2050 VISION PLAN

DAKOTA COUNTY PARKS, GREENWAYS, AND NATURAL SYSTEMS

Nature Protected, Community Reflected, All Are Connected

Dakota
COUNTY

forever wild
PARKS

LETTER FROM THE DIRECTOR

Dear Dakota County Residents and Park Visitors,

It is with great enthusiasm that I share the 2050 Vision Plan for Dakota County Parks, Greenways, and Natural Systems. As the Director of Dakota County Parks, I have the privilege of witnessing firsthand the transformative power of parks, trails, and natural lands when they become interwoven with the life of our communities. This plan represents a bold step forward in ensuring that our cherished green spaces and our connections to them remain vibrant and relevant for generations to come.

Dakota County is home to some of Minnesota's most treasured natural landscapes. From the scenic and meandering greenways that connect communities to our beautiful rivers and lakes to the signature outdoor recreation opportunities at each park and park reserve, to the prairies and woodlands being restored and maintained throughout the system, and to the ecological impacts of dozens of conservation areas, our system is rooted in service to all. These cherished places are where families gather, individuals find peace, and communities thrive. It is critical that, as our residents evolve and the needs of our environment change, we take a proactive approach to protect and enhance these resources.

The 2050 Vision Plan is more than just a road map; it is a promise to you—a commitment to stewardship, belonging, sustainability, innovation, and fun! It has been carefully crafted with input from community members, stakeholders, staff and volunteers, and experts who share a deep passion for our parks, greenways, and natural lands. Together, we have envisioned a system that not only meets the needs of today but anticipates the opportunities and challenges of tomorrow.

This vision is ambitious, but it is also achievable. It will require collaboration, creativity, and a shared commitment from all of us. Over the coming months and years, you will see these ideas come to life. Your input and support will continue to be invaluable as we move forward together.

I want to thank each of you who contributed your ideas, shared your experiences, and voiced your hopes for the future. Your passion and dedication are the foundation of this plan. As we embark on this journey, I invite all Dakota County residents and visitors to take an active role in shaping our parks. Whether you're attending public meetings, participating in volunteer programs, or simply exploring and enjoying our outdoor recreation spaces, your involvement makes a difference.

Our parks are more than just places—they are reflections of who we are and what we value. They remind us of the importance of preserving and connecting with our natural and world, fostering community, and creating opportunities for health and happiness. Together, we can continue to create a park system that inspires pride and serves as a model for communities across the nation.

On behalf of Dakota County elected and appointed officials and the amazing staff team from multiple departments that have contributed to the vision plan, I thank you for your continued support and enthusiasm. I look forward to working with all of you as we bring this vision to life and ensure that Dakota County remains a vibrant, thriving place for all.

With Gratitude and Optimism,

Niki Geisler
Director of Parks
Dakota County, Minnesota

CREDITS & CONTENT

CREDITS

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PROJECT TEAM

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Tribal Engagement:
Full Circle Indigenous Planning + Design

DAKOTA COUNTY BOARD OF COMMISSIONERS

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District 4 - William (Bill) Droste

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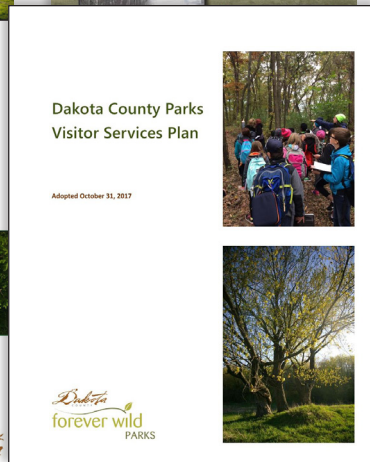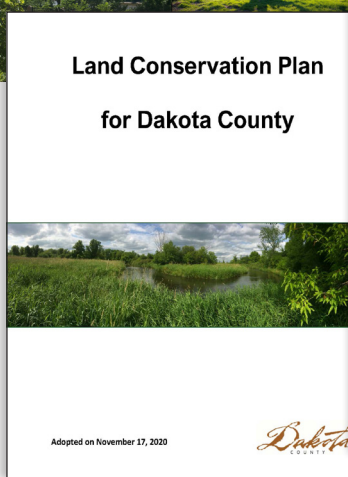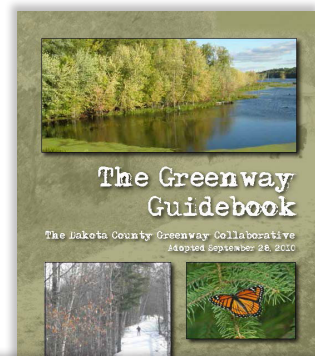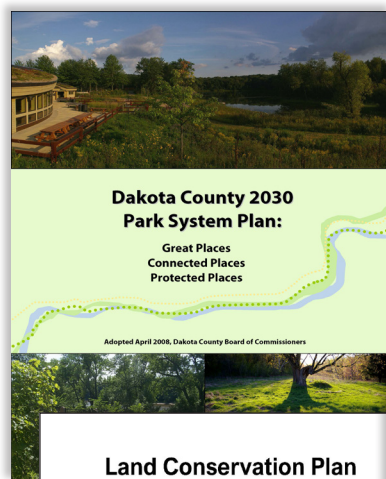
Kelly Kausel

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INTRODUCTION

During its 50+ year history, the Dakota County Parks System has played a pivotal role in protecting and stewarding lands, enhancing environmental quality, developing and caring for recreational facilities, and serving residents and visitors through access to the outdoors and nature-based recreation. Community members routinely share that the work of Dakota County Parks is fundamental to their quality of life. The system operates in a diverse and dynamic environment, serving a wide range of stakeholders with varying interests. The lands and services of Dakota County Parks are emblems of community desirability as a great place to live, a healthy environment, and a robust atmosphere for business and jobs. Dakota County parks are a reflection of the overall mission.

This expansive scope is no accident. From the start of the county park system, Dakota County visionaries recognized the importance of knitting together sensitive landscapes into a tapestry of protected lands that strengthen an ecological footing, provide recreation, and protect the inherent qualities that make life in Dakota County special. Linking conservation and natural areas with parks, greenways and partner agency lands has grown into a powerful recipe for environmental impact, recreational value, and quality of life.

Dakota County is one of ten regional park implementing agencies across the Twin Cities metropolitan area. As a result, the County derives some of its park funding through the State and Metropolitan Council. In return, Dakota County protects, develops, and programs its designated "regional" facilities according to certain parameters established for regional facilities.

The 2008 Park System Plan (which will be superseded by this 2050 Vision Plan) and other foundational plans including the Greenway Guidebook, Land Conservation Plan, Natural Resources Management Plan, and Visitor Services Plan form the basis for the 2050 Vision Plan. They, themselves are rooted in deep and visionary work that continues to guide and shape the physical system of parks, greenways, and natural areas as well as their operation and programming.

This plan looks to the next 25 years, suggesting how community values continue to shape an evolving vision for Dakota County's park system, greenway system, and natural system.

Dakota County 2030 Park System Plan:

Great Places
Connected Places
Protected Places

Adopted April 2008, Dakota County Board of Commissioners

The Greenway Guidebook

The Dakota County Greenway Collaborative
Adopted September 28, 2010

Land Conservation Plan

for Dakota County

Adopted on November 17, 2020

Dakota County Parks Visitor Services Plan

Adopted October 31, 2017

forever wild PARKS

> *"Across its 50+ year history, the Dakota County Parks System has played a pivotal role in stewarding lands and serving residents through access to the outdoors and nature-based recreation."*

VISITORSHIP

Since their inception, Dakota County Parks have become an integral part of County life. Park visitation has increased significantly in the last decade.

- Parks welcomed 2,919,323 visits in 2022.
- Participation in events increased by 3,000 people from 2019 to 2023.
- From 2008 to 2022 park and greenway visits increased 220.5%.

FROM 2008 - 2022 PARK VISITATION INCREASED 220.5%

Exhibit 1.1, Park Visitation 2008 - 2022
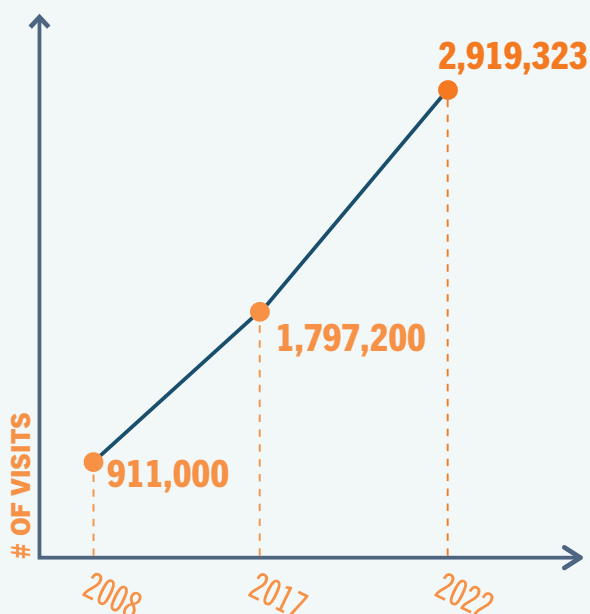
COMMUNITY ENGAGEMENT

Community members show their appreciation for the parks. Since 2017, the number of volunteers and volunteer hours have significantly increased.

- **2019** volunteer hours increased by 2,000 hours from previous years to 6,000 hours.
- **2020 - 2022** The number of volunteer hours dropped during the COVID-19 pandemic. In 2022, 605 volunteers assisted with native plant seed collection / growing / planting, surveyed wildlife, and served as landscape stewards.
- **2023 - 2024** Volunteer hours rebounded to 5,328 by 2023.
- Volunteers and restoration crews teamed to plant 1,500 linear feet of shoreline.

RESOURCES

Dakota County maintains 6,280 acres of parkland and 48 miles of greenway.

Other Resources include:

- **270 acres** of Park Conservation Areas.
- **over 11,000 acres of farmland and natural areas** protected on private property including 96 miles of shoreline buffers.

THE PARK SYSTEM TODAY

The previous version of the Park System Plan completed in 2008, established a theme and organizational structure around "Great Places", "Connected Places", and "Protected Places". While the 2050 Vision Plan moves beyond these themes, they remain a great organizational tool for describing Dakota County's impressive system of lands, facilities, programs, and services.

ACRES RESTORED AND MANAGED
TO DATE - 2024

- ○ RESTORED
- ● RESTORATION IN PROGRESS
- ● MANAGE HIGHLY INVASIVE
- ○ STABILIZED
- ○ YET TO BE RESTORED

*Includes all Dakota County Park PCA's, and Greenways (5,508 acres)

0.1%

11% 5.8%

43.5%

39.6%
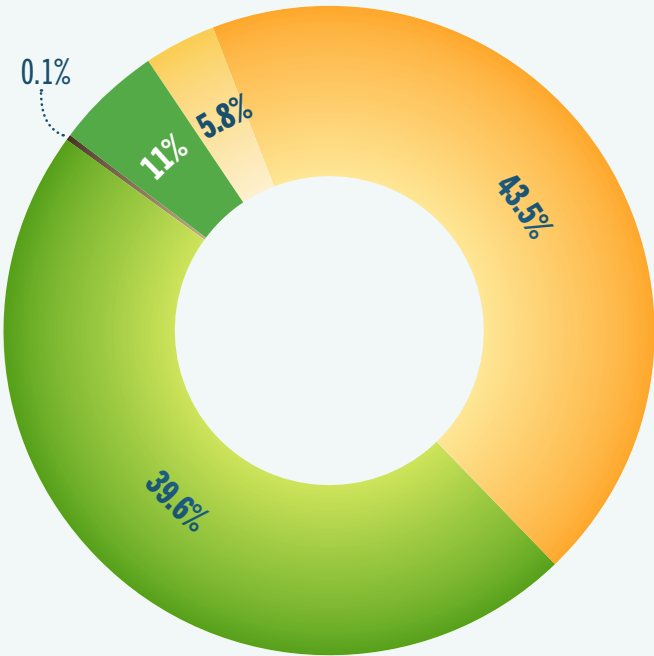
Exhibit 1.2, Acres Restored and Managed

GREAT PLACES:

In 2025, the Dakota County park system includes three regional parks, two regional park reserves, one county park, one dog park, seven greenways, nine county park conservation areas, and 126 conservation easements.

- **Land**
  - 6,280 acres of parkland.
  - 9 county park conservation areas, totaling 270 acres have been added since 2016.

- **Improvements that provide four seasons of recreation**
  - 34 buildings totalling roughly 80,000 sf.
  - 176 campsites.
      Lebanon Hills (93 sites)
      Lake Byllesby (83 sites)
  - 5 camper cabins (Whitetail Woods).
  - Six playgrounds / nature play areas.
  - Two swimming beaches.
  - 1 dog park.
  - 1 community garden.

- **Unique experiences**
  - Camper cabins at Whitetail Woods Regional Park.
  - Reintroduced bison herd at Sprink Lake Park Reserve.
  - Mountain bike trails at Lebanon Hills are revered state-wide.
  - YMCA day camp at Spring Lake Park Reserve.

CONNECTED PLACES:

The park system currently includes seven multi-purpose regional greenways, totaling, roughly 25 percent of the 200-mile vision for greenways expressed in this plan. Greenway usage now constitutes nearly 40 percent of the total park system visitation.

- 48 miles of greenway trails.

- There have been more than twenty active collaborations with city, state, and federal agencies to construct greenways.

- Tunnels and bridges across major roadways have been constructed for user enjoyment and safety.

- Greenway Natural Resource Management Plans (NRMPs) have been developed for four corridors.

- Habitat improvements within greenways include 62 acres of native vegetation restoration and 84 acres of stabilization.

PROTECTED PLACES:

In addition to parks, greenways and conservation areas, the County has worked with numerous public agencies and private landowners to protect and improve other important areas.

- Partnered with cities and the Minnesota DNR to protect 2,264 acres of high ecological value.

- Acquired 71 agricultural easements totaling 7,812 acres, including 1,391 acres of habitat.

- Acquired 55 natural area easements totaling 2,002 acres of habitat.

- Together, more than 96 miles of shoreland has now been protected through conservation easements.

- **Within parks, greenways and conservation areas**
  - 1,434 acres of vegetation have been restored from 2017 - 2023.
  - 35 habitat restoration projects have improved habitat for rare species.
  - Highly invasive plant species were eradicated from 324 acres just in 2023.

DAKOTA COUNTY'S SPECTRUM OF LANDS

NATURE BASED RECREATION

HUNTING / FISHING

PROTECTION / SCENIC

- national wildlife refuge
- state parks
- federal waterfowl production area
- state water access
- state fishing access
- state wildlife management area
- state aquatic management area
- state scientific & natural area
- state wetland bank system
- county wetland bank system

LAND CONSERVATION EASEMENTS

Conservation easements primarily provide protection of natural and open space on private lands. The easements protect waterways and provide scenic natural areas across the county. Limited public access or recreation may be permitted depending on the specific agreement.

COUNTY PARK CONSERVATION AREA

Park Conservation Areas reserve areas of natural quality such as watercourses, wetlands, groundwater recharge areas, areas of high quality habitat or rare species, and areas of high potential for restoration to high quality habitat for environmental benefit and/or natural resource-based recreation. Currently, County Park Conservation Areas must have provision for public access.

REGIONAL PARK RESERVE (regional funding eligible)

Park Reserves protect significant natural resources while providing nature-oriented outdoor recreation such as viewing and studying nature, wildlife habitat, swimming, picnicking, hiking, boating, camping, and trail uses. 80% of the Reserve must be managed as natural lands ensuring that the majority of the area remains in a natural state.

