emergency repair.
 - Funding for unforeseen or extraordinary maintenance costs, such as damage caused by severe storms, major flooding, or other unforeseen circumstances, comes from existing appropriations, disaster assistance, or in response to a funding request to the State Legislature.

- DNR deals with emergency maintenance on an episodic basis as costs are highly variable depending on the level of disturbance, scale and scope of damage. It's difficult to compare one section of trail to another due to variables.

Proposed Natural Surface Trail:

- **Will the existing natural surface trail be removed?**
 - As described below, the intent is to retain as much of the existing natural trail as possible. However, segments of the existing natural trail may need to be used for the paved trail to minimize vegetation removal and to locate the paved trail on the highest ground available. In those locations, a separate natural surface trail will be created. That said, throughout the Bloomington segment a natural surface treadway will be maintained.
- **What is the planned cross-section of the natural surface trail?**
 - The DNR does not anticipate that the natural surface treadway will have a constructed cross-section; it will be the natural terrain except where the two treadways must be brought together, which DNR hopes to minimize. The intention is to have the treadways at the same elevations in areas where they need to merge or cross so that trail users will approach the trail at the same elevation (e.g., not come out of a depression onto the trail).
- **What is the planned surface for the natural surface trail?**
 - The intent is to use the existing floodplain sediments except in those locations where a transition between the two treadways is needed. There may be a series of questions that will need to be discussed with project partners and natural surface trail users, such as: do we build up wet spots? It seems reasonable to minimize muddy pools, ruts, and such.
- **How do ADA policies affect the design of the natural surface trail?**
 - They essentially don't. Parking lots and standard facilities, including the paved treadway, will be ADA compliant; however, the natural surface treadway will not be designed to comply with recreational trail grades.

General Trail Design and Alignment Questions

- **How wide is the State Trail corridor?**
 - The State Trail corridor consists of the area that encompasses the two treadways. The width of the corridor will vary, depending on the separation distance between the two treadways. At some points the corridor may be 100 feet wide; at others 30 feet. Clearance of trees and vegetation within the corridor will be limited to the maximum needed to accommodate the two treadways. The area between the treadways will not be cleared, except where the two treadways are closely aligned.
- **How much tree removal is needed to accommodate the State Trail?**
 - The State Trail will be routed to minimize tree removal, and to preserve unique stands of trees, as much as possible. Significant grading will not be necessary on the whole given the natural level terrain.

- For the most part, the route identified to gain access for installation of necessary infrastructure (culverts and bridges), will be the same route that the paved trail will be developed on. Access routes are typically no more than 20 feet wide, which is more than needed for a 14-foot paved treadway. As noted above, the intent is to maintain the current width of the natural surface trail and minimize additional clearance.
- Many of these access routes already exist, so additional clearance can be minimized. In addition, the trail does not need to be completely linear; the alignment can be quite fluid, winding around stands of trees or other unique land or sensitive features.
- **What structures, besides the two trail/treadways are proposed?**
 - **Bridges:** There will be one trail bridge located over Nine Mile Creek. The bridge and location will be reviewed with the review for the balance of the project itself (i.e., the bridge will not be treated separately).
 - **Culverts:** The locations of the principal culverts have been identified. It is likely that there will be a secondary series of culverts under the trail in low spots. These locations will be shown on the plans. Review will occur in conjunction with the review for the balance of the project.
 - **Signs:** The final trail design will inform the type and location of regulatory and non-regulatory signs. Typical signs include: regulations signs, stop signs, stop ahead signs, and trail rules. Partners could play a role in interpretation. Trail alignment and design will define where regular signs are needed. As a standard, the signs will be placed no closer than 2-feet from the trail surface.
 - **Lighting:** This will only occur at trail heads and parking areas and will be limited.
- **What is the plan for construction phasing and access?**
 - This has yet to be determined. The DNR understands that there are limited locations for access, and that routes for heavy equipment for trail development will be limited. As consultations with project partners evolve, we will work together to identify specific staging and access locations. The intent is to use existing access points as well as existing access roads in the river valley to the extent possible.
 - Typically no more than 20 feet in width is needed to accommodate construction equipment. The largest equipment will be needed to construct the proposed bridge over Nine-mile Creek.
 - The DNR will work with project partners to develop a staging sequence. Development that allows for terminus to terminus locations is an important consideration; however the development sequencing needs further consideration/vetting. As planning and design continues, the DNR will work with its project partners to determine the most appropriate sequence.
- **Have the requisite easements been obtained from private property owners, the railroad and utilities companies?**
 - DNR has been in contact with both Xcel Energy, and Twin Cities & Western (TC&W) Railroad Company. A detailed trail alignment plan across Xcel property is currently being developed for review by Xcel to make sure it complies with Xcel's set back requirements. This fall, DNR staff met with representatives of TC&W to review the Trail plans and discuss issues and concerns from TC&W's and DNR's perspectives. The Minnesota Valley Trust has been negotiating with the Izaak Walton League (Minnesota Valley Chapter) and a private property owner for rights-of-way across those parcels.

