This summary provides the findings from Task 2, which include Existing Conditions, Phase 1 Community Engagement, and the identification of Issues & Opportunities. A draft of the Vision and Guiding Principles for Thompson Park has also been included for consideration.

**Existing Park Conditions**

At just over 58 acres, Thompson is one of Dakota County’s smallest parks. However, as the park is 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 1.67 miles of hiking trails and 1.28 miles of paved trails. The trails are open for snowshoeing and hiking in the winter months. The park is well-connected, allowing visitors to explore beyond its borders via the River to River Greenway, which provides access to the Mississippi River Regional Trail.

Thompson Park Center, which houses Dakota Lodge and Thompson Park Activity Center, is located in the park. Thompson Park Center is operated in partnership with the City of West St. Paul and Independent School District 197. Dakota Lodge, operated by Dakota County, consists of a 200-person capacity lodge that can be rented for weddings, meetings, banquets, retreats, and other events. A catering kitchen, A/V equipment, and WiFi are all provided, while a large stone fireplace, lake view terrace, and air conditioning make for an attractive and comfortable experience. Restrooms for park users are located at the lodge.

Thompson Park Activity Center (TPAC), is operated by the City of West St. Paul and Independent School District 197, and serves adults 55+ Monday-Friday from 9 am to 4 pm, with educational classes, social activities, and opportunities for recreation. TPAC is an attraction which brings seniors to the park on an almost daily basis, providing a unique opportunity to make Thompson County Park a model for how to serve this growing population.
Figure 3.2 Existing Conditions
Thompson County Park’s recreational amenities include:

» A playground

» North Shelter, a handicap-accessible, reservable picnic shelter that can host gatherings of up to 190 people and includes:
  - A serving kitchen with fridge, freezer, and sinks
  - Electricity
  - Drinking fountain (May-September)
  - 24 picnic tables
  - 4 charcoal grills
  - Restrooms

» A fishing pier

» Horseshoes, which are being removed to make way for the forebay as part of the 2018-2019 water quality improvement project on Thompson Lake

» 1.67 miles of hiking trails and 1.28 miles of paved trails, including a portion of the River to River Greenway

Outdoor Education

Currently there are two outdoor recreation-based events offered at Thompson County Park each year, the annual Take a Kid Fishing Day, and Trails by Candlelight in the winter.

The park also hosts a variety of classes and programming that take advantage of the outdoors; however, few of these offerings actually focus on natural resource-based topics or outdoor education specifically. The TPAC has garden and birding clubs; a science discovery group; watercolor, art, and photography instructional classes; and a walking group that benefit from access to the park.

Known Cultural Resources

Cultural resources identified in Thompson County Park include an archaeological site consisting of a lithic scatter near the southeast corner of the park identified as Simon’s Ravine. Simon’s Ravine is named for John and Anna Simon, early settlers who acquired the property in 1878 that later became Kaposia Park. No architectural history properties have been identified and no traditional cultural properties have been formally recorded within the park.
Natural Resources Overview

Natural Resources History

The land that is Thompson County Park has been altered through time due to human development. Prior to European settlement an oak savanna plant community blanketed its slightly rolling topography. Oak savannas are described as scattered trees and groves of oaks of scrubby form with some shrub thickets. This community thrived on the sandy loam soils of the park. These were productive soils and settlers in the late 1800s cleared the trees and thickets to plant gardens, row crops, and to graze cattle. Native plants were almost completely eliminated from the land. The area was known as the breadbasket of West St. Paul in the early 1900s. With increasing pressure to urbanize, farming ceased in the 1970s, and the site became the park. The fields were abandoned and allowed to colonize with opportunistic vegetation – much of which was not indigenous. Since that time the site has evolved into a low diversity forest of mostly non-native and weedy trees. The herbaceous vegetative layer distinctly lacks the beautiful array of wildflowers and grasses that in a native condition would cover the ground.