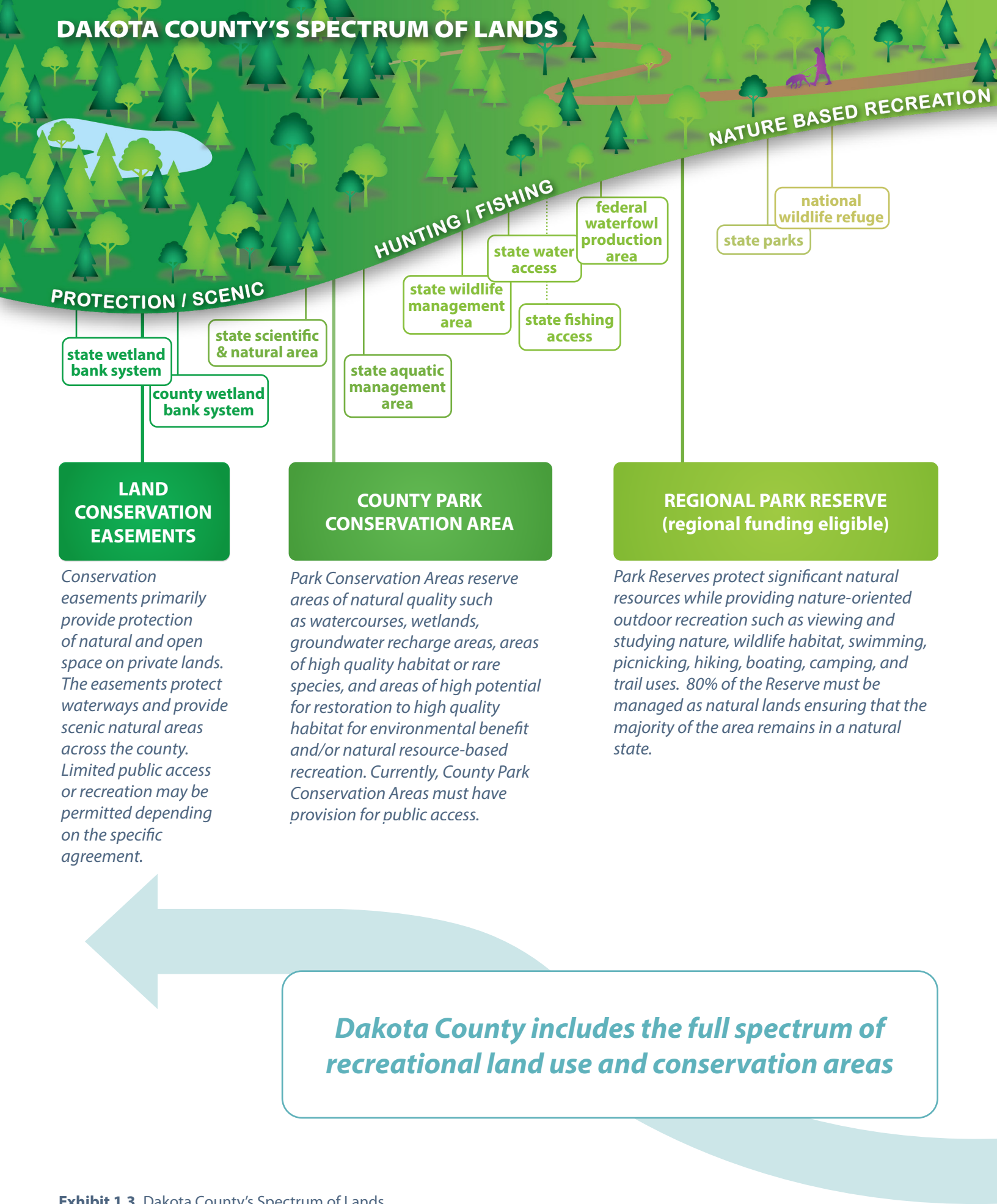### Dakota County includes the full spectrum of recreational land use and conservation areas

Exhibit 1.3, Dakota County's Spectrum of Lands
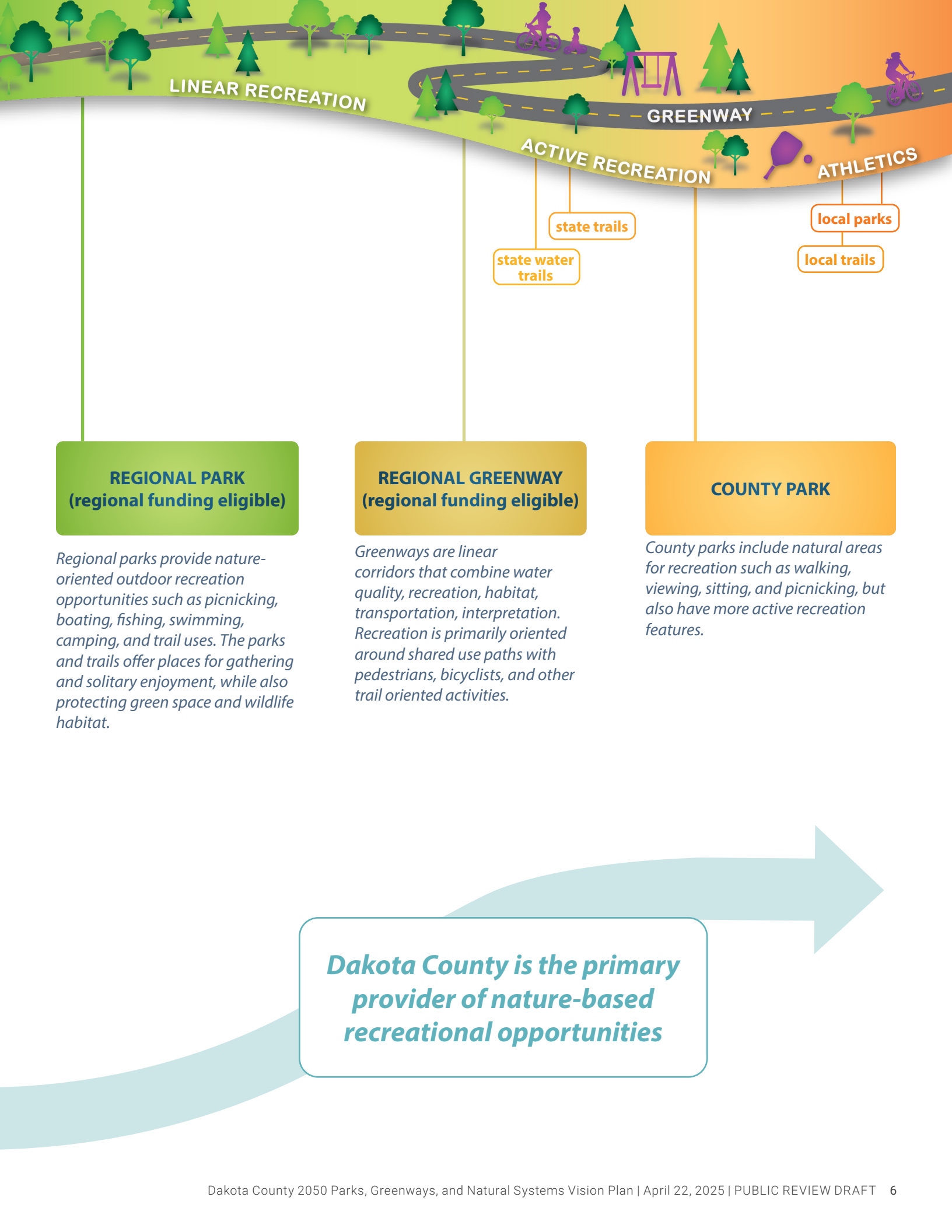
LINEAR RECREATION

GREENWAY

ACTIVE RECREATION

ATHLETICS

state trails

state water trails

local parks

local trails

REGIONAL PARK
(regional funding eligible)

Regional parks provide nature-oriented outdoor recreation opportunities such as picnicking, boating, fishing, swimming, camping, and trail uses. The parks and trails offer places for gathering and solitary enjoyment, while also protecting green space and wildlife habitat.

REGIONAL GREENWAY
(regional funding eligible)

Greenways are linear corridors that combine water quality, recreation, habitat, transportation, interpretation. Recreation is primarily oriented around shared use paths with pedestrians, bicyclists, and other trail oriented activities.

COUNTY PARK

County parks include natural areas for recreation such as walking, viewing, sitting, and picnicking, but also have more active recreation features.

Dakota County is the primary provider of nature-based recreational opportunities

DAKOTA COUNTY ROLE AMONG AGENCY LANDS

As Exhibit 1.3 illustrates, Dakota County operates alongside and often in partnership with local, state, and federal agencies and private landowners to protect important lands and thoughtfully provide public access to the outdoors. Understanding the context of land protection and recreation helps Dakota County focus their efforts in areas not duplicated by others, so collectively, the greatest value is achieved.

From land conservation to specialized park spaces, Dakota County provides an impressive spectrum of natural resource stewardship and nature-based recreation. Dakota County occupies a unique role as the primary provider in the County of nature-based recreation. Dakota County, however, does not operate in a vaccuum. There are many non-county land protection and recreation providers including:

AGENCY LANDS

Federally Managed Land

- **Minnesota Valley National Wildlife Refuge** is managed by the U.S. Fish and Wildlife Service for the purpose of conserving wildlife and offering connection, education opportunities, and recreational experiences.
- **Mississippi National River and Recreation Area** is managed by the National Park Service in minimal land ownership and works in partnership with state and local governments to protect the natural and cultural history of the river and to provide assistance and visitor services.
- **Waterfowl Production Area** managed by the U.S. Fish and Wildlife Service to protect important wildlife habitat.

State Managed Land

Minnesota Department of Natural Resources (DNR)

- **Aquatic Management Areas (AMA):** Publicly accessible waters managed to provide angler/habitat management, and education/research.

- **Fishing Access Sites:** Cooperation with local units of government to install and maintain accessible fishing piers and shore fishing sites.
- **Scientific and Natural Areas (SNA):** Publicly accessible lands that provide recreational opportunities primarily for hunters and trappers, including small game, big game and waterfowl.
- **State Parks:** Land for the preservation of natural and cultural areas and nature-based recreational opportunities.
- **State Trails:** Public trails offering a variety of activities such as biking, hiking, horseback riding, mountain biking, and winter recreation.
- **State Water Trails:** Boating routes on lakes and rivers for canoeing, kayaking, and paddle boarding.
- **Wildlife Management Areas (WMA):** Lands managed for nature-based recreation that does not disturb natural conditions.
- **Water Access Sites:** Cooperation with local governments to install and maintain public boat launches and carry-in water access sites.

Minnesota Board of Soil and Water Resources

- **State Wetland Bank Easements:** Conservation easements fulfilling wetland bank and some project-specific wetland replacement requirements.

Locally Managed Land

- **City Parks:** Local parks that serve a broad range of active recreational needs at the neighborhood, community, and regional scales plus many park areas devoted to natural settings.
- **Private Institutional:** Corporate and individual ownership that may provide some level of public recreational use.
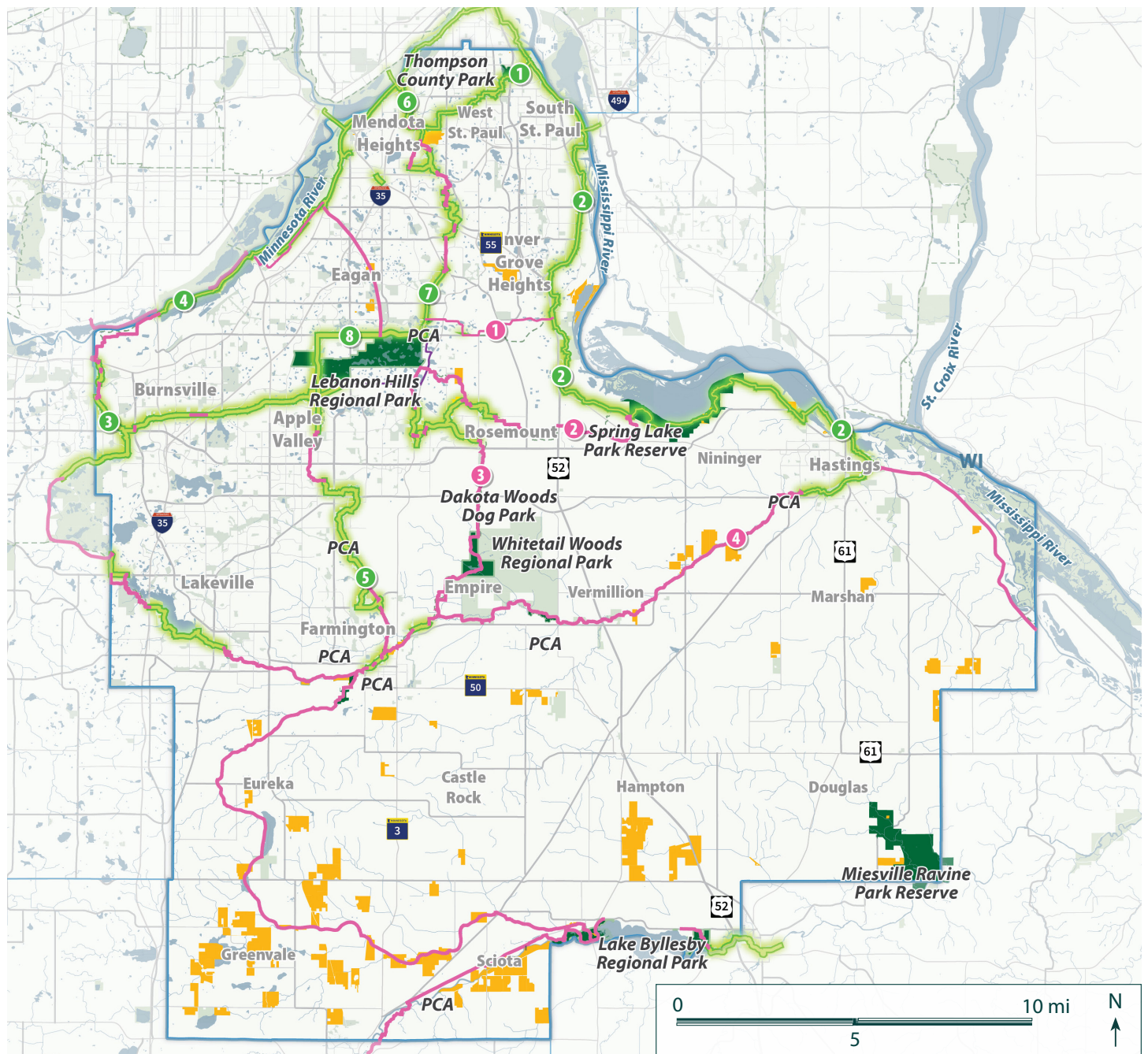
LEGEND

⊥ Reserves, Regional Parks, and County Park

PCA Park Conservation Areas (PCA)

▪ Conservation Easements

▪ Non-County Public Lands

- - - Non-County Trails

━━ Existing/In Development County Greenways

① River to River

② Mississippi River

③ Lake Marion

④ Minnesota River

⑤ North Creek

⑥ Big Rivers Regional Trail

⑦ Lebanon Hills

⑧ Greenway Linking Route

━━ 2030 Greenway Vision

① Veterans Memorial Greenway

② Rosemount Greenway

③ Vermillion Highlands Greenway

④ Vermilion River Greenway

━━ Greenway Linking Route

LOCAL (NON-COUNTY) NATURE-BASED PARKS IN DAKOTA COUNTY

Apple Valley:

- **Alimagnet Park:** Grills, canoe launch, disc golf, volleyball court, trail, picnic shelter and tables, playground.

  - Summer camps, watercraft racks rental (for canoes, kayaks, and sailboards)

Burnsville:

- **Terrace Oaks Park** - East & West: Paved and natural trails, outdoor skating rink, picnic area, playground, softball/baseball fields, tennis courts, warming house/ski chalet, basketball court, mountain bike trails, nature play area.

  - Youth paddle boarding

Eagan:

- **Holz Farm:** Events and festivals, self-guided tour, ball field, hard court, playground, canoe launch, walking path.

