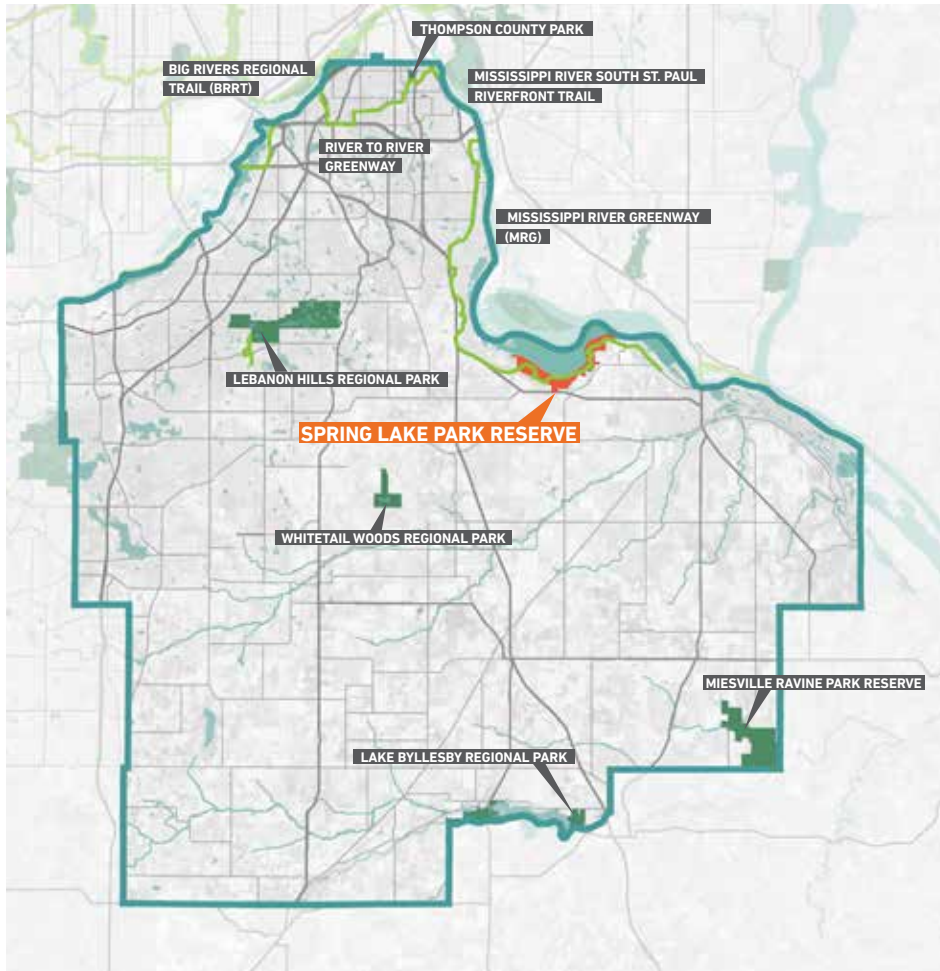




EXECUTIVE SUMMARY: SPRING LAKE PARK RESERVE MASTER PLAN

Adopted by the Dakota County Board June 22, 2021

OVERVIEW



Spring Lake Park Reserve's Location Within Dakota County

OVERVIEW

Spring Lake Park Reserve is singular among regional parks in the Twin Cities, located on a west-to-east flowing reach of the Mississippi River with north-facing bluffs and river terraces that support rare ecosystems and offer expansive river views. A rich legacy of archaeological discovery and history is testimony to the power of this place to draw people over millennia, spanning pre-history, recorded archaeological periods, Indigenous communities, Euro-American settlement, 20th century farming, and today's park visitors. It is a place to observe, reflect, dwell, gather, travel, and time-travel.

Recognizing the park's remarkable qualities, this master plan sets an attainable vision for the future, guides improvements, and carefully balances resource stewardship with public recreation. This plan builds from past plans, community feedback, regional recreation and education needs, and the park's natural and cultural landscape.

Goals of the Master Plan are to:

- Guide improvements and management of the park
- Preserve and enhance the park's natural areas
- Provide recreation amenities that meet park visitor needs
- Celebrate the park's rich cultural and natural heritage

EXISTING PARK CONDITIONS

Spring Lake Park Reserve is a 1,100 acre-park in eastern Dakota County on the Mississippi River in Rosemount and Nininger Township. The park's landscapes are associated with living Indigenous communities, early Euro-American settlement, the city of Nininger, and local agriculture.

