



THOMPSON COUNTY PARK MASTER PLAN *EXECUTIVE SUMMARY*

JANUARY 2020



Thompson County Park Context Map



Overview

Thompson County Park is located on the northern border of Dakota County in West St. Paul, adjacent to U.S. Highway 52. The park is nestled into a neighborhood of single-family houses to the north, west, and south. Across Thompson Lake, at the park's northwest edge, lies St. Croix Lutheran Academy. The 58-acre park is connected to South St. Paul's Kaposia Park and Kaposia Landing by the River to River Greenway. Thompson offers visitors a variety of natural habitats to explore, from hilly savanna to shady woodlands. Scenic trails, including one around Thompson Lake, combine with other park amenities to make Thompson County Park a popular destination for residents and visitors and currently serves the outdoor recreational needs of the more than 50,000 residents who live in the northern portion of Dakota County.

The Goals of this Master Plan are to:

- ✓ Guide improvement and management of the park
- ✓ Preserve and enhance the park's natural resources
- ✓ Provide recreational amenities that meet residents' needs
- ✓ Connect visitors to the parks natural, cultural, and recreational resources

Existing Conditions

Thompson is one of Dakota County's smallest parks, tucked into the most populous area of the County. It is well-used by many local residents. Thompson Lake is a big draw for visitors who enjoy walking around the shoreline and fishing from the pier. In addition to experiencing the lake, visitors can stroll through scenic woodland and savanna landscapes along 1.3 miles of hiking trails and 1.3 miles of paved trails. The River to River Greenway allows visitors to explore beyond the park's borders. Other connections to the surrounding community are lacking, the existing parking situation tends to confuse visitors, and there is not an abundance of wayfinding. A majority of today's visitors arrive by vehicle.

Thompson Park Center, which houses Dakota Lodge and Thompson Park Activity Center, is located in the park. The Thompson Park Center is busy every day of the week with programs catered to active older adults. Dakota Lodge, operated by Dakota County, consists of a 200-person capacity lodge that can be rented for weddings, meetings, and other events. A large stone fireplace and lake view terrace offer great views of Thompson Lake from the lodge. An existing playground, picnic shelter, and play lawn are all well-loved features and help to activate the northern portion of the park.

Existing Conditions Map



The Long-term Master Plan



The Master Plan

The Thompson County Park Master Plan focuses on improvements prioritized for the next five and ten years within the framework of the long-term vision for the park. The long-term plan above shows the park at full recreation development, while the subsequent ten-year plan shows improvements that are reasonably expected to be accomplished during the life of this master plan document. The long-term plan is important for understanding five and ten-year phasing and priorities and allows for flexibility. Elements from the long-term plan that are not currently included in the ten-year plan may be accomplished sooner based on changing priorities or unforeseen funding opportunities.

The development of the master plan was heavily influenced by the feedback received during community engagement pop-up events, stakeholder meetings, surveys, and open houses throughout the design process. Interpretation, education, preservation, restoration, and accessibility and inclusion all play a large role in the ten-year and long-term vision for Thompson County Park.



Vision Statement

Thompson County Park is an urban oasis that inspires people to participate in vibrant and healthy activities, is responsive to the community, and encourages people to discover nature.



Guiding Principles

- Create a welcoming and safe environment
- Provide activity and purpose year round
- Promote social gathering
- Connect the community to the park
- Enhance the lake as a focal point
- Improve natural systems within the park and beyond the park's boundaries
- Inspire learning
- Expand and strengthen partnerships
- Implement strategies for ongoing community feedback
- Reduce barriers to park access and use

TEN-YEAR PLAN



Ten-Year Master Plan

The concept for Thompson County Park includes an extended trail system featuring ADA-compliant paved trails, natural surface trails, multiple event spaces, enhanced picnicking and gathering opportunities, a variety of inclusive play and exploration options, expanded visitor services, a better connection to the River to River Greenway, more opportunities to explore the southern portion of the park, and more welcoming connections to the surrounding community.

Major improvements proposed within the ten-year period that improve the park’s overall design and the consistency of its circulation and character are:

- Neighborhood access gateways and additional park entry points*
- A broad, landscaped linear plaza that guides visitors through the north end of the park*
- Expanded trail system and lighted lake loop with ADA accessibility*
- Public art installations
- Enhanced water access: boat house, paddle input, shore fishing*, and fishing piers*
- Shoreline restoration* and restoration of natural resources(*phase 1)
- Enhanced formal and informal gathering spaces
- Nature-themed inclusive playground*, sensory garden, and nature play*
- Pollinator promenade, daylighted stream, and cascading water feature
- Lighted sledding hill,* open play lawn with arts-inspired ‘play-share’ storage, and stage/screen set-up
- Parking expansion* with compost drop-off* and storm water best management practices features*
- Greater public access to Thompson Park Center, equipment rental with adaptive equipment, and educational programming
- Simon’s Ravine overlook and ravine bridge
- Lakeside plaza*, group fire pit*, and scattered hammocking opportunities*
- Greenway rest area, Thompson Park trailhead*, and River to River Greenway Gateway*
- Event amphitheater and reservable picnic shelter
- Integrated interpretive elements*

** Priority within the five-year phasing plan*



Accessible Wayfinding



Accessible Amenities



Winter Use

Thompson County Park is open year-round. The master plan strives to enhance the park’s capabilities for winter activities by providing access for sledding or walking/ snowshoeing, and provides amenities to warm-up in chilly weather with an outdoor fire pit, plaza fireplace, and expanded use of Dakota Lodge.