- **Walnut Hill Park:** Archery range, hard court, charcoal grill, walking trail, play fields, playground.

- **Patrick Eagan Park:** hiking trail, walking path, Eagan Art House, sun shelter, nature playground.

- **Thomas Lake Park:** walking trails, sun shelter, nature prairie, canoe launch and rack, charcoal grill, fire ring, cross-country ski trail, sand volleyball, fishing dock, pavilion.

- **Trapp Farm Park:** shelter building with fireplace, pavilion, Tubing Hill, amphitheater, sand volleyball court, charcoal grill, canoe launch, fishing dock, playground, walking path.

  - Lakefest - fishing clinic with food vendors and pond life display.

Farmington:

- **Distad Park & Greenway:** Basketball, hard surface trail, hockey, ice skating, picnic tables, playground, warming house.

- **Rambling River Park:** Fishing, grills, hard surface trail, hockey, ice skating, picnic shelter and tables, playground, warming house, tennis.

- **Prairie Waterway Greenway:** Fishing, hard surface trail, picnic shelter and tables.

- **Meadow View Park:** Ball fields, basketball, boardwalk trails, grills, hard surface trail, picnic shelter and tables, playground.

- **Vermillion Grove Park:** Boardwalk trail, climbing boulder, grills, hard surface trail, picnic shelter and tables, playground.

- **Jim Bell Park and Preserve:** Basketball, hard surface trail, hockey, ice skating, picnic tables, playground, warming house.

- **Farmington Preserve:** Ball field, basketball, hard surface trail, picnic shelter and tables, playground, natural trail.

  - Pond and park cleanup, tree planting.

Hastings:

- **Lake Rebecca Park:** Boat launch, picnic tables, fishing pier.

- **Vermillion River Linear Park/Vermillion Falls Park/Old Mill Park:** Picnic tables and shelter.

  - Bike with a ranger partnership with NPS

Inver Grove Heights:

- **Harmon Park/Salem Hills Park:** Playground, trails, ball fields, basketball, pickleball and tennis courts, tree nursery.

- **South Valley Park:** Playground, picnic shelter, firepit, performance area, plaza for gatherings.

  - Camps - nature & science camp, survival camp

Lakeville:

- **West Lake Marion Mountain Bike Trail**

- **Ritter Farm Park:** Dog park, fishing, picnic tables and shelter, trails.

- **Orchard Lake Beach:** Fishing, parking, conservation area, perennial garden, picnic areas, playground, swimming beach.

- **East Community Park:** Baseball/softball, grills, picnic shelters, playground, tennis courts, trails.

  - Nature's classroom series, Nature's detective, bird banding, pollinators, watersheds, kid's nature camps.

Mendota Heights:

- **Friendly Marsh Park:** Trails, paved trails.

- **Roger's Lake Park:** Basketball, fishing, picnic shelters, playground skate park, trails, volleyball.

- **Oheyawahe/Pilot Knob Park:** Trails.

- **Valley View Heights Park:** Basketball, playground, trails.

  - Canoe-rack rentals; kids canoe, hike, and fish; seniors hiking group; fishing derby.

Rosemount:

- **Horseshoe Lake Park:** ADA accessible, fishing, picnic tables and shelter, playground, trails.

- **Erickson Park:** Picnic shelter, softball, tennis course, trails.

- **Carroll's Woods/Schwarz Pond Park:** Grills, picnic shelter, playground, trails, skate park.

  - Nature preschool programs, senior workshop at Caponi Art Park.

South St. Paul:

- **Kaposia Park:** Picnic shelter, pavilion, playground, softball/baseball, volleyball, disc golf, hockey/skating rink, trails.

- **Seidls Lake:** Trails.

- **Wildflower Levee Park:** Picnic tables, trails.

Sunfish Lake:

- **Musser Park:** Trails, undeveloped.

West St. Paul:

- **Marthaler Park:** Basketball, bike trail, fishing, picnic shelters, playground, tennis, volleyball.

- **Garlough Park:** Trail, picnic shelter, disc golf.

- **Southview Park:** Baseball/softball, picnic shelters, playground, skating rink, tennis court, trail, warming house.

DAKOTA COUNTY PARKS TIMELINE

PARKLAND HISTORY

The Land Before Parks

Native Americans have lived on the land for thousands of years prior to the establishment of the park system. Centuries after the first Europeans arrived in the area, Euro-American settlement significantly increased in the 1800s. Starting in 1830 and continuing until 1858, The US government took significant amounts of land from the Dakota people, using treaties to officially transfer land rights. In 1849 the Minnesota Territory and Dakota County were established.

Tensions between the Dakota Nations and the government of Minnesota came to a head during the Dakota-US War of 1862. Congress passed The Dakota Expulsion Act of 1863, evicted Dakota people from their homelands and the state government sold the remaining Dakota land.

After Euro-American settlement, Dakota County land was primarily converted to agriculture. As the population increased in the Twin Cities, the County developed industrial infrastructure to transport people and goods and supply electricity.

In the 1930s, the Locks and Dams on the Mississippi River controlled the river depth for boats to have easier passage. Flooding caused by Lock and Dam #2 led to 7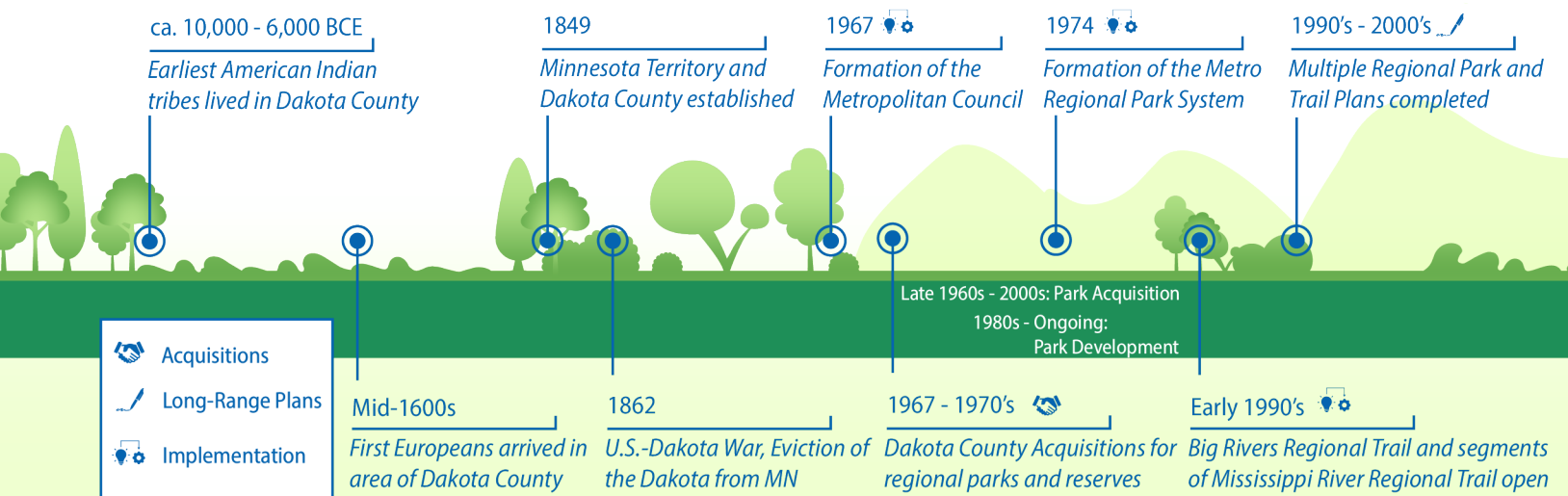00 landowners losing access to floodplain property through flowage easements purchased by the federal government, and the creation of Spring Lake. The US government acquired thousands of acres to create the Gopher Ordinance Works to produce gunpowder for World War II. This land was transferred to the University of Minnesota (U of M) and portions of the property will be permanently transferred to the DNR. Today, the U of M, DNR, County and City of Empire co-manage the 5,000-acre Vermillion Highlands complex which includes Whitetail Woods Regional Park.

In the 1950s and 60s, the primarily agricultural land was transformed into suburbs as America experienced an economic boom and mass production of houses and highways skyrocketed. Most suburban cities in Dakota County became incorporated during the early to mid-1960s.

Early Park Acquisition

In the mid 1900s, conservationists began advocating for environmental protection from urban sprawl. Dakota County communities required developers to dedicate land for parks as early as the 1950s. The Minnesota Legislature enabled the formation of county park commissions in 1959 which opened opportunities for park funding. In 1960, thirty community representatives met with the Dakota County Planning Commission and formed a parks commission.

In 1967, the State Legislature created the

---

ca. 10,000 - 6,000 BCE
Earliest American Indian tribes lived in Dakota County

1849
Minnesota Territory and Dakota County established

1967
Formation of the Metropolitan Council

1974
Formation of the Metro Regional Park System

1990's - 2000's
Multiple Regional Park and Trail Plans completed

Late 1960s - 2000s: Park Acquisition
1980s - Ongoing:
Park Development

Acquisitions

Long-Range Plans

Implementation

Mid-1600s
First Europeans arrived in area of Dakota County

1862
U.S.-Dakota War, Eviction of the Dakota from MN

1967 - 1970's
Dakota County Acquisitions for regional parks and reserves

Early 1990's
Big Rivers Regional Trail and segments of Mississippi River Regional Trail open

Metropolitan Council and The Parks and Open Space Commission to advise planning and financing for park acquisition and development. Regional parks could now be supported by state financial assistance. The Farmland and Natural Areas Program (which became the Land Conservation Program) began in 2003 and has facilitated the protection of 12,078 acres outside of the County parks and greenways.

In 1970, Dakota County wrote their first Regional Park System Plan, which sought to ensure there would be enough parkland for residents in the 1990s. At the time the plan was written, the county was acquiring parkland for Lebanon Hills Regional Park, Spring Lake Park Reserve, Miesville Ravine Park Reserve, Thompson County Park and Lake Byllesby Regional Park.

Land Conservation, Continued Park Acquisition, and Park Development

Dakota County's 2001 Park System Plan set the stage for further park acquisition and the County created Dakota Woods Dog Park (2002) and Whitetail Woods Regional Park (2008). The Farmland and Natural Areas Program (which became the Land Conservation Program) began in 2003 and has facilitated the protection of 12,078 acres outside of the County parks and greenways.

Dakota County began constructing park buildings to welcome visitors in the early 2000s with the
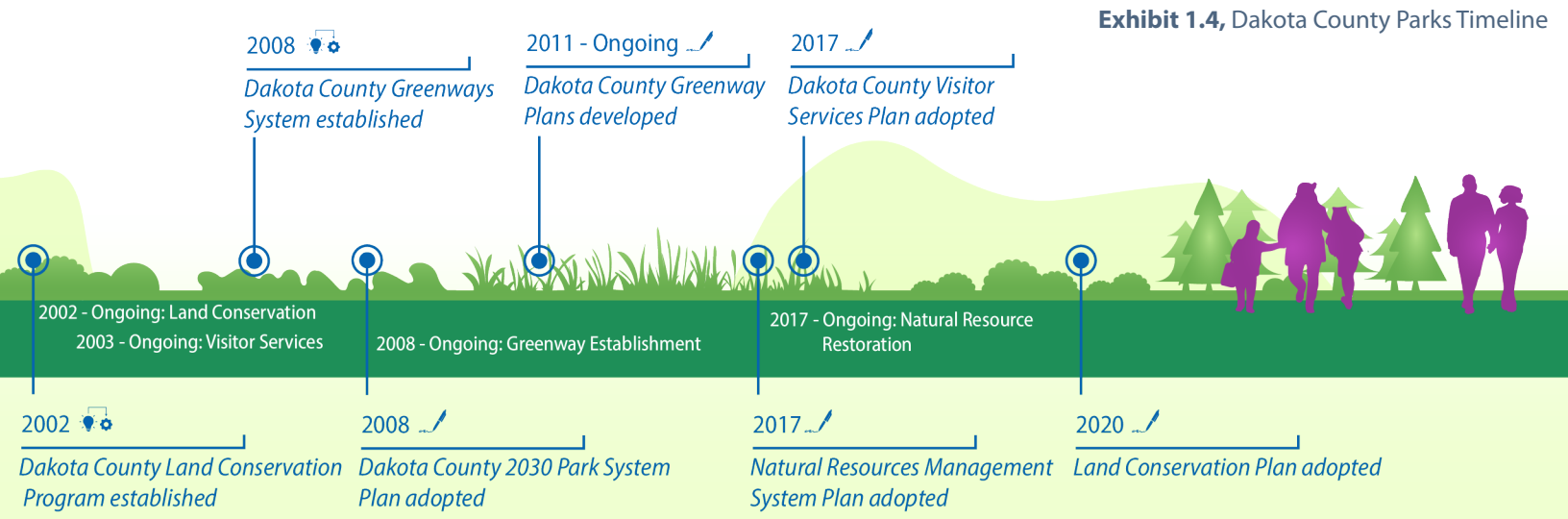
addition of Thompson Park Center, Schaar's Bluff Gathering Center, and Lebanon Hills Visitor Center.

Great Places, Connected Places, Protected Places

Dakota County's 2008 Park System Plan established a vision to improve, connect, and protect parks. Since 2008, long-range plans for all Dakota County Parks have been updated and facility improvements have been made. The plan led to a more refined focus on Greenways, as well as the growth of the Natural Resources Program.

In 2017 the Parks Visitor Services Plan was adopted, outlining goals for and resulting in evolution of visitor services in 5 areas: awareness and outreach, outdoor education, events, equipment rentals, volunteerism, and facility rentals. , In 2017, the Natural Resource Management System Plan was adopted followed by development of natural resource management plans for parks and several greenways. In addition, natural resource management plans for natural areas protected with easements began being required to have a natural resource management plan, jointly developed by the county and landowners.

In 2020, the Dakota County Land Conservation Plan was adopted, outlining a county-wide strategy for land conservation on both public and private land and in 2023, the program moved into the parks department.

Exhibit 1.4, Dakota County Parks Timeline

2008
Dakota County Greenways System established

2011 - Ongoing
Dakota County Greenway Plans developed

2017
Dakota County Visitor Services Plan adopted

2002 - Ongoing: Land Conservation
2003 - Ongoing: Visitor Services

2008 - Ongoing: Greenway Establishment

2017 - Ongoing: Natural Resource Restoration

2002
Dakota County Land Conservation Program established

2008
Dakota County 2030 Park System Plan adopted

2017
Natural Resources Management System Plan adopted

2020
Land Conservation Plan adopted

TRENDS

Dakota County Parks are influenced by several national and local trends that help guide the positioning of the 2050 Vision Plan.

By considering these trends, Dakota County Parks can continue to provide valuable recreational opportunities while preserving the natural and cultural resources that define the region.

Increased Nature-Based Recreation:

In 2021, 164.2 million Americans aged six and over participated in outdoor recreation at least once, marking the highest number on record. This surge reflects **a growing national inclination towards nature-based activities**, leading to higher visitation rates in parks nationwide.
outdoorindustry.org

Health and Wellness Focus:

There is a growing recognition of the health benefits associated with outdoor recreation, leading to increased public interest in parks as venues for physical activity and mental rejuvenation. This trend encourages parks to **develop programs and facilities that promote wellness**, such as fitness trails and mindfulness areas.

