

DAKOTA COUNTY PLANNING COMMISSION

Dakota County Western Service Center – Room L139

14955 Galaxie Avenue

Apple Valley, MN 55124

Thursday, December 14, 2023

7:00 PM – 9:00 PM

Agenda

I. Call to Order

II. Pledge of Allegiance

III. Public Comments:

Anyone wishing to address the Planning Commission on an item not on the agenda may address the Planning Commission at this time (comments are limited to 5 minutes).

IV. Approval of the Agenda

V. Approval of Previous Meeting Minutes (November 16, 2023)

VI. Park System Plan Kick-Off – Information/Discussion

(Lil Leatham – Planning, Niki Geisler – Parks)

VII. Planning Manager Update and County Board Actions (Kurt Chatfield – Planning Office)

- PDC considered 2024 Planning Commission Work Plan
- Opportunity for a combined meeting of Planning Commission and County Board in February
- PDC considered designating 105th street as the preferred alignment for the Veterans Memorial Greenway
- Received an update on the proposed Park System Plan update

VIII. Upcoming Public Meetings – Community Outreach

Vermillion River Watershed Plan Public Meeting	January 16 th , 5-7pm Lakeville Water Treatment Facility
Vermillion River Watershed Plan Public Meeting	January 24 th , 5-7pm Pleasant Hill Library, Hastings

IX. Topics for Next Meeting (Thursday, January 25, 2024)

- Election of Planning Commission Officers for 2024
- Establishment of meeting dates for 2024
- Review of work plan for 2024
- Miesville Ravine Park Reserve – Long-Range Plan
- Miesville Ravine Park Reserve – Natural Resources Management Plan

X. Planning Commissioner Announcements/Updates

XI. Adjourn



Meeting Minutes: Dakota County Planning Commission Advisory Committee Meeting Minutes-DRAFT

Date: 11/16/2023

Minutes prepared by Liz Hansen

Location: Western Service Center

Attendance

Members Present

- Jerry Rich
- Amy Hunting
- James Guttman
- Nate Reitz
- Tony Nelson
- Kelly Kausel
- Mike Cahn
- Jill Smith
- Dennis Peine

Member(s) Absent:

- Barry Graham
- Brady Folkestad
- Lori Hansen

Dakota County staff members attending:

- Kurt Chatfield, Planning Manager
- Niki Geisler, Parks Director
- Liz Hansen, Administrative Coordinator
- Tony Wotzka, Capital Improvement & Greenways Administrator
- John Mertens, Principal Planner

Meeting Called to Order

- Time: 7:02 p.m.
- By Planning Commission Chair, Amy Hunting
- Commissioner Reitz joined the meeting at 7:04 p.m.

Pledge of Allegiance

- The Planning Commission opened the meeting by reciting the Pledge of Allegiance.

Public Comments

- Comments/Notes: No audience member wished to address an item not on the agenda.

Approval of Agenda

Chair Hunting asked if there were any changes to the agenda.

The Planning Commission advised no changes, additions, or deletions.

MOTION: Commissioner Nelson moved, seconded by Commissioner Smith, approving the agenda. Voice vote: Ayes – 8 – Nays – 0 – Unanimously Approved

Approval of Minutes (from October 26, 2023)

Chair Hunting asked if there were any changes to the previous meeting's minutes.

The Planning Commission advised no changes, additions, or deletions.

MOTION: Commissioner Rich moved, seconded by Commissioner Nelson, approving the previous meeting's minutes. Voice vote: Ayes – 7 – Nays – 0 Abstain – 1 – Approved

Item VI. Veterans Memorial Greenway Design/Alignment Study Update - Information (Tony Wotzka – Parks, John Mertens - Planning)

Tony Wotzka, Capital Improvement & Greenways Administrator, and John Mertens, Principal Planner, presented this item. The Planning Commission received a presentation on the route alignment options for the Veterans Memorial Greenway.