Archaeological sites document Indigenous occupation from early pre-history to European contact. A high concentration of known sites and its location on a major river suggest greater archaeological significance, and potential for designation as a culturally significant landscape. Spring Lake is in the Upper Mississippi River Valley Regional Center, where ancestors of today's Indigenous communities lived, gathered for ceremonies, reinforced communal ties, forged alliances, and are buried.

The park's remarkable and diverse natural qualities - dramatic river views, terraces, bottomlands, north-facing limestone bluffs, ravines, and rare ecosystems - provide a strong foundation for public enrichment and respite, with opportunities to protect biodiversity, natural heritage, open space, and views.

The park's two program areas, Upper Spring Lake (Schaar's Bluff, east) and Lower Spring Lake (west), are connected by the Mississippi River Greenway (MRG). The upper park offers more visitor amenities, including the Schaar's Bluff Gathering Center, picnicking, playground, sand volleyball courts, community garden, the MRG trailhead, an overlook, and an interpretive cultural trail. The lower park includes the Camp Spring Lake Park Retreat Center, an archery trail, campground facilities, and a MRG trailhead.

The park has National and State significance as a destination within the Mississippi National River and Recreation Area (MNRRA), as a resource for the 10-state Great River Road scenic byway travelers, by including a segment of the National Mississippi River Trail, and as a stop on the as Mississippi River State

Water Trail. In addition Spring Lake Park Reserve is in the Mississippi Flyway, an waterfowl migratory corridor and is part of the Audubon Society's Mississippi River Twin Cities Important Birding Area.

VISION STATEMENT

Spring Lake Park Reserve showcases the ecological and cultural integrity of the land to provide a regional destination where visitors can experience the integral relationship between humans and the landscape

GUIDING PRINCIPLES

1. Protect, restore, enhance, and maintain natural resources.
2. Create an engaging gateway to the treasures of the Mississippi River Valley.
3. Become a regional, four-season destination.
4. Celebrate the area's rich cultural heritage.
5. Integrate ecological, cultural, educational, and recreational experience.
6. Provide inclusive, memorable, and relevant experiences for all



View of Mississippi River from Schaar's Bluff

THE MASTER PLAN

OVERVIEW

This plan focuses on improvements prioritized for the next five and 10 years within the framework of the long-term vision for the park. The long-term plan depicts the fully realized vision for the park and is important for understanding the five-year and 10-year phasing. All priorities are flexible enough to respond to change and unanticipated funding.

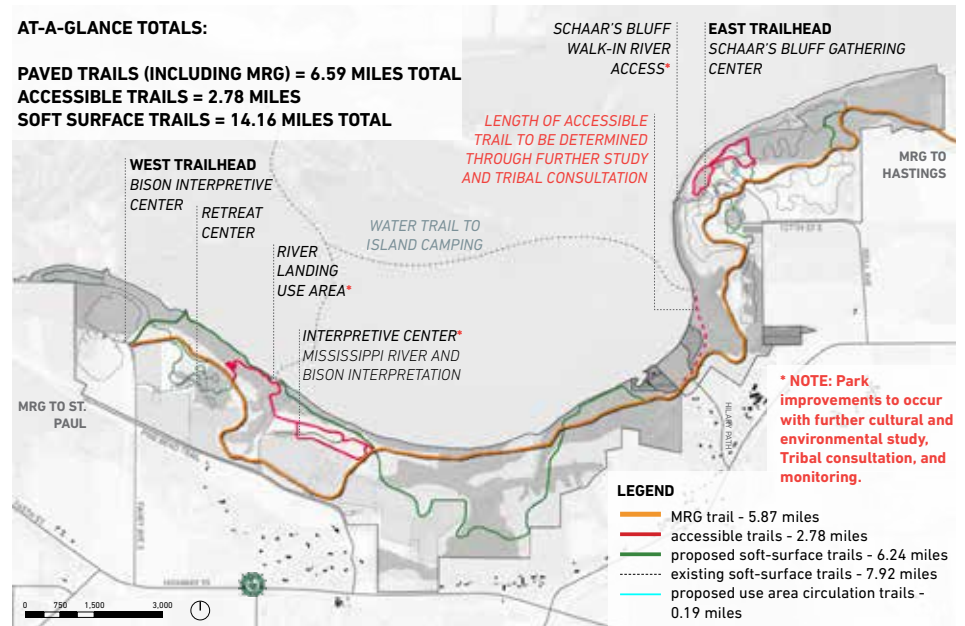
Improvements are organized into the Upper Park (Schaar's Bluff/east) and Lower Park (west). The Upper Park long-term plan enhances picnicking, play areas, the Gathering Center, community gardens, parking, water access, trails, and restoration areas. New features include the Farm and the Schaar's Bluff River Access and Use areas. The Lower Park long-term plan includes new hike-in campsites, river access points and overlooks, outdoor classrooms, pavilions, interactive interpretation, an interpretive center, trail extensions, and restoration areas.