Technological Integration:

The integration of technology, such as artificial intelligence and digital platforms, is **transforming park operations and visitor engagement.** These advancements offer opportunities to enhance visitor experiences through interactive guides and efficient resource management.
nrpa.org

Economic Contributions of Park Visitors:

In 2023, 325 million park visitors spent an estimated $26.4 billion in local gateway regions while visiting National Park Service lands across the country, underscoring the **significant economic impact of parks on surrounding communities.**
nps.gov

Continued Population Growth:

Dakota County is experiencing ongoing development, influencing land use patterns around park areas. Balancing conservation efforts with urban expansion **requires strategic planning to protect natural habitats while accommodating community growth.**
farmlandinfo.org

Climate Change Impacts:

Climate change poses substantial challenges to park ecosystems, including altered weather patterns, increased frequency of extreme events, and shifting habitats, and altered wildlife patterns. These **changes can affect biodiversity, water resources, and the ways visitors experience open spaces**, prompting parks to implement adaptive management strategies to mitigate adverse effects.
nps.gov

Public Support for Park Funding:

A significant majority of U.S. adults (77%) favor expanding national park field trips, classroom activities, and educational experiences, indicating **strong public support for park-related initiatives.**
prnewswire.com

Financial Constraints and Staffing Challenges:

Despite rising visitation, many parks face financial limitations and staffing shortages. Budget constraints are leading to greater deferred maintenance and strain on services, **impacting the quality of visitor experiences and the preservation of natural resources.**
wsj.com
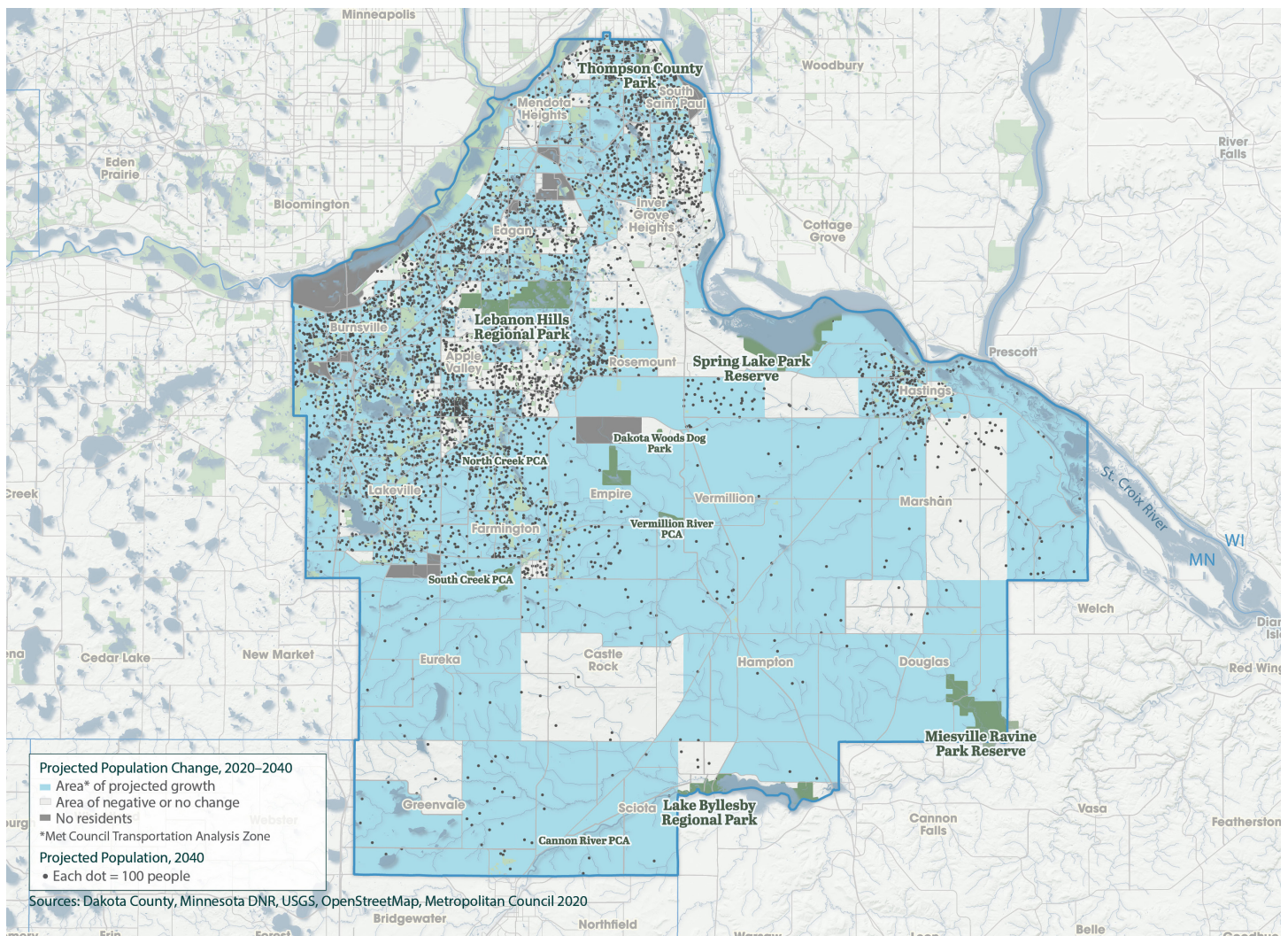
Map 1.2, Areas of Projected Population Growth

THE PLANNING PROCESS

The 10-month planning process for the 2050 Vision Plan included reaching over 500 participants at in-person events and receiving over 500 online survey responses from a broad spectrum of the community.

93% of online respondents identified outdoor recreation as high or medium priority when spending free time.

The engagement approach sought to reach a wide variety of residents and visitors across Dakota County as well as build on the existing relationships with community organizations.

Key Themes

Emergent park system priorities include:

- Nature and nature-based recreation
- Park and trail access and universal accessibility
- Environmental health
- Facilities that are clean, safe, and in good repair
- Family-friendly and multi-generational spaces and programs
- Community gathering spaces
- Cultural awareness, representation, and celebration
- Strengthen and elevate partnerships

FINDINGS

Recent decades have been a time of growth and increasing depth for Dakota County's park system, much of it shaped by visionary and thoughtful planning. This planning process for the 2050 Vision Plan has also included analysis of Dakota County as well as the outside influences that shape it.

Key findings from community voices, staff observations, analysis of the park system, and broader influences are identified on the proceeding pages.

The percentage of park visitors who are youth, people of color, lower income, and older adults is lower than their percentage in the county population

Dakota County is viewed as a leader in providing nature-based recreation

Dakota County park visitors expect more accessible facilities

The changing climate threatens natural systems and recreational opportunities

Visitation of Dakota County Parks is lower than metro area average based on population

Urbanization impacts remaining natural areas, habitat, and water quality

A growing County population will expect additional parks and greenways

Securing consistent and sustainable funding is a growing challenge

Programming is limited compared to other metro area park systems

Dakota County park facilities are aging and have growing deferred maintenance demands

Awareness has grown about park's essential role in supporting physical, mental, and spiritual health

Data Sources:

2024 Engagement Online Survey

2024 Engagement

2024 Tribal Engagement Meetings

2021 Met Council Regional Parks and Trails Visitor Study

2022 US Census ACE Estimates

2022 Minnesota State Demographic Center, Long-Term Population Projections for Minnesota, 2020

2023 Dakota County Adult Health Survey

Metropolitan Council Local Forecasts to 2050

2020 Dakota County Parks Awareness and Promotion Plan: Report of Community Engagement Findings

July 2023 Met Council Annual Use Estimates

A more detailed summary of engagement efforts and analysis reports can be found in the Appendices

The percentage of park visitors who are youth, people of color, lower income, and older adults is lower than their percentage in the county population

Engagement

- 30% of Dakota County adults with incomes less than half the poverty line identify situations of not feeling accepted due to their race, ethnicity, religion, or immigration status. *(Source: Dakota County Adult Health Survey, 2023)*

Analysis

- Compared to the Dakota County population, youth, people of color, lower income individuals, women, and older adults are underrepresented in park visitor counts when compared to county population.

- People of color visited Dakota County regional parks at a rate of 33% of their population makeup and visited county greenways at a rate of 28% of their population makup.

Exhibit 1.5 identifies park visitors as fewer than - "under-represented", roughly equal to - "on-target" and more than - "over-represented" when compared to overall county population demographics.

Exhibit 1.5, 2021 Visitor Demographics

(Sources: 2021 Met Council Regional Parks and Trails System Visitor Study and 2022 US Census ACS Estimates, Table DP05

Dakota County park visitors expect more accessible facilities

Engagement

- Accessible facilities are identified by users as a key need within the park system. *(Source: 2024 Engagement Online Survey and Tribal Engagement Meetings)*

Analysis

- 10.9% of Dakota County residents have a disability. The most prevalent disabilities are:
  . Cognitive difficulty (5%)
  . Independent living difficulty (4.9%)
  . Ambulatory difficulty (4.5%)

  (Source: 2021 Met Council Visitor Study and 2022 US Census)

- 8.2% of residents from 65-74 years of age have a disability. 38.2% of residents age 75+ have a disability. *(Source: 2021 Met Council Visitor Study and 2022 MN Demographic Center)*

- 12% of groups visiting a Dakota County park included a resident with a disability. *(Source: 2021 Met Council Visitor Study and 2022 US Census)*

- As the population ages, demand for accessible facilities will increase.

- The percentage of Dakota County residents 75 or older is expected to jump from under 6 percent in 2020 to nearly 10 percent in 2035. *(Source: 2022 MN Demographic Center)*

Exhibit 1.6, Lakeside Accessible Trails

Trails within Parks	2008	2023	Name of Trail
Lebanon Hills	0	1	McDonough Lake
Spring Lake	0	1	Spring Lake
Lake Byllesby	0	1	Lake Byllesby
Miesville Ravine	0	0	
Thompson	0	1	Thompson Lake
Whitetail Woods	N/A	1	*Empire Lake*
Trails within Greenways			
Mississippi River Greenway	0	2**	Lake Rebecca & Spring Lake
Minnesota River Greenway	0	1	Black Dog Lake
River to River Greenway	0	2	Marthaler Lake, Thompson Oaks Lake
Vermillion River Greenway	N/A	0	
Rosemount Greenway	N/A	1	Horseshoe Lake
Vermillion Highlands Greenway	N/A	0	
Lake Marion Greenway	N/A	2	Lake Marion, Sunset Lake
North Creek Greenway	0	2	Cobblestone Lake, East Lake
Total	**0**	**14**	

Data Sources: 2021 Met Council Regional Park and Trail System Visitor Study and US Census Bureau, ACS 5-Year Estimates, 2022, Table DP02

Units in italics are new since 2008

**Spring Lake is along both the Mississippi River Greenway and is in Spring Lake Park Reserve

Visitation of Dakota County parks is lower than metro area average based on population

Engagement

- People report that Dakota County parks are not as conveniently located as they would prefer.

- In the 2020 Dakota County Parks Awareness and Promotion Plan: Report of Community Engagement Findings, Hmong, South Asian Indian, American Indian, Latinx, Moroccan, and Somali community audiences noted limited knowledge of parks within some parts of their communities.

- Ways to better attract diverse and under-represented populations include cultural awareness, partnerships, welcoming spaces, accessibility, and involvement in decision making. *(Source: 2020 County Parks Awareness and Promotion Engagement)*

Analysis

- To reach its share of visitors to suburban regional parks based on population, Dakota County would need over three million more annual visits. *(Source: 2023 Met Council Use Estimates)*

- Despite being the 3rd most populous geography of the 10 regional park implementing agencies, Dakota County is 6th in visitation. *(Source: 2023 Met Council Use Estimates & 2022 US Census)*

- Dakota County parks have a lower level of facilities, programs, and events compared with other metro regional parks.

- Many Dakota County greenways have trail gaps planned to be completed in future years.

Programming is limited compared with other metro area park systems

Engagement

- Community members requested more programming that provides education or recreation and allows for social interaction. *(Source: 2024 Engagement)*

- Community members highlighted the importance of cultural information and programming, language, and cultural practices as keys to welcoming diverse visitors and fostering belonging in parks. *(Source: 2020 County Parks Awareness and Promotion Engagement and 2024 Engagement)*

Analysis

- Dakota County has limited system-wide programs compared with other regional park agencies.

- Compared with other regional park agencies, Dakota County offers fewer outdoor ed. programs.

- Outdoor education program participation has been growing by roughly 20% annually in recent years. *(Source: 2023 Parks Programming Waitlist Numbers)*

- Demand exceeded capacity with 1,085 youth or adults wait-listed for programs in 2023. *(Source: 2023 Parks Programming Waitlist Numbers)*

- Seasonal staffing impacts program capacity and efficiency in program delivery.

A growing population will expect additional parks and greenways

Engagement

- 39% of visitor survey respondents noted that "better walking or biking access" or "a trail closer to me" would help them visit trails more often. *(Source: 2021 Met Council Visitor Study)*

Analysis

- Some of the most populous municipalities in Dakota County lack regional park acreage.

- Residents without a vehicle would have a difficult time reaching most of Dakota County's parks.

Awareness has grown about park's essential role in supporting physical, mental, and spiritual health

Engagement

- Over 50% of community survey respondents ranked the health benefit of time in nature as the most important benefit of the park system. *(Source: 2024 Engagement Online Survey)*

- Community survey respondents identified physical and mental health benefits of time in nature and/ or nature-based recreation as the highest priority for the future park system. *(Source: 2024 Engagement Online Survey)*

Analysis

- 46% of all Dakota County adults surveyed met "Healthy People Physical Activity Guidelines" for exercise. *(Source: 2023 Dakota County Health Survey)*

- Greenspace use for adults results in a variety of health benefits including stress reduction, improved sleep quality and reduced cancer risk. *(Source: Barcelona Institute for Global Health, 2020)*

- Greenspace use for children results in improved attention capacity, concentration, emotional and behavioral development, coordination, balance, self-confidence, self-discipline, and social skills. (Barcelona Institute for Global Health, 2020)

- In 2023 the US Surgeon General named loneliness as an epidemic in the U.S. Parks counter this as places of social connection.

Dakota County is viewed as a leader in providing nature-based recreation

Engagement

- Community members identified time in nature as a key benefit and ranked nature-based recreation (e.g. hiking, canoeing, and picnicking) as important to their appreciation of Dakota County parks. *(Source: 2024 Engagement Online Survey)*

- Favorite activities in Dakota County parks:
  1. Hike/walk
  2. Biking
  3. Mountain biking
  4. Dog walk/dog park
  5. Running

  (Source: 2021 Met Council Visitor Study)

Analysis

- "Tranquility", "Peace", "Oasis" are words commonly used to describe Dakota County parks. *(Source: 2024 Engagement Online Survey)*

- Overall park visitation has significantly increased since 2017. *(Source: 2023 Met Council Use Estimates)*

- Outdoor Education Program participation has grown by roughly 20% annually in recent years.

- The Dakota County Parks Outreach program began in 2020 and quickly grew. In 2022, 5,733 people participated in the program (240% increase over 2020) and the number of outreach activities was 141 (171% increase over 2020). One strategy leading to this success has been collaborating with community liaisons and instructors to develop and facilitate programs and events.

The changing climate threatens natural systems and recreational opportunities

Engagement

- Native American participants suggested bringing the ecosystem back to the point where animals can thrive through a changing climate. *(Source: 2024 Tribal Engagement)*

- Staff suggests more research and understanding occur on climate adaptive plants and species to ensure green spaces thrive amidst a changing climate.

- 34% of community survey respondents identified climate change as a major concern and 22% as a moderate concern. *(Source: 2022 Dakota County Residential Survey)*

Analysis

- Beach closures and warm winters have impacted equipment rentals and recreation.