A design study has been completed to evaluate the feasibility of locating an off-road road trail parallel to 105th Street, connecting the proposed trailhead at the Rich Valley Athletic Complex with the Mississippi River Greenway to the east. The Planning Commission reviewed the proposed trail alignments along 105th Street.

Questions and comments by the Commissioners, along with responses from staff (*italics*):

The Planning Commission asked about the original route that was identified in the master plan in comparison to the 105th Street route option. *Staff responded that a design study identified significant challenges with the master plan route due to very rugged terrain, environmental impacts, and the difficulty of assembling land for the greenway because of a recent railroad ROW acquisition that interfered with the greenway master plan alignment. As a result, the County began a study of the 105th Street route alternative.*

The Planning Commission asked a series of clarifying questions about the Greenway history, phasing, memorials, and funding:

- When the name was changed to Veterans Memorial Greenway, did that allow the County to access additional funding? *Staff responded that renaming the greenway to honor veterans and proposing to locate memorials along the trail was key to receiving state and federal appropriations.*
- When will the funds awarded need to be spent? *Staff responded that there are several funding sources, with some needing to be spent in 2028 and others needing to be spent in 2029. Staff are working on a proposed change to legislative language to consolidate project timeframes and deadlines.*
- Are any of the memorials located along the section of Greenway that would parallel 105th Street? *Staff responded that the Native American Veteran Memorial was originally proposed along 105th Street but was relocated in response to neighborhood privacy concerns and to take advantage of a more desirable location that became available on the very west end of the greenway off Dodd Road.*
- How does the proposed greenway trail impact neighbors? *Some neighbors have raised concerns about loss of privacy, trash associated with trail users, visibility from their homes, preserving the character of their rural street/neighborhood, and a desire by some to use the street for horseback riding. There are several options along 105th Street that have been prepared with varying impacts on adjacent property owners. At least one of those options appears to fit within the existing road right-of-way and does not appear to require permanent easements from adjacent property.*
- Who do we think will use the trail? Will it be pedestrians or bicyclists? *Staff responded that the County anticipates an approximate 50/50 split between pedestrians and bicyclists, similar to other greenway trails.*
- How are drainage, snow storage, and melting being accommodated? *Staff responded that water and snow management are part of the current study and will be coordinated with the City of Inver Grove Heights. Water management will be somewhat dependent on whether the desired roadway design is an urban (with storm sewer) or rural (with ditches) section.*

A question was raised about why some of the options for an off-road trail along 105th Street are considered infeasible. *Staff responded that the wider design options that would require the purchase of substantial private property are the ones that have been identified as infeasible for this analysis.*

Planning Commission members discussed the balance between providing a trail along 105th Street that would provide an enjoyable trail user experience while limiting impacts to adjacent landowners. The Planning Commission offered the following comments:

- While it may be necessary to use a narrow greenway trail cross-section where landowners are unwilling to sell a portion of land adjacent to 105th Street for a permanent easement, the County should use a wider and more typical greenway trail cross-section where landowners are willing sellers. This approach may be most practical for groups of landowners as opposed to having the design change back and forth between individual property owners.

- Since many of the lots along 105th Street are deep lots, consider offering to install or pay for vegetative screening on private property for landowners who desire a vegetative buffer between their homes and the road and trail.
- If adjacent landowners are concerned about high vehicle speeds along 105th Street today, consider offering to build a narrower roadway along with the trail project, as narrower roadways have been shown to slow driver speeds.
- If there are concerns about trash from trail users, consider a design that places enough trash containers along the route for trash, recycling, and composting.
- If the trail is built too narrow (8'), then bicyclists may be more likely to ride on the adjacent street. If landowners would like to limit bicycles from riding along the street, it might be preferable to build a standard-width greenway trail.
- The County should work with landowners to make sure that the trail and boulevard are designed so that there is room for residents to put their trash cans at the end of their driveways.
- If landowners along 105th Street desire to ride horses along the road, the County could explore creating a parallel soft-surface equestrian trail.
- Since trains sometimes block 105th Street and the proposed greenway trail, the County should consider locating benches on either side of the railroad crossing. Waste containers could also be located at the crossing.
- Consider working with volunteer groups to designate and adopt a trail group for this segment of the greenway and keep the maintenance levels high.

