

## Section VIII

# Cultural and Environmental Education Plan

### Overview

As defined in *Section III – Vision Statement*, Dakota County emphasizes cultural and environmental education throughout the park system. Providing outdoor education and recreation opportunities for people of all abilities is a cornerstone of the Parks Department’s mission of “enriching lives by providing high quality recreation and education opportunities in harmony with natural resource preservation and stewardship.” Given its unique qualities, Spring Lake Park Reserve offers an extraordinary cross-section of educational opportunities. This section considers cultural and educational programs and services at the master planning level.

### Interface with Dakota County’s Outdoor Education Plan

The cultural and environmental plan for Spring Lake Park Reserve is closely linked to Dakota County’s *Outdoor Education Plan*, which was first developed in the 1998, with the program being continually expanded since that time. The goals of the plan are to:

- ▶ Protect or enhance the health of the ecosystem in Dakota County Parks.
- ▶ Provide outdoor education services which create a sense of stewardship for Dakota County’s parks natural and cultural heritage.
- ▶ Promote increased understanding, appreciation and enjoyment of natural and cultural resources.
- ▶ Provide an appropriate balance between resource preservation and recreational use.

The Outdoor Education Plan includes a list of recommendations that serve as a blueprint and springboard for future creative programming and initiatives that fulfills the changing needs of Dakota County residents. Implementation of the recommendations will take place both in the short and long-term depending on available resources. A number of the plan’s recommendations are already being implemented, including:

- ▶ Providing programs and events for the general public.
- ▶ Partnering with other agencies and organizations.
- ▶ Marketing and promoting of outdoor education programs.
- ▶ Providing outdoor education services for special populations, e.g., at-risk youth, seniors, women, and low-income park users.

Under the plan, outdoor education encompasses environmental, historical, cultural, and recreational programs, including parent and child fishing events, kayak and canoe lessons, prairie hikes, stargazing, historical bike rides, dog sledding lessons, candlelight skis, and moonlight snowshoe hikes. Many of these opportunities are provided through partnerships with other agencies, including the National Park Service, REI (an outdoor retail store), Friends of the Mississippi River, National Audubon Society, Department of Natural Resources, Minnesota Safety Council and Wilderness Inquiry. An Outdoor Education Supervisor plans and oversees outdoor education programming in the parks.

In 1999, the Parks Department received a grant from the Legislative Commission on Minnesota Resources to develop a comprehensive experiential based adventure learning program for youth-at-risk in the County. The grant provided the resources to build, develop and run the program. The program built an extensive team challenge/ropes course at Lebanon Hills Regional Park, which included a high ropes course, low ropes course, low initiatives, and a climbing wall.

After the grant expired, Dakota County Parks entered into a partnership with the Southwest Area YMCA to continue and expand the program. Youth-at-risk remains an important audience for the program; however, the program is also open to a variety of groups and ages. The objectives of the program are to build personal confidence, leadership skills, and character while learning how to work cooperatively as a group.

## Existing Outdoor Education Program Opportunities

The themes and sub-themes defined in *Section III – Vision Statement* highlight the breath of educational opportunities afforded by Spring Lake Park Reserve. Dakota County's existing program is already taking advantage of these opportunities by implementing an education program that occurs at two levels. The first level relates to personal interpretation (staff led) programs, with the second relating to self-guided interpretation.

At the personal interpretation level, existing programs include:

- ▶ **Schaar's Bluff Programs** – a series of general programs that includes birding and kite flying. An average of three large events are also held in this area, including the Candlelight Ski and National Park Service Singing Ranger. About 300 people often participate in the larger events.
- ▶ **Spring Lake Youth Camp Programs** – a wide-variety of programs and services are provided out of this facility, including:
  - S General programs, such as star gazing , prairie hike, winter camping, and snowshoeing. Attendance ranges from 10 to 50.
  - S Pre-school programs, such as Knee-High Naturalist, which averages 30 participants.
  - S Scouts (Boy and Girl), averaging six gatherings per year with 45 participants each time.
  - S Private naturalist programs, such as youth groups and bird-watching groups. Averages 12 groups per year with 12 to 150 participants.
- ▶ **Archery Range Program** – general public programs for archery.

Note that many of these programs are relatively new. As more people become aware of them, the programs are expected to grow and eventually expand into new types of programs.

At the self-guided interpretation level, there are a number of resources available for visitors to gain new knowledge about the park. For example, an interpretive sign program is being implemented that highlights the unique features of the park. This includes a number of interpretive signs that have already been installed in the Schaar's Bluff area in partnership with the National Park Services – Mississippi National River and Recreation Area.

At the Spring Lake Youth Camp, a number of interpretive resources are also available. Examples include a resource library, animal tracking interactive exhibit, self-guided trail activities, seasonal nature interpretive posters, nature journal, nature art activities, and nature games.

## Flexible Use Approach to Development Master Plan

Under the *Outdoor Education Plan*, Dakota County is committed to expanding educational opportunities whenever the opportunity presents itself. Having the right facilities within the park is critical to their capacity to achieve this goal. Each aspect of the development master plan considered both general recreational and educational uses, with an eye toward building flexibility into each facility to allow for multiple uses, expanding programs, and maximizing the value of public investment into the built infrastructure.