The head of Simon’s ravine occupies the southern end of the park. Prior to 1970 the ravine stretched down to the Mississippi River. The construction of Highway 52 severed this ecological connection ending the free movement of plants and animals in and out of the park and to and from the river. Today the undeveloped area of the park is an island of low quality vegetation within a matrix of urban development. Without the connection to the river, this detached island does not provide adequate habitat for many species of mammals, reptiles and amphibians, but has become home to a diversity of songbirds.
Plant Community Types

Plant community types within the park today were mapped based on the Minnesota Land Cover Classification System (MLCCS) survey previously conducted by Dakota County staff. This 2005 study mapped land cover by plant community and percent impervious cover (buildings, roads, parking lots, etc.). Today, for this current natural resources management plan, County staff ecologists and consulting ecologists checked and updated the data that describes the plant communities. A description of the plant communities of the park follow. Figure 3.3 illustrates the distribution of plant communities within the park.

Old Field
Open, herbaceous-dominated areas within the park are former fields that have not yet been colonized by trees. Non-native grasses such as smooth brome, reed canary grass and Kentucky bluegrass dominate along with broadleaved, weedy species such as Canada goldenrod, leafy spurge, and stinging nettle. Plant diversity is low compared to native prairies. The size of the old fields in the park have been slowly shrinking as trees and shrubs encroach on the edge of these open areas. Eventually, if left unmanaged, these former old fields will succeed to degraded deciduous forest. The old field plant community provides marginal wildlife habitat because of the lack of plant diversity.

Degraded Native Forest
A few native oak trees persisted through agricultural times and comprise the canopy of the plant community called Degraded Native Forest by the MLCCS system. Bur oaks dominate this community in the park with basswood, American elm and box elder as subdominants. Ironwoods occasion the mid-story, but common buckthorn dominates. The forest floor contains a low diversity consisting primarily of common herbaceous weed species (burdock, garlic mustard, reed canary grass, woodbine, and raspberry) but does include a few native species such as sweet cicely, jewelweed, white snakeroot, and Pennsylvania sedge—all species that can withstand cattle overgrazing and earthworm invasion. These areas are

Figure 3.3 Vegetative Cover
ranked as medium ecological quality (defined below). They have formed from disturbed conditions (grazing) and contain a fair amount of buckthorn. Garlic mustard, a very aggressive, introduced herbaceous forest plant, has invaded throughout the park.

**Degraded Deciduous Forest (former old field)**
Since becoming a park, this young forest has formed on abandoned farm fields. Few native oaks have colonized these areas, likely because deer and rabbits heavily browse oak seedlings, and because buckthorn and earthworms suppress oak seedling growth. The forest canopy is almost exclusively comprised of box elder and black walnut. A grove of black locust (considered an invasive tree) occurs just south of the Dakota Lodge. Other tree species include silver maple, Siberian elm, green ash, black cherry, and hackberry. Large-sized common buckthorn and Tartarian honeysuckle were removed from the park in February of 2018. These species comprised a thicket in the woodland prior to their removal. The cut stumps, re-sprouts, and seedlings still exist, without additional management these invasive species will grow again to fill in the shrub layer. The buckthorn dominated understory is accompanied by a non-native herbaceous layer including species such as catmint, motherwort, creeping Charlie, burdock, and garlic mustard. This weedy forest is of low ecological value.

**Shoreline**
The shoreline of Thompson Lake has been disturbed over time by several factors including: bounce of the lake water level, invasive plant establishment and trampling by people. Efforts to restore the shoreline have paid off. Improvements should be continued to reduce erosion, to introduce native plant diversity, and to control invasive species. Narrowleaf cattail and reed canary grass dominate the shoreline communities, driving down plant diversity and degrading wildlife habitat.

**Developed**
The northern portion of the park has been developed for peoples’ active use. Lawn extends between buildings, parking lots and recreational areas. The turf is managed with herbicides and fertilizer. Raingardens have been installed to capture runoff from the parking lots in order to clean runoff before reaching Thompson Lake. Due to lack of weeding, these raingardens have become overrun with thistle and reed canary grass, and other aggressive weedy plants. The biodiversity and habitat value of developed areas is very low. In spite of this songbirds are found throughout this area, especially during migration in spring and fall.
Ecological Quality

A valuation of park ecological quality was based upon plant community integrity and the history of the site. Few native oak savanna plant species have survived the historic farming of the site, resulting in a legacy of degraded communities today which consist of an array of non-native, native, and invasive plant species growing upon disturbed soils. Nutrient cycles and hydrologic cycles were altered through agriculture, although they have had time to stabilize, but today are altered by urban landcover.