- Dakota County is expected to experience a 168% increase in extremely hot days and a 4% increase in days with heavy precipitation across the next 25 years. *(Source: Headwaters Economics)*
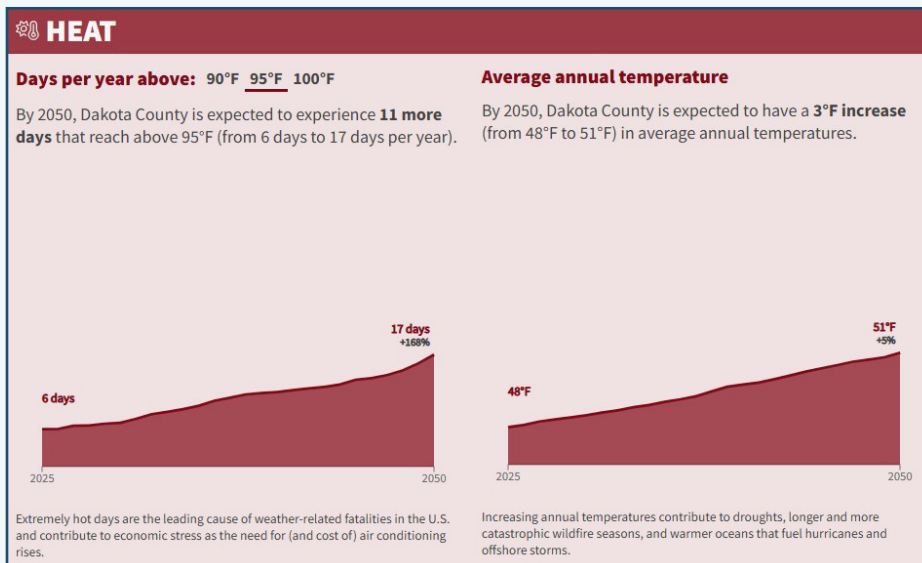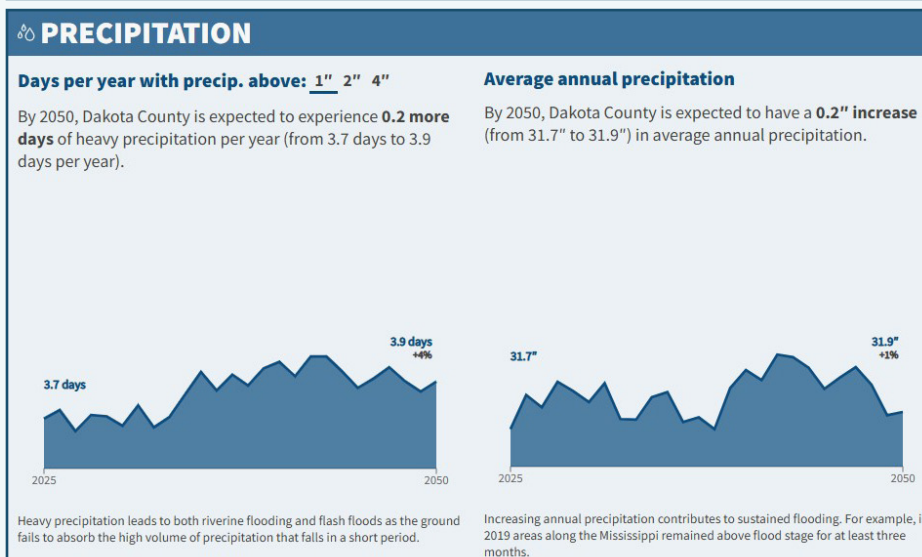
Exhibit 1.7, 2023 Projected Heat and Precipitation Change for Dakota County

☼ HEAT

Days per year above: 90°F 95°F 100°F

By 2050, Dakota County is expected to experience **11 more days** that reach above 95°F (from 6 days to 17 days per year).

6 days
17 days
+168%

2025
2050

Extremely hot days are the leading cause of weather-related fatalities in the U.S. and contribute to economic stress as the need for (and cost of) air conditioning rises.

Average annual temperature

By 2050, Dakota County is expected to have a **3°F increase** (from 48°F to 51°F) in average annual temperatures.

48°F
51°F
+5%

2025
2050

Increasing annual temperatures contribute to droughts, longer and more catastrophic wildfire seasons, and warmer oceans that fuel hurricanes and offshore storms.

☷ PRECIPITATION

Days per year with precip. above: 1" 2" 4"

By 2050, Dakota County is expected to experience **0.2 more days** of heavy precipitation per year (from 3.7 days to 3.9 days per year).

3.7 days
3.9 days
+4%

2025
2050

Heavy precipitation leads to both riverine flooding and flash floods as the ground fails to absorb the high volume of precipitation that falls in a short period.

Average annual precipitation

By 2050, Dakota County is expected to have a **0.2" increase** (from 31.7" to 31.9") in average annual precipitation.

31.7"
31.9"
+1%

2025
2050

Increasing annual precipitation contributes to sustained flooding. For example, in 2019 areas along the Mississippi remained above flood stage for at least three months.

Urbanization threatens remaining natural areas, habitat, and water quality

Engagement

- Community survey participants ranked "protection and restoration of natural habitat" as the second highest priority for the future park system. *(Source: 2024 Engagement Online Survey)*

Analysis

- Dakota County population is anticipated to grow by approximately 20% by 2050. *(Source: Met Council 2050 Forecasts)*

- Urban and suburban development continues to move south, replacing remnant natural areas and agricultural areas. Developing communities include Rosemount, Lakeville, Farmington, and Empire.

Securing consistent and sustainable funding is a growing challenge

Engagement

- County staff and leadership routinely identify a need for reliable funding sources as a critical issue to be addressed. *(Data Source: 2024 Engagement with staff and County Board)*

Analysis

- Park visitation has grown, leading to increased demand for programming that, in turn demands more infrastructure and maintenance while staffing experiences only modest growth. *(Data Source: Dakota County Parks annual budgets).*

- There are more external funding opportunities for new capital projects than for maintenance and management of existing assets. *(Data Source: 2024 Engagement with staff)*

Dakota County park facilities are aging and have growing deferred maintenance demands

Engagement

- Staff has identified challenges to making significant capital investments that are sometimes not supported by adequate operational resources. *(Data Source: 2024 Engagement with staff)*

- Community members emphasized the importance of well-maintained physical infrastructure for parks to feel safe, accessible, and inviting. (*Source: 2020 County Parks Awareness and Promotion Engagement)*

Analysis

- Dakota County began constructing park buildings in the mid-1980s. Some of these structures (eg. campground office at Lake Byllesby Regional Park) are in their fourth decade and require significant capital investment or replacement. As the park system ages, these situations will become more pressing. *(Data Source: 2024 Engagement with staff)*

- The Dakota County Facility Management Department maintains a condition database for all County buildings. Investment in park buildings flagged by the database competes with maintenance of other existing county-wide buildings plus additional investment demands for new buildings (for example, replacement of the campground office at Lake Byllesby Regional Park). *(Data Source: 2024 Engagement with staff)*

- In addition to impacts from use and age, evolving building codes demand investments. Dakota County is roughly halfway through a 10-year program to address ADA accessibility compliance. (*Data Source: 2024 Engagement with staff)*

VISION FRAMEWORK

The Dakota County 2050 Parks, Greenways, and Natural Systems Vision Plan serves as a forward-looking guide to the protection, enhancement, and development of the county's cherished outdoor spaces. The Vision Framework sets a foundation for ensuring that lands, facilities, operations and visitor services meet the needs of the county's growing and diverse population now and in the future. By clearly articulating long-term objectives and the actionable steps required to achieve them, Dakota County is preparing for a future that includes environmental stewardship, recreational opportunities, and the well-being of its residents and visitors.

Dakota County has long been recognized for its commitment to preserving natural systems, supporting outdoor recreation, and fostering environmental sustainability. With over 400,000 residents and growing, the county is at a critical juncture in its planning efforts. The region's river and stream corridors, woodlands, wetlands, and prairies are integral not only to the ecological health of the county but also to its identity and quality of life. As urbanization increases and climate patterns evolve, this vision framework anticipates future challenges and opportunities, setting a course to ensure the county's natural areas remain vibrant, accessible, and resilient through the

VISION PLAN

Vision

Mission

Core Values

Goals

POLICY GUIDES

Written Policies

Natural Resource Management System Plan

Parks Visitor Services Plan

Land Conservation Plan

Greenway Guidebook

Long-Range Plans, Natural Resource Management Plans, Interpretive Plans, Cultural Landscape Plans

Operational and Program Plans

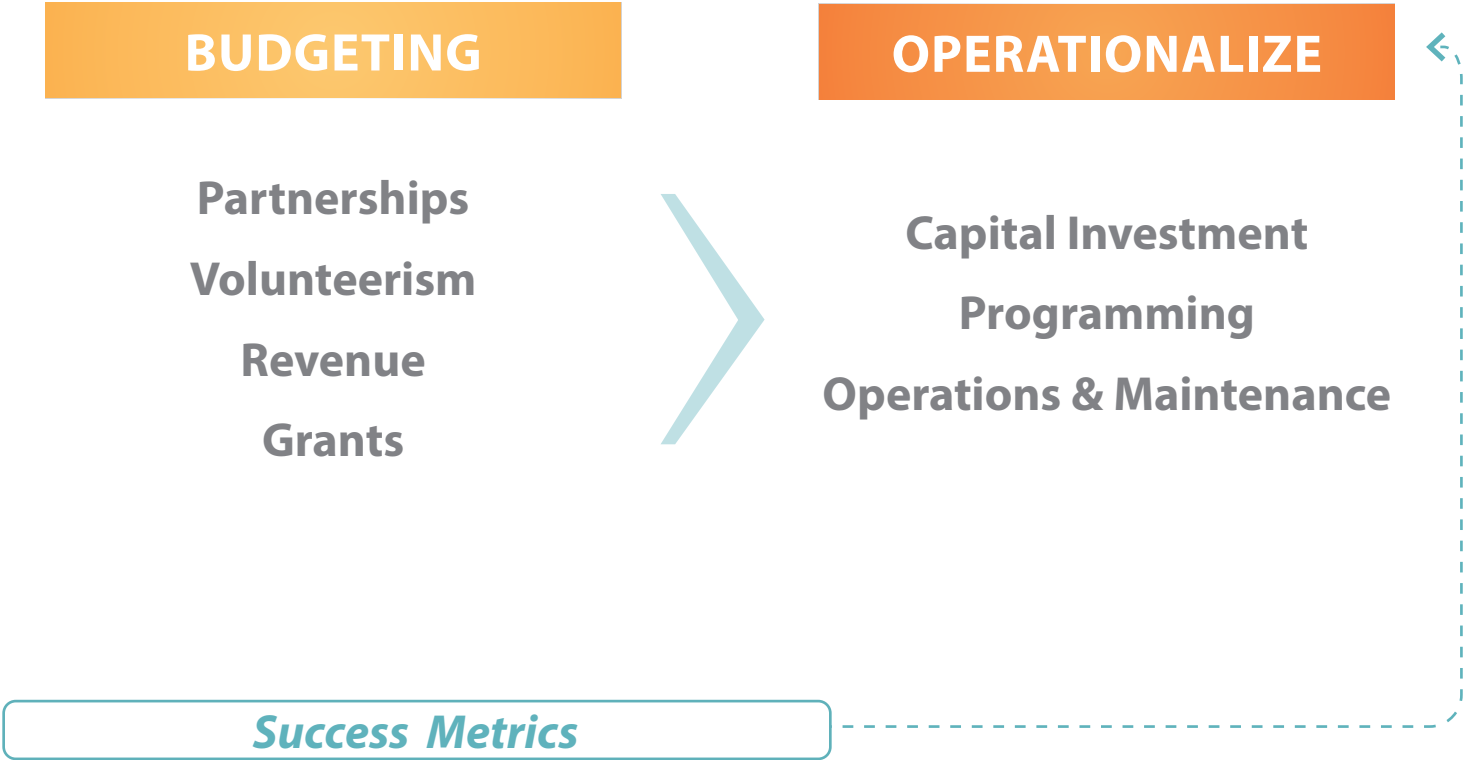*Success Metrics*

Exhibit 2.1, Use of the Vision Plan

middle of the 21st century and beyond.

As a foundation for propelling the complexities of a regional park system and grasping the array of opportunities, Dakota County has created the 2050 Vision Plan. The Plan articulates the agency's mission and aspirations, helping to focus resources, inspire workforce, and align work with community expectations and environmental needs.

The 2050 Vision Framework solidifies Dakota County Parks' foundation for the future. It forms the basis for a suite of other guidance/policy documents the agency uses and routinely updates.

More importantly, it is an expression of Dakota County's promise to drive community values into organizational mission, vision, and goals that will ground and inspire the agency's work for the next two+ decades.

BUDGETING

Partnerships

Volunteerism

Revenue

Grants

OPERATIONALIZE

Capital Investment

Programming

Operations & Maintenance

Success Metrics

CREATING A VISION FRAMEWORK

The Vision Framework is constructed around four elements: Mission, Vision, Goals and Values. The Vision Framework is intended to establish the basis for the 2050 Vision Plan and the work of the organization in decades to come.

The Vision Framework acts as a compass, ensuring that activities and initiatives align with community values and Dakota County Parks' core purpose and future aspirations.

The Vision Framework is more than just words. It is the foundational toolkit that guides Dakota County Parks' work.

The selected words and statements are the result of community, staff, and leadership engagement as well as analysis conducted for the project since and even before the planning process.

Like any long range plan, community interests and organizational demands will change and evolve through the life of the 2050 Vision Plan, making it important to periodically evaluate the relevance of the plan and vision framework.

THE VISION FRAMEWORK WILL:

- Guide strategic planning and decision-making; assisting with setting priorities, evaluating programs, and adapting to change.

- Drive organizational culture and workforce development by creating a sense of purpose, encouraging innovation, and fostering accountability.

- Unlock potential partnerships by establishing trust, attracting those with shared values, and revealing potential funding streams.

- Shape public engagement and advocacy through education, mobilization and feedback loops.

- Provide a foundation for flexibility in meeting the important topics of the day such as climate, equity, access, and economics.

Dakota County Parks Native Land Acknowledgment

We at Dakota County Parks respectfully acknowledge that Dakota County is Dakota homeland, land significant and sacred to the cultural identity of past, current, and future generations of the Dakota people, and other native peoples from time immemorial. We commit to understanding, respecting, and partnering with Indigenous communities as together we care for the land, wildlife, air and water here. Let our actions demonstrate our resolve and commitment, bringing to life the truth of these words.

DAKOTA PARKS AND DAKOTA LAND

Dakota County is committed to embedding learning, respect, and appreciation for Native American people and land into our practices. All of Dakota County and adjacent lands are within the vast ancestral homelands of the Dakota people who were the original stewards of this place for thousands of years. Anishinaabe and Native people from other Tribal Nations also traveled and traded through this land and have made this area their home.

We will continue listening, learning, and acting- because a just future requires more than acknowledgment. It requires commitment, collaboration, and change. We are committed to strengthening authentic, long-term relationships with Indigenous communities, relationships grounded in trust and accountability. This means creating spaces where Indigenous voices lead, where cultural practices are honored and where the presence of Native people are visible and valued.

The following statement was established by the County Parks Department and expresses our commitment to build a practice of active land acknowledgment every day into our work. We anticipate that this practice and these words, informed by long and deep relationships, will evolve and mature over time.

Dakota Presence in the River Valley

The Minnesota and Mississippi river valleys have been home to the Dakota for hundreds of years, and the existence of our ancestors was sustained by their relationship with the earth and their surroundings. For generations, Dakota families fished from the rivers, gathered rice from area lakes, and hunted game on the prairies and in river valley woodlands. Along the riverbanks, leaders of the Eastern Dakota, including ŚSAKPE, CASKE, MAZOMANI, WAMBDITANKA, HUYAPA, TACANKU WAŚTE, and TAOYATEDUTA, established villages. From these home sites, the Eastern Dakota traveled for hunting, gathering, and meeting with other bands of Dakota. Our ancestors lived in harmony with the world around them, and Dakota culture flourished.