Wayfinding

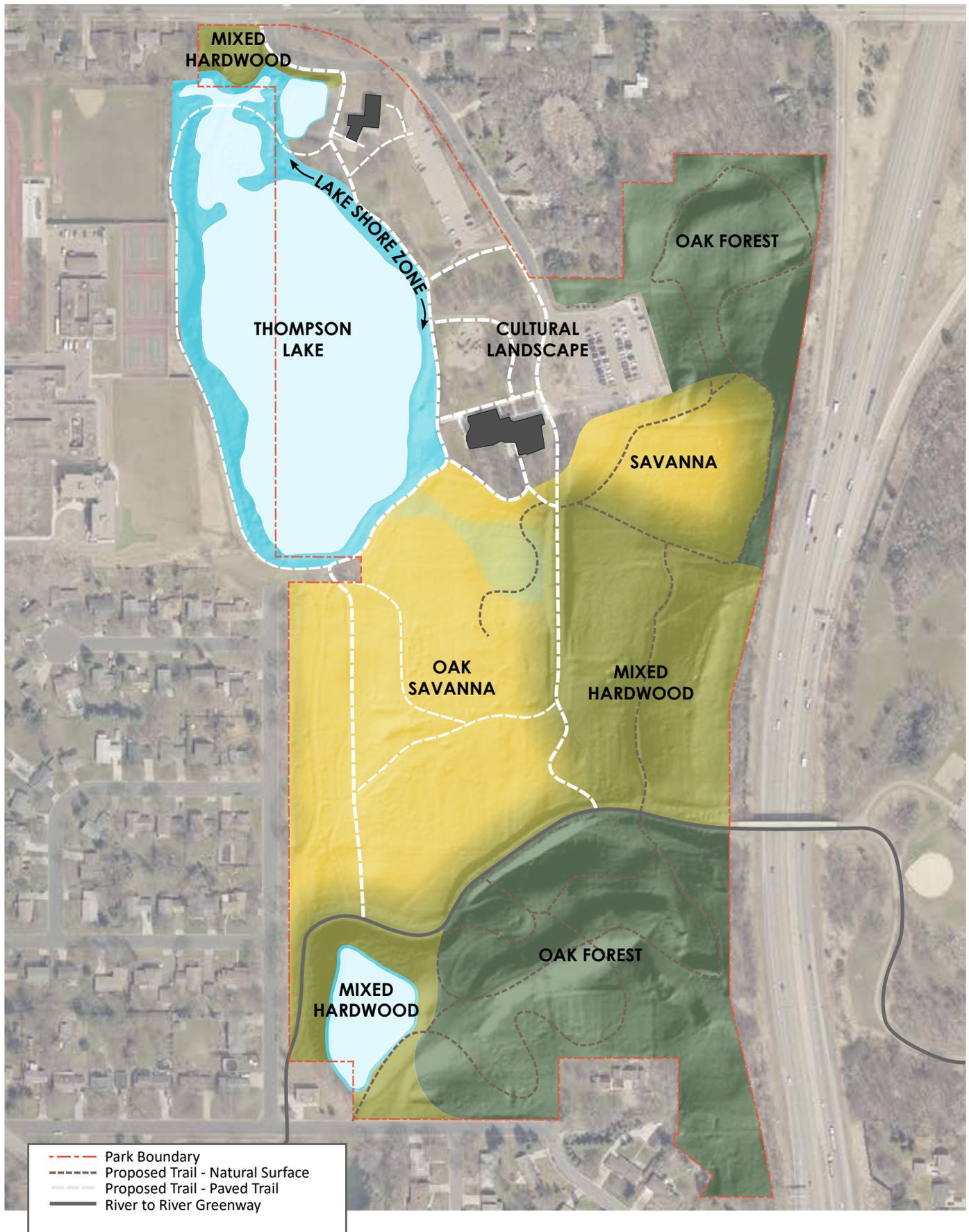
Wayfinding is an important component of park design that orients commuters and visitors, provides park identity, and helps to ensure that visitors have a safe and enjoyable experience. Proposed features in the master plan include park monument signs, directional signs for vehicles, information kiosks, and trail wayfinding.



Accessibility

Given the context of Thompson County Park and the diversity of users, inclusivity and accessibility details were a priority within the master planning process. Proposed features include ADA accessible trails, amenities, parking, services and programs, and safe maintenance practices for visitors with cognitive or physical disabilities.