Ecological quality was assessed and each plant community type shown in figure Y was given a high, medium, or low ecological quality rating based on the following criteria:

**Figure 3.4 Ecological Quality Map**

**High**
Sites with little or no human disturbance, important to preserve. Less than five percent of the site covered with invasive plant species. Most natural processes are occurring, including disturbances such as fire or flooding, if appropriate. There is little or no evidence of human disturbances such as logging, grazing or soil compaction.

**Medium**
Sites with at least fifty percent of the vegetation native species. Invasive species occupy between five and forty percent of the site. Some human disturbance may be seen.

**Low**
Sites with a clear history of human disturbance occupied with greater than forty percent invasive species. Natural processes are disturbed such as altered soils through tilling or compaction, fire suppression, and altered hydrology.

**Wildlife**
A variety of urban wildlife inhabit the park. White-tail deer are the dominant large animal impacting the park through extensive browsing. Fox, rabbits, squirrel, woodchuck and raccoon have been also been observed in the park. It is likely that nocturnal animals such as bats and owls are utilizing different niches within the park. Species such as wild turkey
and mallard have utilized resources within the park to raise their young. A total of 71 species, of which 51 are Neotropical migratory birds have been observed in the park within the last four years (eBird, 2018). Waterfowl species observed at the park include the Canada goose, wood duck, mallard and hooded merganser. There were 47 passerine, 4 woodpecker, and 1 hummingbird species observed since 2014 within the park. Hawks and eagles such as the bald eagle, Cooper’s hawk, broad-winged hawk and red-tailed hawk frequently are observed. Various other types of birds such as pigeons and doves, loons, grebes, wading birds, cormorants, pelicans, and kingfishers have been observed at the park.

Fish Survey Results

Based on the Minnesota Department of Natural Resources (MNDNR) Thompson Lake stocking report, the latest stocking of fish occurred in 2017 with 100 adult channel catfish. Other species listed by MNDNR in Thompson Lake include: largemouth bass, bluegill, green sunfish, golden shiner, black crappie, and black bullhead. Bluegill adults have been continuously stocked from 2008 – 2016.

Water Resources

Thompson Lake

The watershed of Thompson Lake is 169 acres comprised of mixed urban land uses (residential, commercial and institutional). The inflows to Thompson Lake are primarily from stormwater. The outflow located at the south end of the lake is controlled by an adjustable outlet structure. At normal lake level a uniform low flow is allowed to pass-through the outlet structure, while at higher lake levels (due to storm events) higher flows are passed over the outlet structure. All lake outflows pass through a 42” storm sewer to Emerson Pond at the southwestern corner of the park. The Thompson Lake outflow discharges through Emerson Pond to a pipe that runs under Simon’s Ravine and under Highway 52, and eventually to the Mississippi River.

Erosion is occurring along the southeastern bank of Thompson Lake near Dakota Lodge due to heavy use by anglers. Vegetation that holds bank soil in place has been trampled and is slowly washing into the lake adding sediment and phosphorus to the lake.

Thompson Lake is impaired for recreational use due to excessive nutrients and salts, and is on the MPCA’s 2014 Impaired Waters list. A watershed restoration and protection strategies (WRAPS) study and total maximum daily load (TMDL) developed from 2012 to 2014 identified watershed runoff as the primary source of phosphorus to the lake; the TMDL identified a phosphorus waste load reduction of 30% necessary to achieve MPCA water quality standards.