The long-term plan integrates guidance from a Traditional Cultural Properties (TCP) Study that identifies "numerous highly sensitive TCPs of importance to the Dakota People and their ancestors for time immemorial."¹ Throughout this document, the master plan identifies the additional study, consultation, and monitoring by associated Indigenous communities that must occur to finalize design concepts.

SUSTAINABLE TRAIL DESIGN

This plan expands the park's soft-surface trail network. Although essential for recreation, trails can degrade natural areas by providing access for invasive species, fragmenting core habitat, altering hydrology, increasing erosion, and bringing visitors to sensitive areas. To protect the park's profound natural and cultural resources, trails should be "field fit" to on-site conditions and sustainably designed.

1 Upper Sioux Community Tribal Historic Preservation Office, "Spring Lake Park Reserve Traditional Cultural Properties Survey," on file at Dakota County, November 9, 2020.

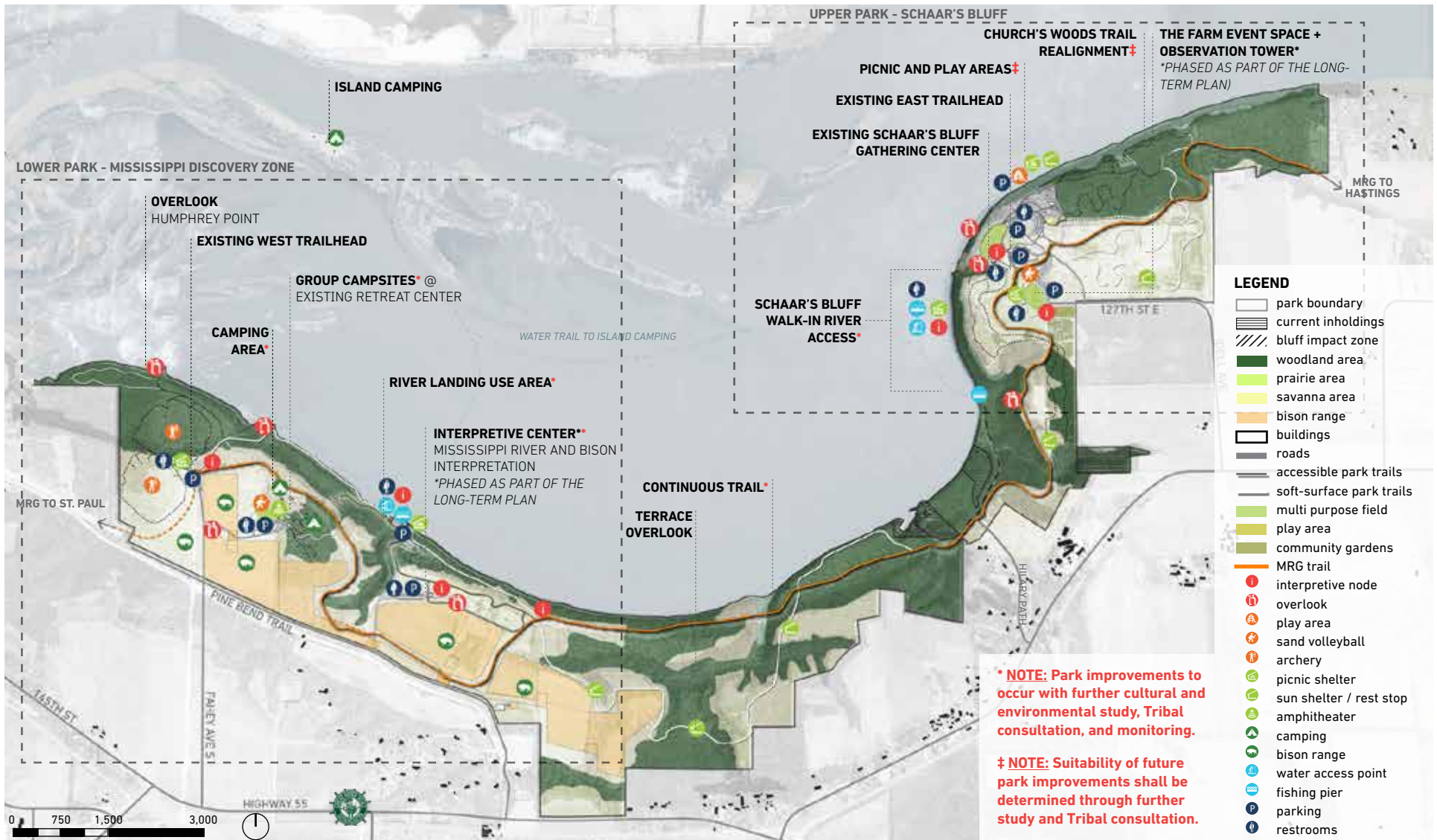


Site-wide Overview of Trail Types

WINTER USE

Winter activities include ski trails, snowshoeing loops, and maintenance of the MRG and accessible trails for winter walking. An improved Gathering Center will offer indoor warming space and equipment rentals. Parking lots and major access roads will be plowed.

LONG-TERM CONCEPT PLAN THE MASTER PLAN



Site-wide Concept Plan, Long-Term Development Plan

UPPER PARK: SCHAAR'S BLUFF

10-YEAR PLAN

Schaar's Bluff is situated high above the Mississippi River and offers stunning views of the river channel, Spring Lake, and the island-rich landscape below. Its captivating views and abundant natural resources have drawn people to the area for thousands of years. The Upper Park includes a high concentration of sensitive Traditional Cultural Properties (TCPs) of importance to past, present, and future generations of Dakota People. Additional study and Tribal consultation is needed to more fully understand the scope and significance of the Upper Park's cultural landscape and appropriate public park uses. Proposed improvements represent desired recreation program based on existing recreation facilities and activities, recreation trends, demographic trends, and community input to date. Final recreation program and locations for associated facilities is dependent on the results of future study and Tribal consultation.