The "Dakota Presence in the River Valley" mapping and database project demonstrates the strong presence of the Dakota and other native groups in the Minnesota and Mississippi river valleys. This is an ongoing project of the Shakopee Mdewakanton Dakota Community that will tap into various sources of information including elders, manuscript collections, archaeological data, survey notes, and map collections. The map and database are continuously updated to reflect the additional material we have uncovered, including differences in names, spellings, and site locations.
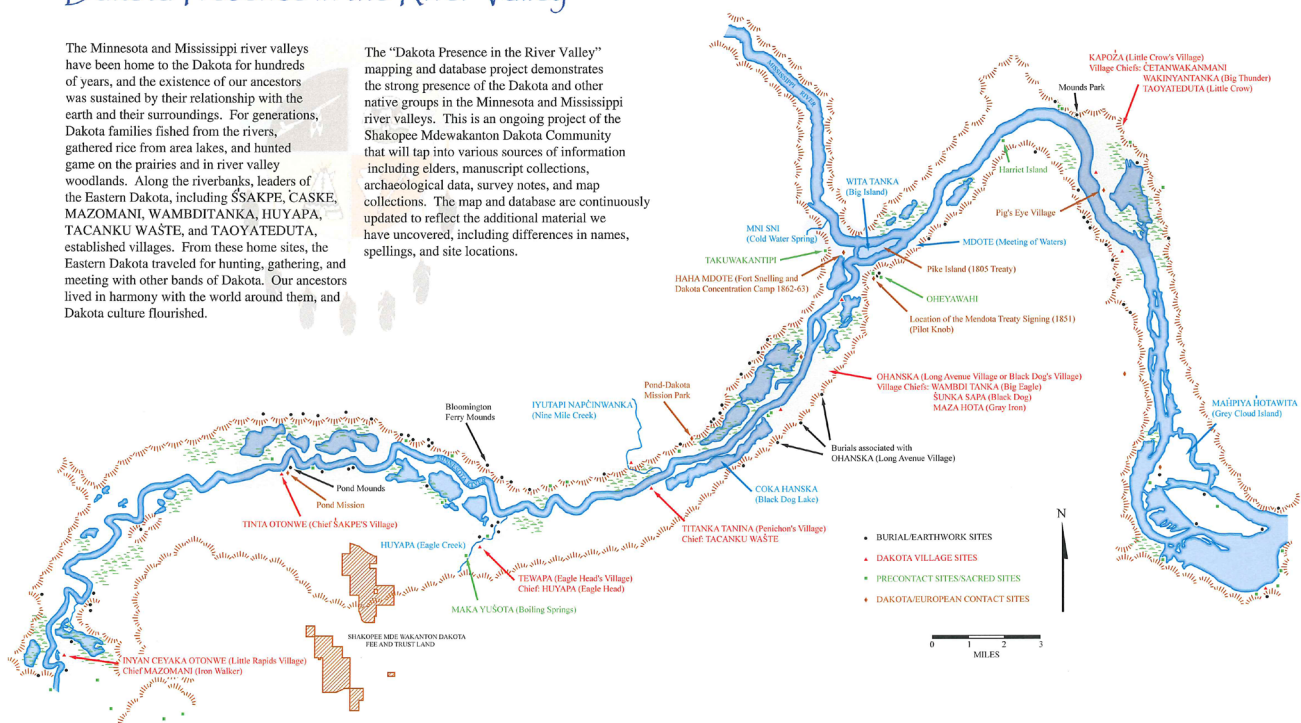
Map 2.1, Dakota Presence in the River Valley

For more information about the Shakopee Mdewakanton Sioux (Dakota) Community, please visit www.shakopeedakota.org or contact the Shakopee Mdewakanton Sioux (Dakota) Community, Cultural Resources Department, 2330 Sioux Trail NW, Prior Lake, MN 55372, E-mail: culturalresources@shakopeedakota.org.

© 2003 Shakopee Mdewakanton Sioux (Dakota) Community
Printed for Big River Journey Program, National Park Service
For additional classroom resources, please visit the Shakopee Mdewakanton Sioux (Dakota) Community web site: www.shakopeedakota.org.

Due to the forced removal of Dakota people from Minnesota, many people with deep ties to the land are located outside of the state. With this Vision Plan, Dakota County expresses our intent to nurture a park system that welcomes all Dakota people home. Dakota County's commitment to action is defined in more detail in the Goals & Strategies section. **Goal 7: Strengthen partnerships with Tribal Nations and Indigenous communities for the protection of lands and traditions,** and the related strategies, articulates these actions most directly and specifically. However the intention to build a park system with Native people as integral partners, leaders, and co-creators, and respect for traditional Dakota land is woven throughout the Vision Plan.

CORE VALUES

In alignment with Dakota County's core values of Integrity, People, Service, and Innovation this plan's core values are:

To Connect...
people to each other and the natural world, fostering a sense of belonging for all.

To Nurture...
and heal the vital relationship between people and nature.

To Protect & Improve...
natural spaces, ensuring a resilient and healthy environment for future generations.

To Celebrate...
our vibrant and richly diverse communities.

To Inspire...
wellbeing, wonder, adventure, and learning through engaging and inclusive outdoor experiences.

VISION

Vision Statement

"Nature Protected, Community Reflected, All Are Connected"

MISSION

Mission Statement (working draft)

"Strengthen the vital relationship between people and nature and enhance wellbeing by restoring healthy natural systems, creating meaningful outdoor experiences, and building connected communities in a nature-based setting."

GOALS

Goal 1
Nurture the reciprocal relationship between people and nature.

Goal 2
Cultivate belonging by engaging and serving the community, with an emphasis on those who are under-represented in the outdoors.

Goal 3
Provide safe and positive core services, amenities, and experiences.

Goal 4
Create dynamic spaces with unique and memorable experiences.

Goal 5
Expand environmental stewardship through outdoor programs, learning, and volunteerism.

Goal 6
Offer opportunities to improve physical, mental, and spiritual health.

Goal 7
Strengthen partnerships with Tribal Nations and Indigenous communities for the protection of lands and traditions.

Goal 8
Locate new park units close to people and additionally, to protect natural areas and recreational assets.

Goal 9
Lead and support on ecological stewardship and climate resilience.

Goal 10
Elevate cultural richness through arts, historic preservation, interpretation, and, storytelling within the park system

Goal 11
Seek values-based and mission-driven partnerships.

Goal 12
Care for the system through sustainable and innovative funding.

Goal 13
Invest in a thriving parks workforce that represents the communities served.

Goal 14
Support local and sustainable economic development.

Goal 15
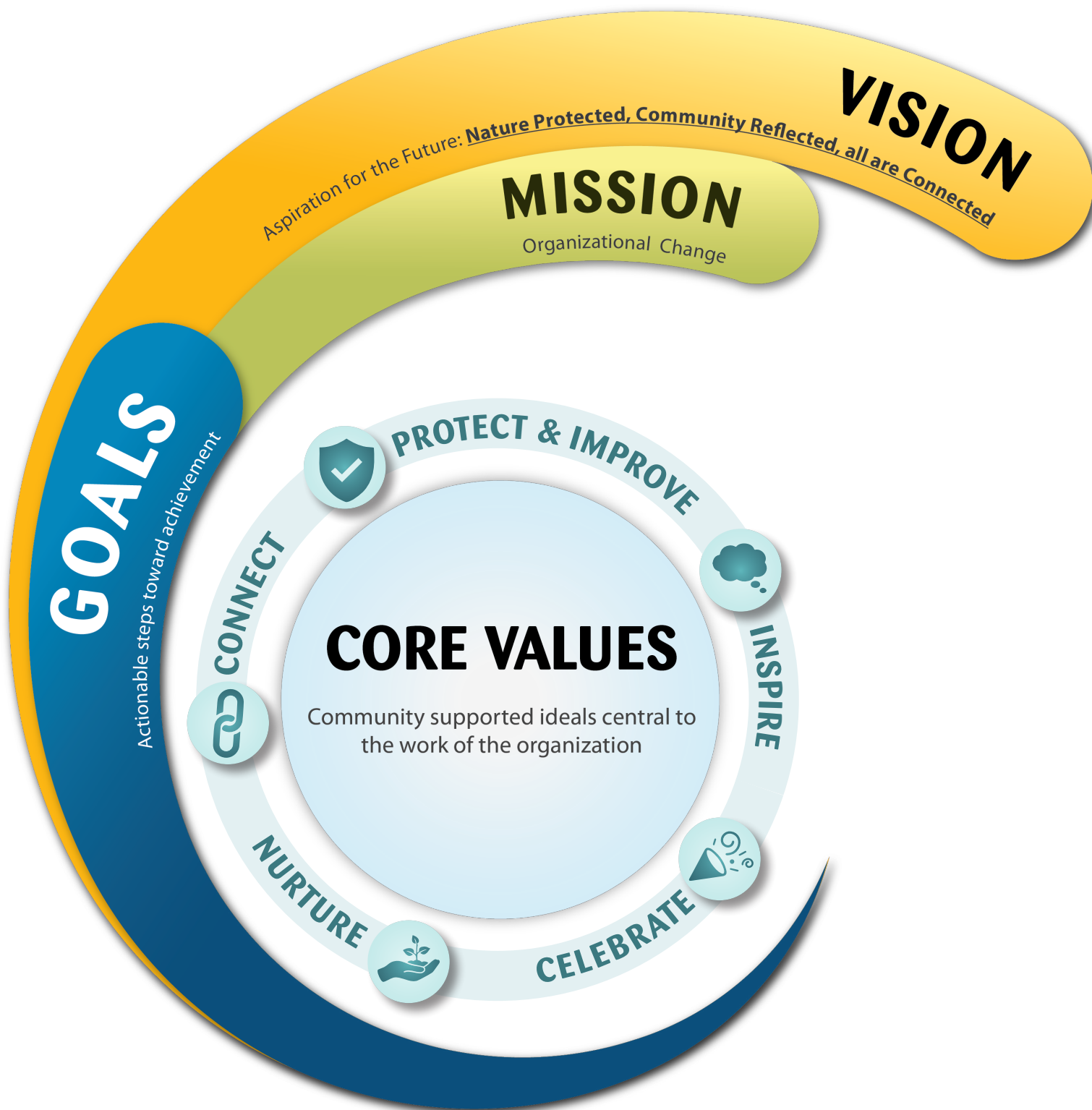Protect, improve, and manage the natural resources of Dakota County.

VISION

Aspiration for the Future: <u>Nature Protected, Community Reflected, all are Connected</u>

MISSION

Organizational Change

GOALS

Actionable steps toward achievement

PROTECT & IMPROVE

CONNECT

INSPIRE

CORE VALUES

Community supported ideals central to the work of the organization

NURTURE

CELEBRATE

Exhibit 2.2, Vision Framework

GOALS & STRATEGIES

Goals and strategies are intended to drive the 2050 Vision Plan into the inner workings of Dakota County Parks. Goals are umbrella statements that address the breadth of demands and interests raised by the plan. Strategies are slightly more detailed statements that help operationalize each goal.

By setting clear goals and actionable strategies in this plan and subsequently using them going forward, Dakota County positions itself to incrementally achieve its vision and operationalize its mission. By "working the plan", Dakota County in unison with policymakers, community members, partner organizations, and local communities can work together toward a shared vision of thriving parks, interconnected greenways, and protected natural systems that serve as a foundation for a healthy and vibrant Dakota County in 2050.

Definition of Underrepresented: In the context of this plan, underrepresented refers to demographic groups for whom the percentage of members visiting Dakota County regional parks is lower when compared to their percentage in the overall county population.

1 Nurture the reciprocal relationship between people and nature.

The park system recognizes people's place as a part of the natural world and ecological processes, and the crucial role people have in conserving and managing natural areas and natural features and attributes. Nature-based experiences in enhanced and diverse environments foster a reciprocal cycle of well-being and care.

Strategies

1. Expand nature-based experiences (programs & self-guided) and volunteer opportunities across the seasons to encourage connection with nature as a fundamental part of daily life.

2. Maintain impactful land conservation, visitor services, and natural resource management plans as budgeting, capital implementation, and operating tools.

3. Commit to systematic care, management, and enhancement of lands across the system.

4. Exemplify sustainability and innovation in design, implementation, and maintenance practices.

Community surveys identify time in nature as a key benefit and ranked nature-based recreation (e.g. hiking, paddling, and biking) as important to their appreciation of Dakota County Parks.

Metrics

- Visitor awareness/satisfaction surveys.
- Program and volunteer participation metrics.
- Visitors counts.
- Habitat management metrics.
- Budget metrics.

SUPPORTS CORE VALUES:

CONNECT   PROTECT & HEAL   INSPIRE   NURTURE   CELEBRATE

2 Cultivate belonging by engaging and serving the community, with an emphasis on those who are under-represented in the outdoors.

Community members of all backgrounds, interests, and abilities are welcome and included. People feel pride in their parks and a sense of responsibility in stewarding a renowned park system.

Definition of Underrepresented: In the context of this plan, underrepresented refers to demographic groups for whom the percentage of members visiting Dakota County regional parks is lower when compared to their percentage in the overall county population.

Strategies

1. Establish a co-creation process that engages a broad range of community to inform the development of programs and services.

2. Establish direct communications and long-term, meaningful relationships with demographic groups who are under-represented in park visitor makeup.

3. Nurture partnerships that provide unique and exceptional programs.

4. Reduce barriers to park access through supportive, accessible, affordable services.

5. Provide timely public awareness/information about processes, programs, and resources.

6. Celebrate and reflect diverse cultures through programming, staffing, interpretation, art, wayfinding, and communications.

7. Establish accessibility goals for parks and greenways. See Parks & Greenways Chapter for more guidance.

8. Provide programs and spaces that support intergenerational experiences.

9. Consider additional advisory committees (e.g. Indigenous, park specific arts group, etc.)

10. Modify Dakota County Parks logo/tagline to better reflect new vision and mission.

In the 2050 Vision Plan planning process, community members highlight the importance of culturally important spaces/ programs, and removal of barriers to participation.

Metrics

- Visitor awareness/satisfaction surveys.

- Visitor demographic analysis.

- Program participation metrics.

- Cultural representation in planning and decision making

SUPPORTS CORE VALUES:

CONNECT   PROTECT & IMPROVE   INSPIRE   NURTURE   CELEBRATE

3 **Provide safe and positive core services, amenities, and experiences.**

As a baseline to the broader recreational experience, visitors have confidence that Dakota County facilities will be clean, cared-for and thoughtful to their needs. Visitors are comfortable in the parks and become loyal advocates.

Strategies

1. Adopt and implement core service/amenity guidelines for each unit type found in the Parks & Greenways Chapter. Guidelines address base levels of visitor support facilities (parking, wayfinding, toilets, drinking water, furnishings, shelter, boundary markers), security (lighting, visibility, surveillance), and base-level amenities (paths, interpretation, rec facilities).

2. Strive for universal access to services/amenities and key programs beyond minimum ADA requirements.

3. Maximize capital investment life cycles through data driven approaches to asset management and maintenance practices.

4. Enhance self-guided and self-directed visitor amenities such as interpretive and wayfinding features and digital content.

In community surveys, respondents note the importance of comfort amenities including bathrooms and drinking water, as well as cleanliness and maintenance as critical features.

Metrics

- Visitor awareness/satisfaction surveys.

- Visitors counts.

- Budget and operational metrics.

SUPPORTS CORE VALUES:

 CONNECT   PROTECT & IMPROVE   INSPIRE   NURTURE   CELEBRATE

4 Create dynamic spaces with unique and memorable experiences.

Dakota County Parks has worked through its 50+ year history to protect many of the most interesting landscapes in the County and knit them together through a network of greenways. The park system and programs set Dakota County apart. Each place is a unique attraction with an abundance of fun experiences for all ages. The collection of parks, greenways, and natural lands offers a breadth of activities and experiences.

Strategies

1. Within long range park and greenway plans, identify special landscape characteristics to be celebrated and leveraged for memorable experiences appropriate to their setting.

2. Develop a system-wide plan strategy to determine signature park features that identify a targeted spectrum of distinctive experiences, location prospects, implementation road map, and operations/revenue strategy.