A system of stormwater pre-treatment wetlands and a forebay structure is being constructed at the north end of the lake within Thompson Park. The project will treat stormwater runoff prior to discharge into Thompson Lake, thereby reducing phosphorus concentrations in the lake, which will result in improved lake clarity, and lead to removal from the Impaired Waters list. The project includes construction of a series of upland stormwater settling and infiltration areas that will treat runoff from 83% of the watershed (145
acres). The project will include sediment forebays at storm sewer outfalls, a stormwater wetland/pond, and a stormwater reuse irrigation system that draws water from the wetland and irrigates nearby parkland. Water quality modeling indicates that the proposed project will reduce phosphorus loading to the lake by 39%, achieving the waste load reduction identified in the TMDL. The project will provide additional public benefits including native habitat enhancement, education opportunities, trail improvements, and improved aesthetics.

**Emerson Pond**

Emerson pond occupies the southwestern corner of the park and treats stormwater runoff from the urban watershed, as well as water overflowing from Thompson Lake. The pond was designed with steep, deep slopes to properly accommodate the stormwater. These slopes are covered with degraded forest comprised mostly of non-native and invasive species. It provides some habitat value to songbirds and waterfowl, but has little value to people.

**Demographics**

The Demographic Analysis provides an understanding of service area populations for Thompson Park. For purposes of this analysis, two service areas were created for Thompson Park: a 16-square mile “primary” service area and a 134-square mile “expanded” service area as shown below. The analyses are reflective of the total population, and its key characteristics such as age segments, income levels, race, and ethnicity for each service area.

![Figure 3.5 Demographic Service Areas](image-url)
Primary Service Area

The “primary” service area’s population has experienced a slight growing trend in recent years and is currently estimated at 55,582 individuals. Projecting ahead, the total population is expected to continue to grow over the next 15 years. Based on predictions through 2033, the service area is expected to have 60,905 residents living within 24,560 households. With a 9.6% growth over the next 15 years, park and recreation services must continue to grow to keep up with the population.

Evaluating the population by age segments, the “primary” service area exhibits a fairly balanced distribution among the major age segments. This is significant as providing access to services and programs will need to be focused on multiple age segments simultaneously. This also may be challenging as age segments have different likings toward activities.

The overall age composition of the population within the service area is projected to undergo an aging trend. While most of the younger age segments are expected to remain the same or experience slight decreases in population percentage; those who are 55 and older are projected to continue increasing over the next 15 years, making up 34.6% of the population by 2033. This is assumed to be a consequence of a vast amount of the Baby Boomer generation shifting into the senior age segment. Given the differences in how the active adults (55 and older) participate in park programming, the County should evaluate park experiences that would cater to active adults who are 55-64, 65–74, and 75+ age segments.

In analyzing race, the “primary” service area’s current populations are predominately White Alone. The 2018 estimates show that 70% of the service area’s population falls into the White Alone category, while the Black Alone category (9%) represents the largest minority. The predictions for 2033 expect that the service area’s population by race will change in that White Alone will decrease by 11% while Black Alone will increase by 5% and the Asian segment will grow by 3%. In addition, based on the 2018 estimate, those of Hispanic/Latino origin represent 22% of the service area’s total population. The Hispanic/Latino population is expected to experience an increase of 7% to 29% by 2033. The slightly diversifying population means the County should continue to provide traditional and non-traditional programming and services while seeking to identify emerging activities.

The “primary” service area’s per capita and median household income levels are below, county, state and national averages. It is recommended, therefore, that the County prioritize providing offerings that are first class with exceptional customer service while de-emphasizing the need to create revenue generation.

Expanded Service Area

The “expanded” service area is similar to the “primary” service area in that it has been growing in recent years and is expected to continue to grow through 2033. In 2018, the “expanded” service area had a population of 215,643 people. It is expected to rise to more than 240,000 residents in the next 15 years. Also similar, the “expanded” service area exhibits a fairly balanced distribution among the major age segments with the largest segment being the 55+ with 28.8% of the population.

While the “expanded” and “primary” service areas are similar in their age distributions, the “expanded” service area is not as diverse as the “primary” service area around Thompson Park. Even with the slight difference in diversity, the County will still want to focus on providing traditional and non-traditional programming and service offering and seeking to identify emerging activities.