Funding Questions

- **How much will the State Trail cost and how will it be funded?**
 - The State Legislature authorized \$2.165 million in its 2014 Bond Appropriations bill to the DNR to develop the Bloomington segment of the State Trail. DNR has estimated the cost of the Bloomington segment to be approximately \$2.5 million.
 - The DNR is responsible for all costs associated with the design, construction, operations and maintenance of the State Trail facility. There is no expectation of financial support from partners (i.e., the City/property owner).

- **Will the State Trail be funding by Bloomington tax dollars?**
 - City tax dollars will not be used to fund the project, however State tax dollars will. As noted above, the State Trail is a State facility. Funding for construction will be provided via State Legislature bonding, similar to other capital projects. Funding for ongoing maintenance and operations will be provided in the DNR biennial budget allocated by the State Legislature.
 - As noted above, funding for unforeseen or extraordinary maintenance costs, such as damage caused by severe storms, major flooding, or other unforeseen circumstances, comes from existing appropriations, disaster assistance, or in response to a funding request to the State Legislature.

Environmental Impact Questions

- **What level of environmental review will occur?**
 - Minimum standards will need to be met for both NEPA guidelines and EQB's rules. DNR Parks and Trails Division staff will prepare the Environmental Assessment Worksheet (EAW) that the DNR's Division of Ecological and Waters Resources must approve and process. Technically, DNR is not the owner of any interest, but has been granted access interest by the property owners. As such, the DNR will act as the Responsible Government Unit (RGU) for the project.

- **What other entities will be involved in the review?**
 - US Fish and Wildlife Service, the City of Bloomington, the Corps of Engineers, the EQB, Minnesota's State Historic Preservation Office (SHPO), DNR Parks and Trails Division, DNR Ecological and Waters Resources Division, and the general public.

- **Will there be an opportunity for public input on the environmental review work?**
 - Yes. DNR must follow the public review process outlined in State Statutes and used by the Environmental Quality Board. For an EAW, a 30-day public comment period is provided once the EAW document is approved for distribution and review.

- **How will cultural/historical resources be addressed in the review?**
 - DNR's Parks and Trails Division cultural resources staff will complete archeological and historical review, in consultation with USFWS Refuge and the City, and in compliance the Federal Section 106 standards and requirements.

- **When will the environmental review process begin?**
 - The initial stages and conversations have already begun with DNR review staff. The EAW and the Environmental Quality Board reviews could be completed in 8 months to a year. It's possible that the environmental review could be completed at the beginning of 2017.

Contact Information for State Trail project

For more information on the Minnesota Valley State Trail visit the DNR website at:
http://www.dnr.state.mn.us/state_trails/minnesota_valley/index.html or contact:

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