3. Integrate a rotation of events, food, arts, and culture.

4. Offer nature immersion experiences in extraordinary natural landscapes.

5. Provide multi-generational spaces and experiences and places for families and community groups to gather.

> *In surveys, respondents requested a variety of multi-generational spaces to connect with community and the outdoors.*

Metrics

- Unique and memorable park features added.
- Visitor counts and feedback.
- Program participation.
- Vendor revenue metrics.
- Long-range plan implementation.
- Number of picnic shelter and indoor space reservations.
- Number of public events held.

SUPPORTS CORE VALUES:

CONNECT   PROTECT & IMPROVE   INSPIRE   NURTURE   CELEBRATE

5 Expand environmental stewardship through outdoor programs, learning, and volunteerism.

The impact of parks and natural areas transcends physical boundaries by motivating actions by individuals in all parts of their lives. Community outreach and education bring programs to people who become lifelong advocates.

Strategies

1. Offer year-round program and volunteer opportunities.

2. Partner with cities, schools, libraries, and other organizations to advance environmental learning and connection to career pathways.

3. Provide community outreach and education that inspires environmental awareness and understanding.

4. Encourage volunteerism to restore natural resources and build a conservation ethos.

5. Offer cultural programming and partner with community organizations for cultural leadership in planning and programs.

6. Develop and implement self-guided interpretation that inspires environmental stewardship.

Community members routinely request more programming that provides the combination of learning, recreation, and social interaction.

Metrics

- Visitor awareness/satisfaction surveys.

- Program and volunteer participation metrics.

- Number of collaborative community partners and cultural events.

SUPPORTS CORE VALUES:

CONNECT   PROTECT & IMPROVE   INSPIRE   NURTURE   CELEBRATE

6 Offer opportunities to improve physical, mental, spiritual health.

Parks provide core service to public health and can positively impact health through belonging, fun, exercise, access to nature, and social connection.

Strategies

1. Institute a health impact checklist for use in planning documents to identify influence across seasons, ages, cultures, and incomes.

2. Promote healthy, active lifestyles with a variety of recreational amenities and an emphasis on lifelong activities.

3. Partner with health related organizations to integrate care and wellness education into park environments.

4. Offer spaces that encourage consistent creative play, healthy food, and nature immersion.

5. Offer training and equipment for affordable and supportive activity participation.

6. Provide celebration venues for birth to death life and family milestones.

Over 50% of survey respondents ranked the health benefits of time in nature as the most important benefit of the park system.

Metrics

- Health trend indicators.

- Frequency of repeat visits.

- Visitor surveys.

SUPPORTS CORE VALUES:

CONNECT   PROTECT & IMPROVE   INSPIRE   NURTURE   CELEBRATE

7 Strengthen partnerships with Tribal Nations and Indigenous communities for the protection of lands and traditions.

Respecting the significance of this land for Native Nations and people is evolving and action based. Indigenous culture, language, and people are thriving and visible within parks and greenways. Through partnership, the park system reinforces understanding and respect of Indigenous cultures by all people.

Strategies

1. Partner with Indigenous communities and organizations to establish consultation protocols and collaborative processes.

2. Expand the relationship with Indigenous communities to holistically address culturally important sites. Conduct Traditional Cultural Places surveys, develop ownership, management, and access plans, as well as messaging and protection.

3. Reconnect Native people with the parks.

4. Infuse a naming policy that considers Indigenous culture.

5. Elevate Indigenous connections, traditions, stories, and cultural practices and promote deep and immersive intergenerational learning. Partner with Native schools, support language, host lodges and gatherings, and provide harvesting opportunities.

6. Employ Indigenous experts for teaching and planning and apply Traditional Ecological Knowledge (TEK) that stewards healthy water and land.

7. Expand public awareness about Native American people, land, history.

Tribal workshop participants suggested conducting more robust engagement with descendants of village sites, expanding liaison work, and returning more Indigenous presence to the Dakota County landscape.

Metrics

- Consistent presence of Native American people in the system.

- Tribal Nation and Native Organization partnerships and a framework for collaboration.

- Completion of consultant protocols.

- Positive feedback from Native American agencies, people, and organizations.

- Completion of plans and surveys.

- Completion of interpretive planning.

- Alignment with Met Council's work and policies developed with the American Indian Advisory Council.

SUPPORTS CORE VALUES:

CONNECT   PROTECT & IMPROVE   INSPIRE   NURTURE   CELEBRATE

8 **Locate new park units close to people and additionally, to protect natural areas and recreational assets.**

Parks, greenways, and open spaces are central to healthy and dynamic communities and continuous ecosystems throughout the County. Connecting natural areas supports ecological function and elevates the entire network to a regional experience.

Strategies

1. Secure new park units that fill service area gaps, increasing system offerings within convenient distance to people's lives.

2. Complete current greenway search corridors and add new greenway search corridors that interconnect Dakota County parks, other open spaces, and popular community gathering areas.

3. Leverage greenways to create a rural hiking network through farmland and natural areas.

4. Develop public water access facilities to establish water trails.

5. Protect park land and greenway corridors ahead of development pressure.

6. Collaborate with local communities and partner organizations toward establishing new parks, greenways, and bridging facilities.

7. Employ land protection tools to conserve shorelines and sensitive landscapes.

8. Work with partners to protect regionally important private recreational lands if they are threatened.

9. Collaborate with communities to create local trail loops that connect with County greenways.

10. Collaborate with other agencies to provide more nature based offerings along greenways (e.g. fishing piers, trail loops, nature play areas).

Residents in some parts of the County do not have ready access to County parks or greenways.

Metrics

- Acres and miles added to the system.

- Visitor counts.

- More residents live within a 10 minute drive of a regional park or greenway.

- More residents live within a 15 minute walk of a park or greenway.

SUPPORTS CORE VALUES:

CONNECT   NURTURE   CELEBRATE

9   Lead and support on ecological stewardship and climate resilience.

The Dakota County Park system is a leader in integrating protected natural areas under a unified umbrella. Parks and conservation areas are resilient reservoirs of ecological service that reaches beyond sustainability to impact climate resilience.

Strategies

1. Develop and maintain a system wide approach to identify, protect, connect, improve, and manage landscapes. Regularly update this approach based on data and best practices and integrate into long range plans.

2. Develop climate adaptation and mitigation strategies and resilient restoration practices.

3. Continually innovate reduced environmental impacts of park development, programming, and operations.

4. Prioritize habitat in environmentally sensitive areas.

5. Be a cooperative platform, providing technical support to other's protection efforts.

6. Reduce the park system's carbon footprint.

7. Use preliminary Conservation Focus Areas (CFAs) as a framework for protecting and connecting natural areas and habitat.

8. Continually assess new environmental threats and plan for responsive actions.

9. Assess cumulative effects and impacts on natural systems when planning new development and improvements in parks, greenways, and conservation areas. Minimize, mitigate, or prevent impacts.

> *Public comments indicate the belief that parks can be demonstrations of sustainability and environmental leadership.*

Metrics

- Carbon footprint assessments.

- Habitat and wildlife health metrics.

- Quantification of guideline and plan implementation.

SUPPORTS CORE VALUES:

CONNECT   **PROTECT & IMPROVE**   **INSPIRE**   **NURTURE**

10   Elevate cultural richness through arts, historic preservation, interpretation, and storytelling within the park system.

Dakota County collaborates with the full spectrum of communities around arts, historic preservation, and cultural interpretation, ensuring the parks system reflects the rich diversity of the community. The system inspires cultural appreciation and all people feel included and connected.

Strategies

1. Increase the amount and diversity of arts and cultural programming/events.

2. Identify multicultural stories, voices, and history.

3. Identify and prioritize places important to diverse cultures.

4. Connect visitors with the histories of the land and people.

5. Integrate art in parks and develop a public art plan.

6. Adaptively reuse physical structures within parks for recreational and educational purposes.

7. Develop and implement self-guided interpretation.

Community members highlight the importance of highlighting cultural programs, language, and practices as keys to welcoming diverse community members and fostering belonging in parks.

Metrics

- Quantification of implemented strategies.

- Number performance art events.

- Number of interpretive exhibits installed.

SUPPORTS CORE VALUES:

CONNECT   PROTECT & IMPROVE   INSPIRE   NURTURE   CELEBRATE

11   Seek values-based and mission-driven partnerships.

Effective teaming elevates our work and reach. We find optimal roles and maximize our effectiveness with partners to create an extensive network of environmental and community benefits.

Strategies

1. Expand strategic partnerships with cities and other agencies and organizations to provide nature based recreation, reduce duplication, and enhance service levels.

2. Work with cities and outreach partners to engage the public, provide events and programs, and build relationships with under-represented groups.

3. Develop a suite of tools (agreements, return-on-investment (ROI) analysis, vendor policies, others) that allow for streamlined communication/collaboration with potential vendors and service partners.

4. Continue the Greenway Collaborative with cities, state agencies, federal agencies, and other parters to create a robust and integrated network of trail-based recreation, water quality, natural resource corridors, and active transportation.

5. Partner with state and federal agencies to improve parks/sites with state and federal significance.

6. Partner with private land owners on conservation and land management.

7. Maximize interdepartmental partnerships for stacked benefits.

Respondents to the 2024 online survey identified community organizations and key connections into the park system

Metrics

- Quantification of implemented strategies.

- Number of different partnerships: landowners, agencies, community partners.

- Number of targeted programs.

SUPPORTS CORE VALUES:

CONNECT   PROTECT & IMPROVE   INSPIRE   NURTURE   CELEBRATE

12   Care for the system through sustainable and innovative funding.

The system operates efficiently and effectively supported by diverse revenue sources. Stable funding provides for consistent level of service and for the care of assets. Innovative funding is continually pursued to reach beyond the core services.

Strategies

1. Analyze Met Council visitor counts and visitor demographics as measures of success that directly impact regional funding levels.

2. Partner with a Dakota County parks non-profit philanthropic organization.

3. Seek out grants, legislative funding, and sources of private funding.

4. Explore revenue capture opportunities such as:

   . Carbon offset credits.

   . Donor giving and stewardship programs that align with the County gift policy and incorporate a financial assistance program to increase philanthropic interest.

   . Vendors and public/private partnerships.

5. Infuse the budgeting process with metrics that illustrate the balance between capital investments, programming costs, operational demands and revenue streams.

6. Evaluate organizational structural changes that would consolidate the full scope of parks, greenways, and natural systems operations.

Metrics

- Budget metrics.

- Partnership tallies.

- Grant metrics.

- Donor data.

SUPPORTS CORE VALUES:

CONNECT   NURTURE

13 Invest in a thriving parks workforce that represents the communities served.

Investment in people inspires energy and creativity that enriches the park system and boosts confidence among constituents. A renowned work environment at Dakota County Parks elevates career opportunities in the outdoor industries.

Strategies

1. Develop a year round staffing model.

2. Collaborate with schools and professional organizations to elevate park and natural resource career pathways.

3. Maintain an organizational structure and culture that provides opportunities for career growth and fulfillment.

4. Invest in innovative recruitment and retention strategies.

5. Identify and implement adequate staffing levels to operate and maintain amenities and services, and adjust accordingly to growth.

6. Invest in staff training and development to deepen cultural competencies.

7. Invest in youth programs, outdoor education, mentorship, and training that supports pathways to outdoor careers and future workforce diversity.

Community members identified representation in staffing and communications as important to their comfort in parks.

Metrics

- Workforce demographic analysis and satisfaction surveys.

- Workforce recruitment and training metrics.

- Regular compensation and classification reviews.

SUPPORTS CORE VALUES:

CONNECT   INSPIRE   NURTURE

14 Support local and sustainable economic development.

The park system contributes to broader economic systems and is fundamental to Dakota County's desirability as a place to live, work, and visit. Parks support sustainable economic development that meets current needs without compromising the ability of future generations to meet their own needs. Dakota County is celebrated as a place where carefully managed natural resources, positive environmental impact, and social equity are promoted alongside economic progress.

Strategies

1. In long range and natural resource management plans, identify how broader economic systems are being served/ enhanced.

2. Communicate that robust and healthy natural systems are essential infrastructure a thriving economy.

3. Bolster environmentally based local businesses and agri-tourism through proximity, interconnections, vendor relationships, and partnerships.

4. Support the local creative economy through vendor and partnership agreements in arts programming, design, and events.

5. Continually innovate engaging visitor destinations and signature events that attract from a broad region.

6. Develop parks that are environmentally and economically sustainable with the imperative of promoting social equity while preserving environmental health and quality.

7. Support urban development and redevelopment that incorporates parks and greenways and improves natural systems.

A 2009 study estimated that people walking, running, and biking on Twin Cities metro trails spent $4.7 million annual dollars in connection with their activities.

Metrics

- Vendor revenue and sustainability metrics.
- Economic impact studies.

SUPPORTS CORE VALUES:

CONNECT   PROTECT & IMPROVE   INSPIRE   NURTURE

15 Protect, improve, and manage the natural resources of Dakota County.

Working collaboratively with private and public stakeholders, ecologically important areas are prioritized for protection in Conservation Focus Areas, park inholdings, and easements. Surface and ground water are improved, natural resources are restored and strengthened, and the public is deeply engaged in the effort. Measured and deliberate recreational access offers immersion in nature.

Strategies

1. Use Conservation Focus Areas (CFAs):

    -   As a landowner discussion framework for protecting and connecting natural areas.
    -   To prioritize, protect, and restore surface/ ground waters and reduce flooding.
    -   To protect critical habitat on public and private lands.
    -   To provide compatible and appropriate outdoor recreation activities.

2. Partner with watershed organizations and others to promote, incentivize, and implement water management and soil health practices in agricultural areas.

3. Protect and restore critical infiltration areas outside CFAs identified by the County Groundwater Plan.

4. Develop and implement a Pollinator Habitat Network.

5. Provide timely Land Conservation Program information.

6. Implement the Dakota County Land Conservation Plan and support implementation of the Dakota County Ground Water Plan.

Nearly 70% of survey respondents ranked "protection and restoration of natural habitat" or "ecological benefits" as their first priority.

Metrics

- Landowner awareness surveys.
- Habitat management metrics.
- Water quality metrics.
- Budget measures.
- Acres and miles protected.

SUPPORTS CORE VALUES:

CONNECT   PROTECT & IMPROVE   INSPIRE   NURTURE

PARKS, GREENWAYS & LAND CONSERVATION

The Dakota County system has three basic categories of land holdings: conservation lands, greenways, and parks. Together, these areas form a diverse and well-integrated network that plays a crucial role in preserving the county's natural resources, fostering outdoor recreation, and enhancing overall community well-being. Conservation lands serve as vital habitats for native plant and animal species, protecting biodiversity while also improving air and water quality. Greenways provide essential corridors that connect communities, facilitate active transportation, and support active lifestyles. Parks, ranging from mostly natural park reserves to recreationally focused regional parks, offer residents and visitors a broad array of nature-based recreation.

This well-balanced portfolio delivers an impressive array of benefits, from ecological preservation and climate resilience to contribution to economic growth and public health improvements. As Dakota County continues to grow, with population increases and shifts in community demographics, the interests and needs of residents are also evolving. Expanding knowledge about sustainability, environmental stewardship, and equitable access to natural spaces highlights the importance of carefully planned growth within the system. Strategic investment in land acquisition, restoration projects, and infrastructure improvements will be necessary to ensure the system continues to serve both current and future generations effectively.

This chapter provides a framework for guiding system growth through the life of the 2050 Vision Plan. It outlines key priorities, identifies opportunities for enhancement, and offers strategies to balance conservation efforts with increased public demand for outdoor recreation. By proactively planning for the future, Dakota County can continue to foster a resilient, vibrant, and accessible network of conservation lands, greenways, and parks.