In contrast to the “primary” service area, per capita and median household income levels in the “expanded” service area are above county, state, and national averages. While for both the “primary” and “expanded” service area it will be important to provide first class offerings, the higher income for the “expanded” service area means that the County should explore opportunities to create revenue generation.
The 2018 estimates show that 70% of the service area's population falls into the White Alone category. Based on the 2018 estimate, those of Hispanic/Latino origin represent 11% of the service area's total population. In analyzing race, the neighborhood service area's current populations are predominately White Alone. The Hispanic/Latino population is expected to experience an increase of 4% to 15% by 2033. The projections for 2033 expect that the service area's population by race will change in that White Alone will decrease by 10% while Black Alone will decrease by 11% while Black Alone category (8%) represents the largest minority. The Asian segment will grow by 2%.

The overall age composition of the population within the service area is projected to undergo an aging trend. While most of the younger age segments are expected to remain the same or experience slight decreases in population percentage; those who are 55 and older are projected to continue increasing over the next 15 years, making up 36.9% of the population by 2033. This is assumed to be a consequence of a vast amount of the Baby Boomer generation shifting into the senior age segment. Evaluating the population by age segments, the neighborhood service area exhibits a fairly balanced distribution among the major age segments. Currently, the largest age segment is the 55+, making up 29.7% of the population.

Given the differences in how the active adults (55 and older) participate in park programming, the County should evaluate park experiences that would be fitting for this age group. Developing the park and recreation system, the County should consider incorporating age-appropriate activities and facilities to cater to the needs of the aging population. The active adults are expected to outnumber the children and youth in the service area by 2033, with those aged 55+ making up 36.9% of the population. This shift in demographics highlights the importance of creating inclusive and accessible spaces for older adults, ensuring that they have opportunities to engage in meaningful activities and maintain an active lifestyle. When developing the park and recreation system, the County should evaluate park experiences that would be fitting for this age group. This includes considerations such as accessibility, health and wellness programs, and social engagement opportunities to cater to the needs of the active adults.
Phase 1 Community Engagement Summary

Community engagement events for the first phase of the Thompson County Park Master Plan were held in June through October 2018. The purpose of the events was to engage a representative cross section of Dakota County residents, park users, and stakeholder organizations to collect meaningful input, build consensus, and generate interest for the park master planning process. The project team was especially mindful of reaching out to those who may live around the park but are not park users.

In total, there were more than a dozen engagement activities with nearly 1,000 people engaged. Events were conducted using various formats including pop-ups at existing community events, individual and agency meetings, stakeholder meetings, and emails and phone calls. Two online surveys were also conducted: a general survey was conducted on Social Pinpoint in English and Spanish and a Survey Monkey survey was sent to past renters of the North Picnic Shelter and Dakota Lodge. Event locations, date, and target populations are shown in Table 1 on the next page.

In addition to participating in local events, information about the planning process was distributed to residents in West St. Paul, South St. Paul, and Inver Grove Heights. Approximately 700 flyers were distributed to be included in block party packets for the August 2018 Night to Unite. A letter was also sent to approximately 500 residents who live around the park.

Key Themes

Below is a summary of the key themes from the Phase 1 engagement events. This summary encompasses the survey results, stakeholder meetings, one-on-one conversations with staff, and input from the pop-up events.

Overall, the community outreach indicates that Thompson County Park is well loved. The setting, mixture of activities, and shelter/lodge rental bring a wide range of people to the park. Regular park users, as may be indicated from the Social Pinpoint results, likely come on a weekly to monthly basis. Outside of events and programming at the Activity Center, draws of Thompson County Park include walking/hiking, being in nature, picnicking, and using the playground. While Thompson County Park is nestled in an urban neighborhood, the majority of park users still come via car rather than on foot or bike. The following are major themes heard from input:

- Retention and improvement of the natural areas - The natural areas were cited by existing park users as an amenity to preserve, maintain, and improve. This includes water quality in Thompson Lake, as well as the southern half of the park.

- Recreational use of the lake - Park users were interested in expanded use of the lake through additional fishing opportunities and small craft rental of paddleboards or kayaks. There was also a desire to preserve views of the lake from seating areas.