Desired recreation program during the 10-year phase include:

- Refined natural surface trails that reduce conflict with TCPs and new, nonstructural river overlooks (simple rest stops such as a trailside bench with a scenic view)
- Access to the River Use Area via a trail leading from the Mississippi River Greenway (MRG) and a potential connection between the upper bluffs and lower shoreline
- Infrastructure supporting river access (picnicking, fishing dock, and shore fishing)
- Transformation of the Gathering Center from a private rental space to a trailhead with a public warming area, improved office space, and rental equipment facilities
- Improved Picnic Grounds including non-reservable sun shelters, modern reservation picnic shelters, and restrooms
- Relocated and Enhanced Play Areas (nature-themed and nature-play)



UPDATED PICNIC FACILITIES
modern picnic shelters



GATHERING CENTER ENHANCEMENT
public trailhead use, expanded office space, and equipment rentals



ENHANCED PLAY AREA
nature-themed play



ENHANCED PLAY AREA
nature play

10-YEAR PLAN

LOWER PARK - MISSISSIPPI DISCOVERY ZONE

The focus of Lower park improvements is on reintroduction of bison and providing access to Spring Lake and the Mississippi River. Facilities support visitor services at the Bison Range and River Landing Use Area, expand camping, and add trails to new park areas:

- Reintroduction of bison to the prairie ecosystem
- A Bison Range-accessible viewing trail and viewing platforms, and a shaded accessible outdoor classroom or shelter integrating interpretation of the role of large animals in ecological restoration
- A River Landing Use Area small watercraft boat launch, watercraft rental, a reconfigured access road, a picnic shelter, picnic grounds, and a fishing dock
- A Water/kayak trail and island camping
- Walk-in/bike-in camp sites with rustic amenities



1 RIVER LANDING USE AREA
outdoor classroom / riverside pavilion



2 RIVER LANDING USE AREA
boat launch / watercraft rental kiosk



3 EXPANDED TRAIL NETWORK WITH
INTEGRATED INTERPRETATION



4 BISON RANGE VISITOR SERVICES
ENHANCEMENTS
accessible trail and viewing platform



5 EXPANDED CAMPING OPPORTUNITIES
hike-in, river-oriented campsites



6 BISON HERD

LOWER PARK: MISSISSIPPI DISCOVERY ZONE 10-YEAR PLAN



*** NOTE:** Park improvements to occur with further cultural and environmental study, Tribal consultation, and monitoring.