The Planning Commission concluded their discussion about the 105th Street route alternatives with questions about the next steps. Is 105th Street a study, or has the County Board adopted the alignment? What is the process moving forward? *Staff responded that currently, the 105th Street alignment is a study and that after reviewing the 105 Street design options, the County Board will consider designating 105th Street as the preferred alternative for the greenway. If directed by the County Board, staff will continue to work with the City of Inver Grove Heights on a design that will address adjacent property owner concerns and provide a good experience for greenway users.*

Planning Manager Update and County Board Actions

Comments/Notes: Kurt Chatfield, Planning Manager, provided the Planning Commission with an update on the following County Board Actions:

- Dakota County Commissioners and staff met with Rice County, Northfield, and MN DNR to discuss Mill Towns Trail progress and coordination

Upcoming Public Meetings – Community Outreach

Lebanon Maintenance Shop Virtual Meeting	November 9 th , 6:30pm https://bit.ly/LH-MF
County 42 Western Apple Valley Project Design Kickoff Open House	November 15 th , 4:30pm-6:30pm Apple Valley Senior Center, Yosemite Room
Miesville Ravine Park Reserve Long-Range Plan Open House	November 15 th , 5pm-6:30pm Cannon River Lutheran Church
Delaware Trail Gap – School Safety Project Open House	November 16 th , 5pm-7pm Two Rivers High School, main entrance mezzanine
Vermillion River Watershed Plan Public Meeting	January 16 th , 5-7pm Lakeville Water Treatment Facility
Vermillion River Watershed Plan Public Meeting	January 24 th , 5-7pm Pleasant Hill Library, Hastings

Topics for next meeting (Thursday, December 14, 2023)

Kurt Chatfield, Planning Manager, let the Planning Commission know that there is one item on the schedule for next month's meeting:

- Mississippi River Greenway – Long Range Plan

Planning Commissioner Announcements/Updates:

Commissioner Reitz made an announcement that he will not continue serving on the Planning Commission next year. Commissioner Reitz has been serving on the Planning Commission for the last 20 years.

Adjournment

Chair Hunting asked for a motion to adjourn.

MOTION: Commissioner Smith moved, seconded by Commissioner Nelson, to adjourn the meeting at 8:34 p.m. Voice Vote: Ayes – 9 – Nays – 0 – Unanimously Approved.

Next Regular Meeting: Thursday, December 14, 2023, at 7:00 p.m., Dakota County Western Service Center, Apple Valley

Respectfully submitted,

Liz Hansen, Administrative Coordinator

DAKOTA COUNTY PLANNING COMMISSION

DATE: 12/14 2023

AGENDA ITEM: Review Of 2008 Park System, 2017 Visitor Services, 2017 Natural Resource Management System Plans and Input On Topics For Plan Updates

PREPARED BY: LIL LEATHAM

PURPOSE

Provide Planning Commission:

1. *Review of progress on 2008 Park System Plan, 2017 Visitor Services, and 2017 Natural Resources Management System Plan*
2. *Opportunity to provide input on topics for the plan updates in 2024-2025*

BACKGROUND

Dakota County acquired its first 82 acres of parkland at Holland-Jensen Lakes in 1967. Since that time, the park system has grown to 6,280 acres, 46 greenway miles, and 2,919,323 annual visitors. In 2024 Dakota County Parks will begin updating the Park System Plan, Visitor Services Plan, and Natural Resource Management System Plan. In addition, the goals of the 2020 Land Conservation Plan will be incorporated into the Natural Resource System Plan update. The plan update process is an opportunity to reflect on what has been accomplished and consider what the park system should be in the future.