- Expanded recreation - Users would like more to do at the park. Examples of the types of activities suggested include splash pad or mister, nature
### Table 3.1 Community Engagement Events Summary

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>DATE</th>
<th>MEETING/EVENT</th>
<th>EST. ATTENDANCE</th>
<th>DEMOGRAPHICS</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>May 16, 2018</td>
<td>West St. Paul Days - City of WSP Open House</td>
<td>50</td>
<td>General community - Northern DC</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>May 20, 2016</td>
<td>West St. Paul Days - Harmon Park Festival</td>
<td>50</td>
<td>General community - Northern DC</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>June 10, 2018</td>
<td>Take a Kid Fishing (12-3) - Thompson</td>
<td>350</td>
<td>Kids 5-10 and parents/grandparents</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>June 24, 2018</td>
<td>Kaposia Days South St. Paul</td>
<td>25</td>
<td>General community - Northern DC</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>July 11, 2018</td>
<td>Garlough Collaborative (1-3) - Southview</td>
<td>30</td>
<td>Kids 5-15 and parents/grandparents, Latino, WSP</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>July 23, 2018</td>
<td>Staff Kick Off and Tour</td>
<td>20</td>
<td>Staff: Dakota County, WSP, SSP, St. Croix Lutheran, TPAC</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>July 23, 2018</td>
<td>Stakeholder Meetings</td>
<td>20</td>
<td>Community organizations - Northern DC</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>July 25, 2018</td>
<td>Thompson Activity Center - Ice Cream Social</td>
<td>25</td>
<td>Older adults, Activity Center users</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>July 26, 2018</td>
<td>Thompson Park Advisory Council</td>
<td>10</td>
<td>Older adults, Activity Center users</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>August 7, 2018</td>
<td>Night to Unite WSP, SSP, and IGH; can develop 'insert' for block parties</td>
<td>700 distributed</td>
<td>Approximately 700 Flyers distributed in block party packets for WSP, SSP, IGH. Spanish and English for WSP, SSP</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>August 6-12, 2018</td>
<td>Dakota County Fair, NRMP display in NR building - not staffed</td>
<td>5 comments received</td>
<td>General community</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>August, 2018</td>
<td>Letter sent to nearby residents</td>
<td>500 sent</td>
<td>Surrounding park neighborhood</td>
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<tr>
<td>August 23, 2018</td>
<td>Safe Summer Nights - Southview</td>
<td>75</td>
<td>All ages, Latino, WSP</td>
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<tr>
<td>August 24, 2018</td>
<td>Meeting with TCP adjacent landowner</td>
<td>1</td>
<td>Existing park user</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>July - August 2018</td>
<td>Email with survey link to past North Picnic Shelter and Dakota Lodge renters</td>
<td>61</td>
<td>Representatives of those who rented the North Picnic Shelter or Dakota Lodge</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>July to August 2018</td>
<td>Social Pinpoint Website</td>
<td>296</td>
<td>There were 93 surveys completed and 32 comments posted</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>September 6, 2018</td>
<td>Meeting with CLUES</td>
<td>1</td>
<td>Community organizations - Northern DC, Latino, Older Adults</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>September 14, 2018</td>
<td>Accessibility and Inclusion Walk</td>
<td>4</td>
<td>People living with disabilities and their families</td>
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<tr>
<td>October 9, 2018</td>
<td>Dakota County Public Art Citizen Advisory Committee</td>
<td>11</td>
<td>Community organizations - General DC</td>
</tr>
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The full community engagement summary is available at [https://www.co.dakota.mn.us/parks/Planning/ParkPlans/Documents/Phase1CommunityEngagementSummary.pdf](https://www.co.dakota.mn.us/parks/Planning/ParkPlans/Documents/Phase1CommunityEngagementSummary.pdf)
ninja course, nature play area, zipline, rock wall, outdoor workout stations, and community garden.

» Resolve parking confusion and safety concerns – Park users indicated that there is confusion about where to park and how to safely move from the upper parking area to the Thompson Park Center. This concern is particularly cited by Thompson Activity Center users, though it was also heard in the Survey Monkey survey that went to those who had previously rented the North Picnic Shelter or Dakota Lodge.