STEWARDSHIP

Spring Lake Park Reserve's landscape has been shaped by human and natural processes over time.

IN DEVELOPING A PARK VISION, NATURAL AND CULTURAL RESOURCES WERE CONSIDERED AS LINKED SYSTEMS THAT CANNOT BE SEPARATED FROM ONE ANOTHER.

A separate Natural Resources Management Plan (NRMP) was developed in tandem with this plan, with an inventory of existing conditions, desired improvements, and action items. This natural resources section seeks to provide an overview of the direction outlined in the NRMP

LONG-TERM NATURAL RESOURCES MANAGEMENT GOALS

- Facilitate a experience of the area's natural heritage and improve that experience
- Provide habitat for native plants, birds, insects, mammals, amphibians, and reptiles
- Demonstrate native plant community regeneration
- Foster and build a resilient, mature, and high-functioning ecosystem
- Work with adjacent landowners for the best joint management of connected natural resources
- Conserve wildlife species of Greatest Conservation Need
- Mitigate impacts of climate change
- Achieve regionally outstanding ecological quality

Specific Natural Resources Management Goals:

- Regenerate a mosaic of upland communities along a continuum from oak forest to oak savanna to prairie
- Increase native plant diversity
- Minimize invasive species

- Prevent new non-native species encroachment
- Reduce negative visitor impacts
- Reduce erosion and stabilize ravines
- Protect lake water and groundwater quality
- Adapt to climate change by introducing appropriate species native to northern Iowa, southwestern Wisconsin, and Southern Minnesota
- Reintroduce bison or other large grazing animals
- Use fire as a management tool especially in woodlands and savannas
- Monitor native plant communities and wildlife population for changes

CULTURAL LANDSCAPE STEWARDSHIP CONSIDERATIONS

This plan's stewardship approaches for the park as a potential cultural landscape are based on US Secretary of the Interior standards for treatment of historic properties. Strategies address a collaborative process to protect Dakota connections to this landscape, protocols for treatment of important places, and care of artifacts associated with Dakota ancestors.

1. Establish consultation protocols and collaborative relationship with Tribal Historical Preservation Officers (THPOs) and associated Indigenous communities to address decision making on condition, maintenance, use, access, site safety, and interpretation.
2. Work with associated Indigenous communities on appropriate interpretation.
3. As evaluation of a park bison range proceeds, engage a representative of Prairie Island Indian Community experienced with their bison herd.
4. Develop protocols for permits or priority seasonal use for native plant harvesting by members of associated Indigenous communities.

INTERPRETATION FRAMEWORK

INTERPRETIVE GUIDELINES

Interpretation connects park users to Spring Lake Park Reserve's natural and cultural landscapes. The National Association of Interpretation (NAI) defines interpretation as "a mission-based communication process that forges emotional and intellectual connections between the interests of the audience and the meanings inherent in the resource." Interpretive guidelines ensure a cohesive interpretive experience at Spring Lake Park Reserve and assist in the development of interpretation content and features. Critical to understanding Spring Lake Park Reserve is emphasizing the stories of those that lived in and shaped this place. The Dakota people inhabited this land for thousands of years, and the significance of this place lives on today. Below are the plan guidelines:

- 1. This is a Dakota place.** Acknowledge the relationship between the Mississippi River and Dakota people.
- 2. Ecological and human history are tied.** Emphasize how ecological diversity and human activities need to be understood together.
- 3. The park and its stories continually evolve.** Highlight the evolution of specific locations.
- 4. Sites and stories must be connected.**
- 5. This is a place for gathering.** Connect interpretation to park gathering opportunities.

INTERPRETATION GOALS

- Emphasize that this is a sacred place to the Dakota community
- Engage THPOs, Dakota community members, and stakeholders on interpretation of river stories and landscapes
- Move beyond signs and engage visitors with memorable interactive interpretive features
- Renew interest in the park as a regional destination through high-quality recreation with integrated interpretive content
- Enhance river access and sense of connection to the water
- Phase interpretive development as funding becomes available

INTERPRETATION THEMES

The interpretive theme for Spring Lake Park Reserve is:

SPRING LAKE PARK RESERVE CONNECTS YOU TO **THE CHANGING RIVER,** WHICH CONTINUALLY SHAPES AND UNITES THE MANY, EVER-EVOLVING STORIES EMBEDDED IN THIS PLACE.