NATURAL RESOURCES PLAN



Natural Resources

Integrated with the master planning process, a Natural Resources Management Plan (NRMP) was prepared. The NRMP identifies the long-term vision for natural resources and recommends an implementation strategy to achieve that vision. This natural resources section seeks to provide an overview of the direction set forth in the NRMP.

The purpose of regenerating native plant communities at Thompson Park is to:

- Allow people to experience the natural heritage of the area
- Demonstrate the native plant community regeneration process
- Provide habitat for native plants, birds, insects, mammals, amphibians, and reptiles

A long history of agricultural practices resulted in the severe degradation of the park, altering soil conditions that support very little native plant growth. Restoring native plant communities to the park will take thoughtful planning and diligent management. An adaptive management approach is recommended to combat climate change and allows for adjusted management over time. With this approach, Dakota County can help nudge the plant community in the direction of an assemblage of native or 'near native' species so that it does not degrade with exotic weeds.



Lake Shoreline

Overall Park Management Goals

- Regenerate a landscape that contains a mosaic of upland plant communities across a continuum from oak forest to oak savanna
- Increase native plant diversity
- Control invasive plant species to a maximum cover of 5%.
- Prevent new non-native species encroachment
- Manage deer to animal populations
- Reduce erosion
- Improve lake water quality
- Implement organic lawn care practices
- Create an adaptive management plan that can be flexible within a changing climate



Oak Savanna



Lawn Practices

INTERPRETATION PLAN



i Interpretation

The Thompson County Park master planning process considered the place-specific historical, cultural, and natural resources to be interpreted and the demographics of the people who use the Park to develop relevant messages and integrate those messages in the visitor's Park experience. This plan describes the key resources in Thompson County Park, whether they are natural, recreational, or cultural, and identifies key locations for potential interpretive elements. It is important to note that as park development is undertaken, the interpretation will evolve. The County's outdoor education program will bring resources to life through various methods including guided opportunities, such as programming and events, self-guided experiences, and interpretation informing and integrated into landscape and building design.

The goal for interpretation at Thompson County Park is to:

"Foster the wellbeing of social and natural communities through intergenerational play, gathering, and exploration."

The interpretive framework builds on the themes in the previous Park master plan and input from Dakota County staff, community stakeholders, and the project team. It also takes into consideration the Dakota County Parks' mission and vision and the vision statement and guiding principles related to the overall Park experience.



Ecosystem Exploration Loop



Pollinator promenade



Audio Tour

Interpretive Theme:

"At Thompson County Park, people connect with nature and each other through recreation, exploration, and social gatherings, building a strong and resilient community that is committed to stewardship and sustainability."

Subthemes



Social Gathering: Find community here



Water Resources: Follow the flow



Natural Resources: Leave a sustaining legacy



Healthy Lifestyle: Play in the park



Cultural History: You are part of a bigger story

Capital Projects Cost Estimate

Park improvements have been prioritized into three categories: Five-year, ten-year, and long-term. The prioritization was informed by community input, created by Staff, revised by the Planning Commission, and confirmed by the County Board. The prioritization process considered a number of factors, including consistency with the park vision and guiding principles, level of community support, benefit-to-cost ratio, cost, and estimated future operations and maintenance cost.

Park improvements identified in the master plan are planning level cost estimates prepared in 2019 dollars.

Cost estimates should be considered as preliminary, as many variables can influence the actual cost of projects.

PHASE	TOTAL COST
Five-Year Improvements	\$5,822,000
Ten-Year improvements	\$3,018,500
Long-Term Improvements	\$13,594,000
TOTAL IMPROVEMENTS	\$22,434,500

Visitor Services

The master plan recommends that improvements support visitor services such as the addition of an amphitheater as a venue for outdoor weddings, programs like music in the park, equipment rentals such as watercraft and lawn games, and a vision for increasing public use of Dakota Lodge. In the near term, the master plan recommends a Program and Space Study for Thompson Park Center to evaluate improvements that may be needed in the mid and long-term master plans to allow for greater public access. The study would evaluate renovations needed for services like opening Dakota Lodge on weekends for visitor orientation, utilizing the lodge for warming in the winter, and creating a space for general comfort.

Business and Operations Analysis

A Business and Operations Analysis is included in the Master Plan to estimate the staffing requirements and annual operational costs needed to operate the park in the future as improvements are completed. It is intended to increase Dakota County's understanding of the costs associated with maintaining park assets and providing the highest level of experiences for park visitors.

The analysis estimates that when all of the improvements prioritized within the Ten-Year Plan are complete and operational there will be a 16% increase in the net subsidy (operating revenues- operating expenses) needed to operate the park over 2018 levels. The increase includes the cost for additional 2.15 FTE staff. This increase is due to the need to maintain new recreation facilities and natural resource restorations as well as to support increased picnic shelter and Dakota Lodge reservations, recreation equipment rentals, facilitating park events, and opening Dakota Lodge for more public use.