» Visitor amenities - Input identified a number of wishes to improve the park experience, including more picnic tables and BBQs; shade for the playground; small craft rental; equipment check-out for geocaching or lawn games; trail markers; wayfinding; benches; water fountains; port-a-potties; and nature interpretation.

» Focus on accessibility - Many of the conversations in the first phase identified opportunities for improved accessibility. This is likely the results of many factors, including having the Activity Center in the park, its relatively flat topography in the main activity area, and its role for community gathering. This theme is of particular interest to older adults and those living with disabilities. An accessibility and inclusion walk provided a lot of detailed information in the areas of trails, parking, restrooms, playground, seating, shade, wayfinding, events, and maintenance.

» Expanded winter use - a few expressed a desire for groomed ski trails and snowshoe rental so there could be more use of the park in the winter.

» More events - Input indicates an interest in more inter-generational events, family events, and events designed for those with special needs.

» Park maintenance improvements - Some identified an overall need for park clean-up. Others suggested improvements that would assist with maintaining the park's appearance such as dog waste stations and more recycling and trash receptacles.

» Continue to expand partnerships – Attendees at stakeholder meetings expressed interest and discussed ideas for potential partnership opportunities.
Issues and Opportunities

The following list of issues and opportunities was assembled from the community engagement process, demographic and recreation trends, assessment of existing conditions, Dakota County Staff, key stakeholders, and the general public. These statements inform the vision, guiding principles, and the development of concepts.

**Issues**

**Access, Circulation and Wayfinding**

» There is confusion regarding Thompson Park’s location as it is not on Thompson Avenue, a street in West St. Paul less than a mile to the south of the park.

» Other than at the main entrance on Butler, entrances into the park are not clearly identifiable or welcoming.

» There is limited public transit to the park.

» Visitors are confused about the purpose of and access to the different parts of Thompson Park Center - Dakota Lodge and the Thompson Activity Center.

» Parking is limited, particularly in the main lot.

» Sidewalks on Butler Avenue leading to the park are missing.

» Wayfinding is limited, particularly in the natural area of the park.

**Natural Resources**

» The natural resources of the park have low biodiversity and are degraded.

» There is poor water quality in Thompson Lake.

» There is no water access for either swimming or paddling Thompson Lake.

» Highway noise from Highway 52 diminishes the natural setting.

**Social Gathering**

» There are limited public gathering spaces if the picnic shelter and Dakota Lodge are rented.

» Gathering area for parents near the playground is small.

**Recreation**

» The playground does not function as well as it could- equipment gets hot, trash receptacles are frequently full, the play area lacks accessible equipment, there are not enough picnic tables within view, and it is disconnected from the shelter, which is challenging for group events.

» The lake loop trail is not fully accessible.

» Aside from natural surface trails, there are no facilities on the south end of the park.
Education
» Limited outdoor education or interpretation offered.

Park Use
» A perceived lack of safety in the south end of park may limit use and exploration.
» There is a clear divide between the developed and the natural areas of the park. Many park visitors are not aware of the natural areas and trails.
» The River to River Greenway is visually disconnected from the parking area and trailhead support facilities.

Demographics
» Though the demographics of the surrounding community include a higher percentage of Latinos, South Asian Indians, African Americans, Vietnamese, and Somalis than Dakota County overall, these demographic groups are underrepresented in Thompson County Park visitorship. The County needs to continue to build relationships with these groups and strive to diversify offerings to meet their needs and interests.
» The surrounding community has relatively even percentages of older adults, adults, youth, and children. The park will need to appeal to all ages, which can be challenging as different age segments have different preferences.
» Incomes in the surrounding community are lower than Dakota County overall. This may limit the County’s ability to generate revenues.
» Many parts of the park are not accessible to people living with disabilities and older adults.

Opportunities
Retain Natural Resources as Foundational
» Continue to restore and expand savanna habitat.
» Continue to remove invasive species like buckthorn and garlic mustard.
» Maintain the quality of native forest where it still exists.
» Offer educational natural resource programming where the already disturbed environment allows access that would be damaging in a more pristine ecological setting.
» Landscape buffering or a sound wall along Highway 52 would reduce noise impacts and has the potential to provide ecological benefits.