Three subthemes bring more detailed interpretive content to life.

GIFTS OF THE LAND: We cannot separate ourselves or our activities from the living landscape all around us.

IMPORTANCE OF PLACE: Inextricably linked with Mississippi River, Spring Lake Park Reserve is a park unlike any other.

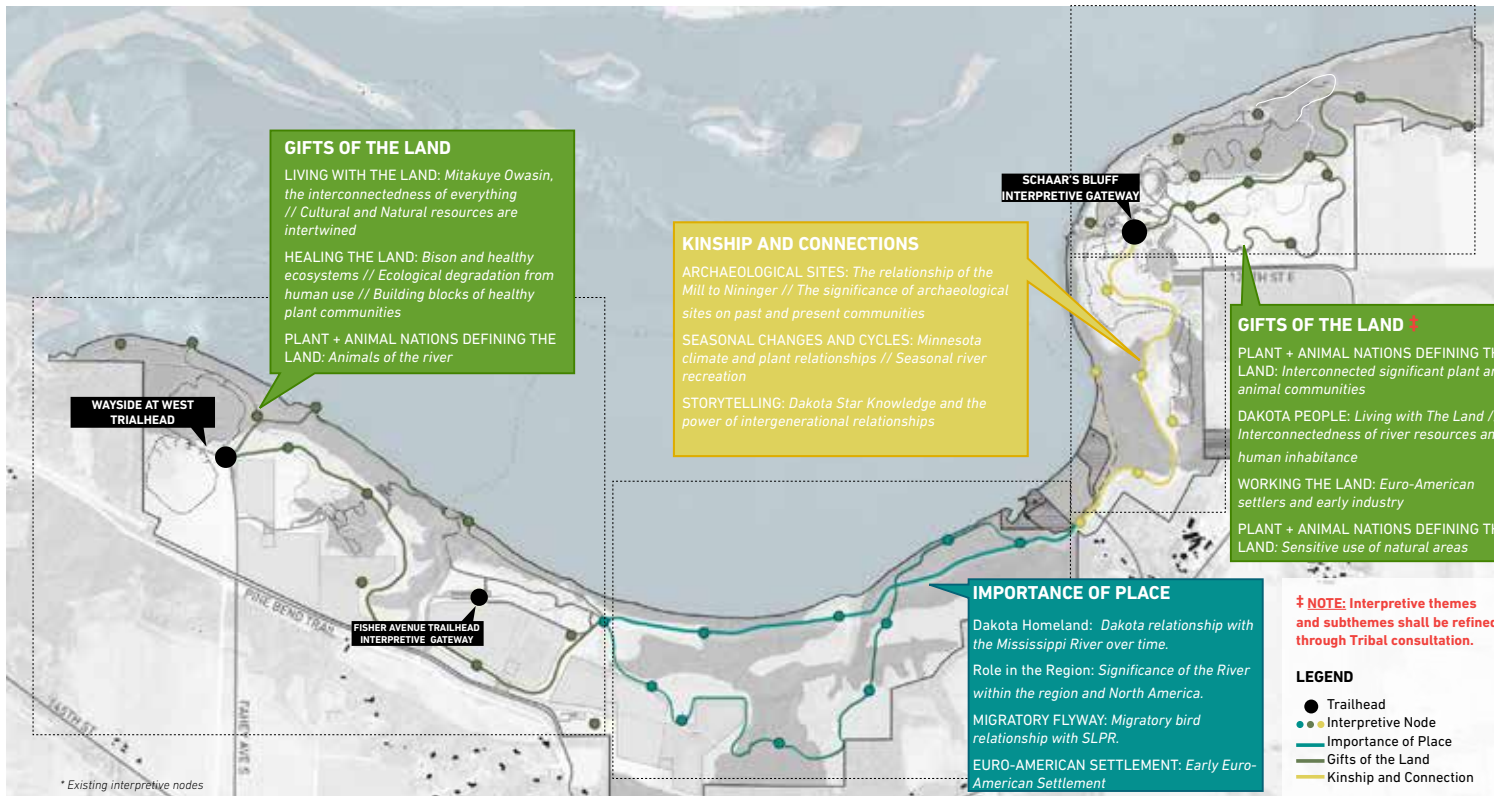
KINSHIP AND CONNECTION: Spring Lake Park Reserve is a regional center where people gather for ceremonies and events to reinforce communal ties and forge new relationships.