The 2008 Park System Plan outlines an ambitious vision for Great Places: Improve Parks as Destinations, Connected Places: Collaborative Greenways with Regional Trails Linking Parks and Popular Destinations, and Protected Places: Green Infrastructure Includes Parks, Greenways, Open Space, and Natural Areas. Significant progress has been made on the plan's 32 goals.

The 2017 Parks Visitor Services Plan includes goals in six focus areas: awareness and outreach, outdoor education, events, volunteers, facility rentals, and equipment rentals. Although the pandemic impacted numbers for most programmatic areas from 2020-2022, overall outcomes have been met or exceeded plan goals.

The 2017 Natural Resource Management System Plan includes goals in five focus areas: vegetation, water quality, wildlife, greenways, private lands, and volunteers. Five-year goals were met or exceeded in all areas except for greenways natural resource management, which fell short of the goal because staff could not keep pace with the accelerated Greenway program.

ATTACHMENTS

Plan Accomplishments

Key Questions

QUESTIONS

The following questions are intended to help assist in review of the packet materials.

1. *What accomplishments stand out to you?*
2. *What topics are important to you that should be addressed as part of the plan update process?*

2008 Park System, 2017 Visitor Services, and 2017 Natural Resource Management System Plan Accomplishments

The 2008 Park System Plan outlined a vision for *Great Places: Improve Parks as Destinations, Connected Places: Collaborative Greenways with Regional Trails Linking Parks and Popular Destinations, and Protected Places: Green Infrastructure Includes Parks, Greenways, Open Space, and Natural Areas*. Accomplishments include:

- Operation of three regional parks, two regional park reserves, one county park, one off-leash dog area, and four county park conservation areas.
- Opening of Whitetail Woods Regional Park with signature activities such as Fawn Crossing nature play area, camper cabins, and a venue for community events.
- Development of contemporary long-range plans for six parks that integrate recreation, natural resources, the cultural landscape, and interpretation.
- Completion of priority capital projects at Lake Byllesby Regional Park, Thompson County Park, Big Rivers Regional Trailhead, and Lebanon Hills Regional Park.
- Establishment of unique destination activities and events at each park: community celebrations (Thompson County Park); Mississippi River views, bison, and archery (Spring Lake Park Reserve); Mountain biking, cross-country skiing, and horseback riding (Lebanon Hills Regional Park); trout fishing (Miesville Ravine Parks Reserve); camper cabins and music in the park concerts (Whitetail Woods Regional Park); camping, river, and lake recreation (Lake Byllesby Regional Park).
- Expansion of winter activities to two sledding hills, four cross-country skiing areas, dogsledding, skijoring, and 57 miles of cleared trails for winter walking.
- Development of popular park activities: three paved lake loop trails, 42 miles of natural surface hiking trails, picnic areas with reservation shelters, five playgrounds, and six fishing docks.
- Adoption and implementation of the 2017 Visitor Services Plan.
- Establishment of the Greenway Collaborative, a collaboration between the county and city, state, and federal agencies to prepare long-range plans for nine greenway corridors and leverage funding to build the greenway network and construct 32 new greenway miles.
- Development of the 2020 Land Conservation Plan to guide land protection throughout the county.
- Protection of nearly 7,500 acres of natural and agricultural areas since 1999.
- Development and implementation of the 2017 Natural Resource Management System Plan.
- Creation of natural resource management plans for six parks and four greenways.

The 2017 Parks Visitor Services Plan recommended the following six focus areas and goals. Although the pandemic impacted numbers for most programmatic areas from 2020-2022, overall outcomes have been met or exceeded plan goals:

- Awareness and Outreach:
 - Goal: Build awareness across all communities, including current and new users and under-represented groups.
 - Progress to Plan: Increase visitation by 5 percent (from 1,797,200) by 2022. Visitation increased by 63 percent for total visitation of 2,919,323. Since the inception of the outreach program, the number of people engaged through outreach efforts increased by 243 percent to 5,800 people.
- Outdoor Education:
 - Goal: Serve more people through outdoor education programming throughout more of the park system with focus on school partnerships and self-guided interpretation.
 - Progress to Plan: Increase participants by 20 percent (from 4,645) by 2022. Participation increased by 86 percent to 8,636 participants. School field trips are still rebuilding post-pandemic. Current numbers are below 2019 when participation increased by 128 percent to 8,582 students.
- Events:
 - Goal: Add events to the system, celebrating unique aspects of each park and the communities they serve.
 - Progress to Plan: Increase participation by 100 percent (from 3,000) by 2022. Event participation increased by 133 percent to 7,000, and the number of events offered increased by 180 percent to 14 events offered.
- Volunteers:
 - Goal: Engage more people who want to contribute to parks.
 - Progress to Plan: Increase volunteer hours by 50 percent (from 4,123 hours). Volunteer hours increased by 46 percent to 6,000 volunteers.
- Facility Rentals:
 - Goal: Evaluate and optimize facility rentals for public use.
 - Progress to Plan: Increase facility rentals by 10 percent (from 1,273) by 2022. Facility rentals increased by 77 percent to 2,250 rentals.
- Equipment Rentals:
 - Goal: Support recreation at more venues, building on unique park assets.
 - Progress to Plan: Increase equipment rentals by 50 percent (from 7,966) by 2022. Equipment rentals remained flat, and slightly below the 2019 high when rentals increased by 71 percent to 13,589 equipment rentals.

The 2017 Natural Resource Management System Plan (NRMSP) recommending the following focus areas and goals:

- **Vegetation.** At the end of the fifth year of implementation, the completed restored acres (2,079 acres) are 145 percent of the five-year goal (1,434 acres). These restored acres are now under on-going maintenance.
- **Water quality.** The five-year goal was to complete 19 projects. To date, over 20 projects have been completed.
- **Wildlife.** By the end of the five-year reporting period, 35 projects were completed that improved habitat for a myriad of species, including at least six rare species. This exceeded the five-year goals of 3-5 species at 15 sites.
- **Greenways.** Natural Resource Management Plans (NRMPs) were developed for four greenways. NRMP development fell short of the five-year goal because staff could not keep pace with the accelerated greenway program. Invasive species were controlled on 127 acres (70% of goal), and vegetation was managed on 77 acres (43% of goal).
- **Restoration on Protected Private Lands.** 345 acres on 21 properties are actively being restored. 64 NRMPs have been developed and 71 stewardship plans for agricultural easements have been updated. 70% of the NRMPs have been updated per the five-year revision schedule to reflect a more strategic use of resources.
- **Volunteers.** The NRMSP called for an expansion of the County's Volunteer Program to decrease restoration costs, increase public support, and foster future park stewards. No specific number goals were presented. However, In 2023, volunteers contributed over 3,431 hours to help restore and manage natural areas in the County parks. This is a 34% increase over 2017 hours.

The 2020 Land Conservation Plan provides vision and action steps for how the natural resources of Dakota County are collaboratively protected, improved, and managed for current and future generations. The plan includes six goals:

1. Ecologically important areas are prioritized for protection.
2. Water quality and quantity are enhanced and protected.
3. Natural resource quality is improved and sustained.
4. Biodiversity is restored and sustained.
5. The public supports and is involved in natural resource protection and management.
6. Recreational access to conservation lands is enhanced.

Strategies and tactics are identified for each goal. During the first years of implementation, notable progress has been made in the areas of land protection and natural resources management.

- The City-County Conservation Collaborative has been established. Eight projects in five cities, totaling 358 acres, have been initiated through development of NRMPs. One hundred thirty-four acres in two cities are under active restoration.
- Staff had contact with 35 private landowners and five land protection applications were received.

- Staff began strategic landowner outreach based on selected Conservation Focus Areas (CFA). In the Marcott Lakes CFA, one protection project is underway and ecological assessments have been completed for 12 property owners.
- Seven land protection projects totaling 177.75 acres have been completed in 2023. In addition, 41 new or existing projects have advanced.
- Three Natural Resource Management Plans were completed with an additional three in progress.
- Ecological assessments were completed for 13 private landowners and eight additional ecological assessments are being developed.
- Twenty-one restoration projects on 345 acres of land were actively managed.