As defined in *Section VI – Development Master Plan*, most of the existing and proposed facilities serve both a general and educational purpose. Specific examples where education program uses were considered include:

- ▶ **Cultural Center** – would be designed for flexible use of the multipurpose four-season shelter, including extensive use for culturally and ecologically-based programming. The interpretive display and exhibit area would also be integral to the overall education program – at both a personal and self-guided level.
- ▶ **Lodge** – potential to expand this facility to accommodate new programs and uses, as demand warrants.
- ▶ **The Village** – new year-round camping facility that provides an opportunity for expanded educational programs, in concert with the nearby lodge facility.
- ▶ **Nature and Cultural Trails** – significantly expanded trail system will provide extensive opportunities for new education programs and self-guided interpretation. The cultural trail will be a unique regional park amenity.

As highlighted under the development master plan, other proposed features would also be used for educational purposes. For example, the council ring near the lodge and a much more extensive interpretive signage program will expand personal and self-guided educational opportunities within the park. (As new developments are implemented, the specific amenities needed for educational programs will be considered in greater detail.)

## Future Outdoor Education Program Opportunities

On the environmental side, Dakota County's *Outdoor Education Plan* already focuses extensively on environmentally-based programs. As the park is developed and the ecological stewardship program takes hold, the opportunities to expand environmental programs will undoubtedly grow. For example, involving the public in wildlife counts and habitat development programs will provide educational opportunities and serve an important planning and stewardship purpose. Given its natural amenities, Spring Lake Park Reserve will play an important and expanding role in Dakota County's outdoor education program.

On the cultural side, Spring Lake Park Reserve holds the promise to be one of the premium educational parks in the regional park system. As defined in *Section VI – Cultural Stewardship Plan*, the cultural history of the park provides outstanding educational opportunities that Dakota County will take advantage of as the facilities to support programming are developed. The cultural center and the cultural trail will play particularly important roles in the educational programs that will be offered in the park.

## Cultural Interpretive Media Considerations

Developing a shared sense of the past can be accomplished through a variety of media. As part of the implementation process, Dakota County will develop a variety of media by which the park resources can be interpreted.

From an overall perspective, the basic theme of the cultural interpretive program is the notion of a **“a walk through time”**. This relates to a cultural history walk through Spring Lake Park that connects various media together and highlights actual archaeological and historical sites. The cultural trail is specifically included in the master plan for this purpose. (Other trails, including the regional trail, may also be part of the “walk through time” theme as appropriate.) Since archaeological sites are, by their nature, usually invisible on the surface, known sites or historical buildings that have been demolished can still be commemorated through a variety of means, as defined below.

In addition to the cultural trail, locations such as cultural center, lodge, and The Village will also be effective places to interpret the overall history of human activity in the park – including how people lived or camped, what their shelters looked like, etc. Thereby telling an important and interesting story without specifically identifying actual site locations of more sensitive archaeological sites. The Village concept draws upon telling the story of how people have used the park in the past.

Specific sites that may be exhibited in one form or another include Lee Mill Cave, Sorg, Bremer Mound and Village Sites, Ranelius, Hamm, Bud Josephs, Boulanger Island, the former location of John Blakely's homestead, Spring Lake Mill, Minnie Lee's house, the City of Nininger, and homes of ghost town-era citizens, to name a few. Other opportunities include Spring Lake, former rock quarries, Truax's/Jeremy Sawmill, historic farmsteads throughout the park, and other *After the Flood* resources, such as foundations.

Specific types of media that would be integrated into the interpretive plan include:

- ▶ **Plaques and Historical Markers** – excerpts from oral histories, texts of historical events, and photographs will be incorporated on plaques and historical markers throughout the park to illustrate places, events, and persons significant in the park’s past and used as part of the cultural history walk. Poems, quotations, and inscriptions could be added to ordinary objects such as lampposts, benches, boulders, walls, and other such objects.
- ▶ **Historical Photo Album** – many historical photographs archived at the Minnesota Historical Society or the Dakota County Historical Society will be used in a large format neighborhood photo-album that illustrates the lives of the past residents of Spring Lake Park. Also, an effort will be made to gather historic photographs owned by former residents, such as Ken Klink, who may be willing to donate them or allow them to be reproduced. People in the surrounding community would be free to add their own photographs of family and friends to the photo album at any time, making it a constant “work in progress.” The album would be on public display at the park or local historical society and be available for people to add photographs and accompanying stories.
- ▶ **Spring Lake Park History Webpages** – a link will be developed for the park web site to pages about the history of Spring Lake Park. These pages would include some of the media presented above, such as oral histories, the history walk, and the neighborhood photo album. The site will also provide avenues for contact for those who would like to contribute new information and images to be added to the website. The site would also include links to related information, such as the site of the Science Museum (home to the Spring Lake Park archaeological collections) and the Dakota County Historical Society.
- ▶ **Oral Histories** – the members of a community often hold information known only by them. Recording interviews with former longtime residents or their descendants will be used for storytelling or put into written form for interpretive purposes. Interviewing the community’s elders is also a way to bridge the gap between generations. This project could be conducted in cooperation with area schools as an assignment in history or social studies, or perhaps as on-site activities for the Spring Lake Park Youth Camp and would be an effective way for young people to gain new perspectives on the history of the area while getting to know some of its older residents.
- ▶ **Living History** – these type of museums are very popular places for visitors, and have been proven to be an effective means to interpret the past and engage people in the stories and people from the past. There are many examples around the state and the nation of successful living history programs, most notably are the Minnesota Historical Society sites. Spring Lake Park Reserve has great potential for such programming, but it is an ambitious and expensive program and plan to embark upon. This will likely be approached as a long-term goal of the park, if analysis shows that anticipated visitorship warrants such a commitment.