INTEGRATED INTERPRETATION: A CONTINUOUS STORY

IMPORTANCE OF PLACE + **GIFTS OF THE LAND** + **KINSHIP & CONNECTIONS**

A node-based trail interpretive experience tells the parks story across the three sub-themes . Nodes frame key views, demonstrate boundaries between ecologies, and expand site understanding.

INTERPRETATION FRAMEWORK



INDOOR EXPERIENCE: Spaces with tactile panels, hands-on interpretive activities, interpretive art, maps, and visitor information.



INTERACTIVE EXPERIENCE: Features that highlight views, focus on a specific topic, and create opportunities for information sharing interactive interpretive elements.



INTERPRETIVE PANEL: Tactile signs that enrich visitors' understanding of SLPR with hands-on elements or relevant facts.



WAYSIDE: Kiosk or rest area seating with immersive views, tactile elements, facts, and personal stories about SLPR often integrated into trailheads and other key destinations.



OVERLOOK: Moments for pause at key viewpoints throughout the park. May include interpretive art, hands-on elements, and/or personal stories of place.



REST STOP: Hands-on activities with interactive components. Engaging interpretive art, test stations, and activities.



OUTDOOR CLASSROOM: Gathering areas in key places with way-finding information, descriptive information about the adjacent area, interpretive art, and hands-on elements.

Interpretive Node Distribution Throughout Park Reserve

IMPLEMENTATION

CAPITAL PROJECTS COST ESTIMATE

Recreation and natural resource improvements are prioritized into five-year, 10-year, and long-term phases, based on connection to the vision and principles, community support, benefit-to-cost ratio, cost, and estimated operational costs. Estimates are planning level, prepared in 2020 dollars, and will be refined as projects advance to construction. Projects will require a predesign process evaluating natural, cultural, education, and equity considerations. Tribal consultation during design and engineering phases and Tribal monitoring during construction will also be needed.

PHASE	ESTIMATED COUNTY COST
5-YEAR PLAN	\$4,945,000
10-YEAR PLAN	\$6,278,000
RUNNING TOTAL OF 5 AND 10-YEAR PLANS	\$11,223,000
LONG-TERM PLAN	\$14,873,000

BOUNDARY

No changes are recommended to the park boundary. The current boundary encompasses 19 acres not owned by the County - three private properties and one public property.

STEWARDSHIP LANDS

The lands immediately south of the boundary have a significant impact on the natural resource quality within the park reserve, the views from the park reserve, and the “entrance experience”. The master plan recommends protection and management of these lands to enhance the park reserve. The 2020 Land

Conservation Plan for Dakota County Land” also identifies many of these same areas as being ecologically important. These properties are included within the preliminary Mississippi River – Spring Lake Park Unit Conservation Focus Areas (CFA). Landowners will be contacted to determine their interest in voluntary land protection and natural resource management opportunities through the County’s Land Conservation Program.

VISITOR SERVICES

This master plan includes facility recommendations that support visitor services at Spring Lake Park Reserve. Facility recommendations include outdoor spaces for guided outdoor education programs, self-guided interpretation, renovated reservation picnic shelters, non-reservation picnic shelters, equipment rental, and outdoor gathering spaces for occasional events. New and improved indoor spaces are also recommended. In the 10-Year Plan, the master plan recommends opening the Schaar’s Bluff Gathering Center as a public trailhead. The long-term vision for the park includes a new interpretive center in the lower portion of the park and a reseason four-season picnic pavilion at the Farm.

OPERATIONAL ANALYSIS

The Operations Analysis estimates the staffing requirements and annual operational costs needed to operate the park in the future as improvements are completed. The analysis estimates that when all of the improvements prioritized within the 10-Year Plan are complete and operational there will be a 50% increase in the operating expenses needed to operate the park over 2020 levels. The increase includes the cost for additional 2.76-5.18 FTE staff. This increase is due to the need to maintain new recreation facilities and natural resource restorations as well as to support picnic shelter reservations, camping reservations, recreation equipment rentals, facilitating park events, guided outdoor education programs, and opening the Gathering Center as a public trailhead.