Increase Interaction with Thompson Lake
» Continue to restore shoreline habitat. Give consideration to how to improve visual connections to the lake.
» Increase fishing access.
» Improve the visual connection from Thompson Park Center, the playground, and other adjacent facilities.
» Offer rental equipment (fishing poles, paddle boards, kayaks, canoes, etc.)

» Explore daylighting of the lake outlet.

**Utilize the Entire Park**

» Poor habitat quality means areas like the degraded deciduous forest could be developed for recreation or transitioned to another habitat type with little ecological impact.

» Ensure the park provides a year-round experience.

» Implement safety improvements in the parking lot, at park access points, and within the natural areas.

» Add restrooms on the park’s south end.

» Expand the recreational offerings to provide more for visitors to do during their visit.

» Improve park accessibility and inclusiveness.

» Make the play area more inclusive, expanding opportunities for different types of play, and improve its day-to-day function.

» Expand picnic amenities (shelters, grills, picnic tables) throughout the park.

» Expand the Thompson Park Center to include a bigger room for exercise classes, small interview space, and a modified registration window. Create an indoor-outdoor experience.

» There is space available to expand recreation offerings, especially those that are not available nearby (including a splash pad/water play, nature/adventure playground, archery, paddle sports, cross-country skiing, or swimming).

» Offer equipment rental (fishing poles, snowshoes, paddle boards, kayaks/canoes, geocaching gps, bike-share).

**Ensure the Park Serves the Community**

» Thompson Park’s location in a densely populated and diverse area means that the park offers nearby residents, who may few opportunities to experience natural areas, a great place to learn about and experience the outdoors in a low risk, approachable setting.

» Establish strong connections to underrepresented communities.

» Improve physical and psychological accessibility within the park on multiple fronts by providing multi-lingual signage, inclusive programming, and ADA trails with adequate seating.

» Promote cross-generational programming in partnership with the Thompson Park Activity Center (grandparent-grandkid programs, etc.).

» Explore the land’s history through interactive and educational interpretation and programming.

» Pursue opportunities to integrate the arts into the park and its programs.
as a vehicle for cultural and natural resource interpretation.

Contribute to Regional Systems

» Improve the park’s function as a trailhead for the River to River Greenway.

» Implement clear signage and access to the River to River Greenway from Thompson Park’s entrance.

» The River to River Greenway is an ecological asset for Dakota County as much as a recreational amenity. Thompson Park should provide beneficial habitat that complements and adds value to the Greenway’s function as an ecological corridor.

» Collaborate with the City of West St. Paul the Lower Mississippi River Watershed Management to improve the greater watershed and reduce impacts of the watershed on Thompson Park and Lake.

» Further park connections and partnerships with St. Croix Lutheran and South St. Paul’s Kaposia Park.

» Improve and integrate the park’s ecological habitats with the larger greenway extending to the Mississippi River.

Increase Collaboration and Expand Partnerships

» Incorporate more volunteer opportunities into program offerings at the Thompson Park Activity Center, especially for citizen science, restoration, and vegetation management.

» Work with the parks and recreation department in the City of South St. Paul in order to ensure complementary recreation offerings and amenities at Kaposia Park, and cross-promote the parks.

» Expand use of Dakota Lodge during the week by marketing to community groups.

» Expand community programming like music or movies in the park, cultural celebrations, etc.

» Continue to expand partnerships with community organizations to develop new programming, events, and recreational opportunities.
Vision and Guiding Principles

The Vision Statement and Guiding Principles set the stage for concept development and initiatives. The Vision describes what the park will be in the future ten to twenty years, while the Guiding Principles suggest how park improvements and operations will achieve that vision.

**Vision Statement**

Thompson County Park is a 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**

1. Create a welcoming and safe environment
2. Provide activity and purpose year round
3. Promote social gathering
4. Connect the community to the park
5. Enhance the lake as a focal point
6. Improve natural systems within the park and beyond the park’s boundaries
7. Inspire learning
8. Expand and strengthen partnerships
9. Implement strategies for ongoing community feedback
10. Reduce barriers to park access and use