Park System, Visitor Services, and Natural Resource Management System Plan Updates

Parks are essential components to Dakota County Board goals for ensuring a great place to live and a healthy environment with quality natural areas. Residents appreciate parks; in 2022, 90% of residents visited a Dakota County park at least once and 75% reported using parks and greenways in the past year. When asked what residents like most about living in Dakota County, the third most popular answer was parks and trails (after location and general quality of life).

Parks, greenways, and natural areas are a fundamental service, as important as transportation, jobs, and schools. They increase property values and the tax base, are places that people depend on for physical and mental health, contribute to community identity, protect the natural environment, and contribute to environmental resilience.

The Dakota County Parks system is in its 56th year. Combined, the Parks System Plan, Visitor Services Plan, and Natural Resource Management System Plan will set the vision and work plan for what it will look like in the next 10-15 years. Below are some of the questions an updated Park System Plan, Visitor Services Plan, and Natural Resource Management System Plan can address.

1. Dakota County represents about 14% of the metro area population but hosts only about 4% of regional park visitation. Some residents do not visit our parks. Do we want to serve our residents at the regional average by hosting more visits?
2. A lot of County residents have never visited a Dakota County Park (about 40,000). Do the activities, facilities, and maintenance standards that Dakota County offers in its parks and greenways match up with the interests and expectations of all Dakota County residents?
3. Dakota County has protected 140 acres of Park Conservation Area. Currently there is no standard for public access. What activities should be allowed and where?
4. Recreational trails are the most popular facility. The County has a vision for 200 miles of greenways for the County. Since 2008, the miles of greenway trails Dakota County operates has grown from 14 to 46 and greenway visits have surged over 300%. Do we want to add new greenways to the vision?
5. Lebanon Hills Regional Park and Thompson County Park are close to where people live. They are also the most visited parks and, in 2018, accounted for 74% of Dakota County park visits. Should Dakota County site or operate more parks close to where people live?

6. Dakota County is a leader in natural resources restoration and management. Since 1999 nearly 7,500 acres of natural and agricultural areas have been protected. How will we ensure that we are able to manage the growing acres of natural areas in greenways, parks, conservation easements, as well as partnerships with private and public landowners?
7. Climate change is a growing concern. Rising winter temperatures, declining water quality, air quality, and loss of species are all problems that affect recreation (e.g. winter sports, swimming beach closures, fish consumption advisories). State and Federal resources are becoming available. Should Dakota County pursue these resources for climate resilience and disaster mitigation in our park system?
8. Dakota County Parks contain sacred Indigenous sites and 19th century historic sites. How should Dakota County protect and interpret the cultural landscape? How will we work in partnership with Tribal communities?
9. Dakota County is still establishing its parks and greenway system. How much will future development and operations of the park system cost? Are our goals aligned with current trends in outside funding?
10. Many cities in the metropolitan area allow private commercial use in their parks for services such as food and equipment rentals. This can result in providing a service visitors want and generating revenue. For example, restaurants in Minneapolis parks pay the Park Board 12% of their gross revenue and Lakeville has entered into a concession agreement with Lakeville Brewing Co. in Antlers Park. Dakota County Parks currently does not have a commercial use in parks policy. What are the revenue and service implications of commercial use in parks?
11. In 2008, when the current Park System Plan was completed, county parks staff operated a park system with 4,740 acres, 14 greenway miles, and 911,000 visitors. In 2023, staff operate a system of 6,280 acres, 46 greenway miles, 2,919,323 annual visitors. Growth in the system has outpaced staff growth. There has been an increase in incidents that require a staff presence and over 1,000 park acres with no formal public access. What level of service is adequate and what staffing level is needed to maintain that level of service?

What questions are you interested in addressing as part of the Park System Plan, Visitor Services, and Natural Resource Management System Plan updates?