CONSERVATION FOCUS AREAS

Dakota County's 2020 Land Conservation Plan identifies and prioritizes land protection based on the combination of natural features, connectivity, hydrology, and land ownership with a renewed emphasis on water. Protection of these lands, called Conservation Focus Areas aims to increase voluntary protection and stewardship of private lands and improve coordination with other land conservation agencies and organizations. The plan identifies 24 preliminary CFAs, encompassing a wide variety of habitats throughout the County, including 28 specific native communities and 25 Species of Greatest Conservation Need.

Map 3.1 illustrates Conservation Focus Areas within which additional conservation easements and landowner agreements will be considered.

Map 3.1, Conservation Focus Areas
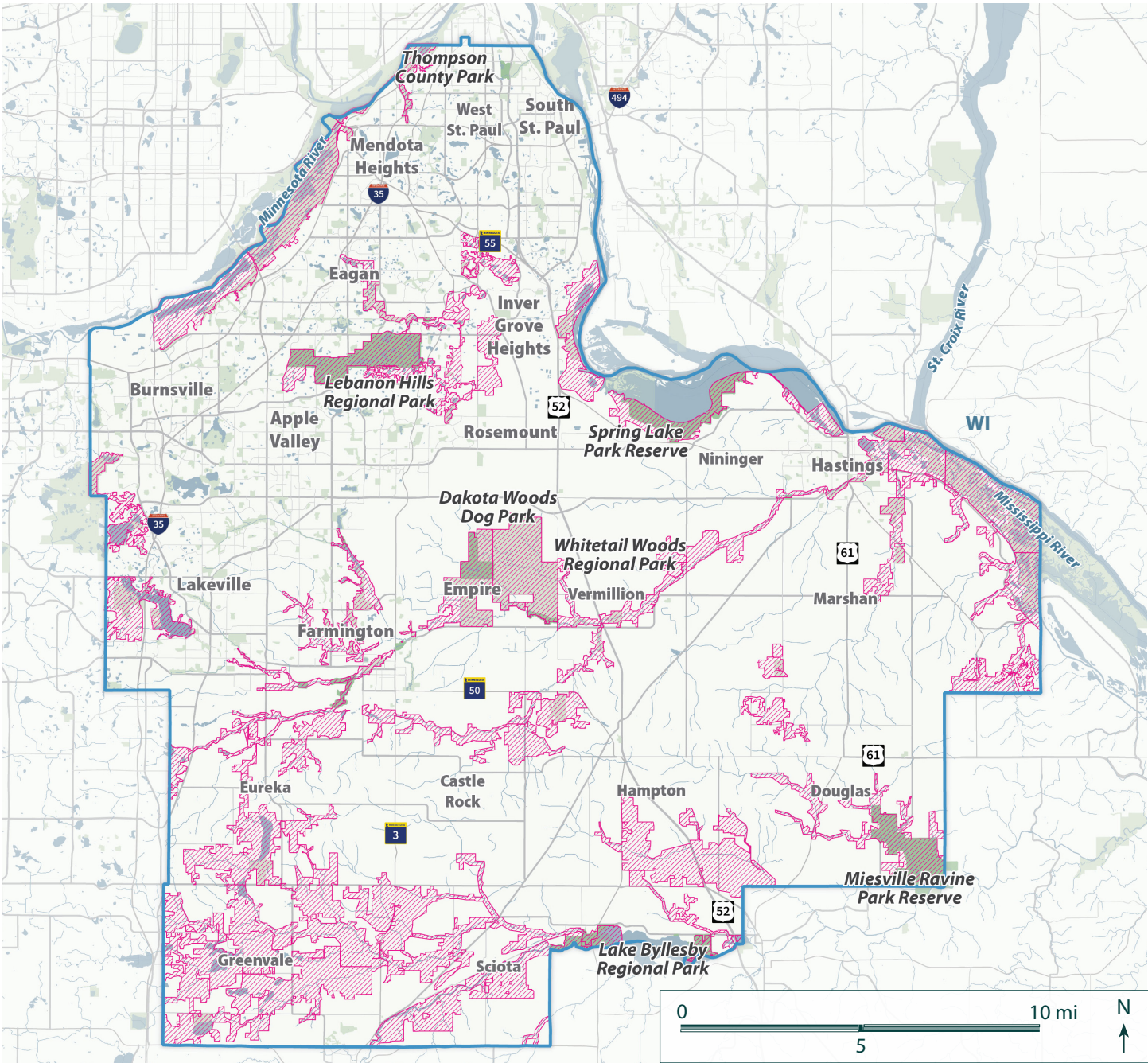
LEGEND

⌐ County Parks, Regional Parks, Park Reserves

▨ Preliminary Conservation Focus Areas

Existing Systems Chart

CURRENT PARK OFFERINGS

PARKS	Picnicking	Fire Ring	Ice Fishing	Visitor Center	Hiking	Snow-Shoeing	Dog On-Leash	Biking	Fishing	Geocaching	Play Areas	Sledding Hill	Cross-Country Skiing
Dakota Woods Dog Park					Y		Y						
Lake Byllesby Regional Park	Y	Y	Y		Y		Y	Y	Y	Y	Y		
Lebanon Hills Regional Park	Y	Y	Y	Y	Y	Y	Y	Y	Y	Y	Y	Y	Y
Miesville Ravine Park Reserve					Y	Y	Y		Y	Y			
Spring Lake Park Preserve	Y	Y			Y	Y	Y	Y		Y	Y		Y
Thompson County Park	Y	Y			Y	Y	Y	Y	Y	Y	Y		
Whitetail Woods Regional Park	Y	Y			Y	Y	Y		Y	Y	Y	Y	Y

Exhibit 3.1, Existing Systems Chart

Dakota Woods Dog Park:
- 16 acres
- Fenced
- Visitor parking

Lake Byllesby Regional Park:
- 620 acres
- 258,000 visits in 2023 (approx.)
- Lake recreation, camping

Lebanon Hills Regional Park:
- 2,000 acres
- 872,000 visits in 2023
- Staffed visitor center, swimming beach, trail recreation (mountain biking, equestrian, hiking, cross-country skiing)

Miesville Ravine Park Reserve:
- 1,600 acres
- 33,000 visits in 2023 (approx.)

	Dog Sled Trails	Ice Skating	Kick Sledding	Skate Skiing	Mountain Biking	Equestrian Trails	Campgrounds	Nature Education	Archery	Gardening	Swimming	Paddling	Camper Cabins	ADA Accessible Trails
	Y			Y			Y				Y	Y		Y
		Y	Y	Y	Y	Y	Y	Y			Y	Y		Y
												Y		
				Y				Y	Y	Y				Y
														Y
						Y							Y	Y

- Trout fishing, Cannon River access

Spring Lake Park Preserve:

- 1,100 acres
- 177,000 visits in 2023 (approx.)
- Mississippi River views & access, bison, indoor event space rental

Thompson County Park:

- 57 acres
- 350,000 visits in 2023 (approx.)

- Accessible playground, community gathering, indoor event space rental

Whitetail Woods Regional Park:

- 456 acres
- 97,000 visits in 2023 (approx.)
- Camper cabins, events, largest lake loop, sledding hill, nature play area

PARK CLASSIFICATION

	County Park Conservation Area	Regional Park Reserve	Regional Park
CLASSIFICATION	Parks	Parks	Parks
DEFINITION & PURPOSE	Land protection with county owned fee title of area of natural quality such as watercourses, wetlands, groundwater recharge areas, rare species, high quality habitat, or potential restoration to high quality habitat that are preserved for environmental benefits and/or natural resource-based recreation. Currently County Park Conservation Areas must have provision for public access per Minnesota State Statute 398.32.	Park reserves include large areas of land or water and provide for a diversity of outdoor recreation activities such as viewing and studying nature, conservation, swimming, picnicking, hiking, boating, camping and trail uses. What distinguishes park reserves from regional parks is the larger size, and the emphasis on preservation and ecological integrity. To establish and maintain an uncompromised sense of nature and protect high-quality natural resources, at least 80% of each park reserve should be managed as wild lands that protect the ecological functions of the native landscape. Up to 20% of a park reserve may be developed for compatible recreational activities	Area of natural or ornamental quality for nature-oriented outdoor recreation such as picnicking, boating, fishing, swimming, camping, and trail uses. Most regional parks are adjacent to lakes, rivers, or streams.
LOCATION	Within a Conservation Focus Area, adjacent to an existing county or regional park, or along existing or planned greenway corridor or greenway search corridor, if another protection mechanism is not practical. Exceptions can be considered by the Dakota County Board.	Within a Conservation Focus Area, adjacent to an existing county or regional park, or along existing or planned greenway corridor or greenway search corridor, if another protection mechanism is not practical. Exceptions can be considered by the Dakota County Board.	Where natural resource occurs or has high potential to occur.
SERVICE AREA	Where resource occurs.	10 min drive.	10 min drive.
SIZE	Based on resources present.	1,000+ acres	200-500 acres typically (100 acres min.)
EXAMPLES	9 existing sites	Miesville Ravine Park Reserve	Spring Lake Park Reserve	Lake Byllesby Regional Park	Lebanon Hills Regional Park	Whitetail Woods Regional Park

Exhibit 3.2, Park Classification Chart

Regional Special Recreation Feature	Regional Greenway	County Park
Parks	**Greenways & Trails**	**Parks**
Special features provide specialized or single-purpose recreational activities. Some special features require unique management approaches and include specific programming efforts. Special features may include zoos, conservatories, arboretums, unique ecological areas, display gardens, bridging facilities, or cultural landscapes. Bridging facilities are a sub-classification. They may be nested within a regional park, park reserve, or trail. They seek to attract and introduce new outdoor recreation users to the Regional Parks and Trails System. Their purpose is to help address inequities that contribute to lower participation rates among prioritized communities. Bridging facilities have a clear and unique purpose. Bridging facilities are not designed as a one-size-fits-all approach. Cultural Landscapes are a sub-classification that recognize lands with significant cultural value to American Indian Tribes, organizations, and communities. Cultural landscapes of significance: • Recognize and protect culturally significant landscapes including American Indian burial grounds • Help interpret and educate visitors on the significance of the cultural landscape • Do not require that recreation be part of the unit. • Designed to protect areas of significant cultural or sacred meaning to groups. This includes protecting these spaces and designing them to limit public access and foot traffic. Dakota County will evaluate if the new classifications are desired.	Linear corridor that combines water quality, recreation, habitat, transportation, interpretation. Supports nature based recreation close to where people live.	Area of natural quality for outdoor recreation such as walking, viewing, sitting, picnicking; could have some field and court games and specialized activities.
Special features are located where unique natural and or cultural conditions exist offering a compelling sense of place. Bridging facilities are located close to their target audience.	Adjacent to natural resources and/or connect components of the regional system. The County collaborates with national, state, and city park agencies with land adjacent to greenways to improve access to nature based recreation and non-motorized connectivity to greenways.	Proximity to community and/or where resource allows.
Regional (metropolitan area).	Regional and local communities. Approximately one and a half mile spacing between corridors.	5 minute drive.
Appropriate to feature.	Multiple communities.	25-200 acres
Silverwood Park, special recreation feature (Three Rivers Park District) | Bridging facilities and cultural landscapes are a new regional designation, with no existing facilities	**Minnesota River | Mississippi River | River to River | North Creek | Vermillion River | Veterans Memorial Greenways**	**Thompson County Park | Dakota Woods Dog Park**

PARK AND GREENWAY SEARCH AREAS

GREENWAY CORRIDORS

Dakota County is home to a diverse and growing network of greenways that serve as essential connections between communities, natural landscapes, and recreational destinations. Dakota County intends to build out this system, fill current gaps, and expand into future residential growth areas; ensuring that greenways remain accessible, functional, and ecologically beneficial for generations to come.

To guide this expansion, Dakota County has identified greenway search corridors (Map 3.2 and Exhibit 3.3) where future greenways are planned or envisioned. These search corridors are selected based on a combination of factors, including existing gaps in the greenway network, community needs, environmental significance, and opportunities for land acquisition or partnership with local communities. The identification of these corridors is a proactive step toward creating a fully connected and comprehensive system that maximizes recreational, environmental, and economic benefits.

The process of identifying greenway search corridors has involved comprehensive planning and collaboration among county officials, city governments, community organizations, and residents. Factors such as land availability, environmental sensitivity, transportation needs, and funding opportunities are carefully analyzed to determine where future greenway corridors can be most effectively developed.

Dakota County prioritizes search corridors based on their potential to close network gaps, provide equitable access to underserved communities, and enhance regional connectivity. Special attention is given to locations where greenways can link existing parks, nature areas, and trail systems, ensuring a seamless and enjoyable experience for users.

In 2010, Dakota County created a program called the Greenway Collaborative as a model for building greenways with partners (local communities, developers, and stakeholder organizations). The program has been wildly successful and contributed to the creation of much of the current County greenway system as well as prompted the development of several local trail loops that connect with County greenways. The Greenway Collaborative program is intended to be expanded to include greater County support for local trail loops and nature based recreation linked with city parks. Expansion of the greenway collaborative will be further explored and defined in the update to the Dakota County Greenway Guidebook.

The expansion of greenways in Dakota County represents a forward-thinking investment in sustainability, recreation, and community well-being. By strategically identifying greenway search corridors, the County is laying the groundwork for a future where residents can enjoy safe, scenic, and environmentally friendly routes that enhance both mobility and conservation efforts. This chapter outlines the framework for identifying, planning, and implementing these greenways to create a stronger, healthier, and more connected Dakota County.

PARK AREAS

Dakota County parklands provide highly valued, nature-based recreation, environmental benefits, and community spaces. Parks serve as hubs for outdoor activity, nature preservation, and social gatherings, contributing to the overall quality of life for residents and visitors. As the County's population expands and recreational needs evolve, there is an increasing demand to enhance and extend the park system. To address this, Map 3.3 and Exhibit 3.4 identifies park search areas where future parks may be developed or existing parklands expanded.

Park search areas represent a strategic approach to ensuring that residents across the county have equitable access to high-quality nature-based parks, especially where they serve demographic groups who visit parks at a lower rate than expected, compared to the demographics of the county population. The designation of these search areas is based on data-driven planning, community input, and environmental considerations, ensuring that each new park contributes meaningfully to the county's overall vision for open spaces and outdoor recreation.

The identification of park search areas is guided by Dakota County's long-term commitment to enhancing recreation, conservation, and public well-being. Selection considers factors including:

- Population Growth and Development Trends.
- Environmental and Natural Resource Value.
- Existing Park Gaps.
- Connectivity to Trails and Greenways.
- Access to the Minnesota and Mississippi Rivers.

Potential candidate sites are identified as a starting point for future discussion and assessment of regional park suitability. Candidate site designation does not imply that a location must become a future park and there may be candidate sites that have not yet been identified.

County Park Conservation Areas (CPC's, Dakota County owned)

County Park Conservation Areas are a tool for land protection using fee title ownership by Dakota County. The focus is on natural quality such as watercourses, wetlands, groundwater recharge areas, rare species, high quality habitat (or potential restoration of) that are preserved for environmental benefits and/or natural resource-based recreation. Currently County Park Conservation Areas must have provision for public access per Minnesota State Statue 398.32.

New County Park Conservation Areas could be pursued adjacent to existing (Map 1.1) or future (Maps 3.2 & 3.3) county parks, regional parks or greenways if another protection mechanism is not practical.

Privately Owned Recreation Areas

In addition to the park candidate sites identified, Dakota County will consider preserving land previously owed/operated by private or public entities that may no longer be in active use, but provides significant community recreation or natural resources value, by transforming it into protected public open space. This approach can serve expanded community benefits including:

1. Land Conservation: Preserving areas with historical, ecological, or scenic value.
2. Public Access and Recreation: Expanding open space for outdoor recreation, which can enhance community well-being and increase public engagement with natural spaces.
3. Historic Preservation: Retaining historical significance of former recreational sites by converting into accessible public resources.

Dakota County may consider evaluating sites nearing the end of their operational lifespan and working with stakeholders—landowners, local governments, and community members—to transition these spaces into public ownership or conservancy partnerships.
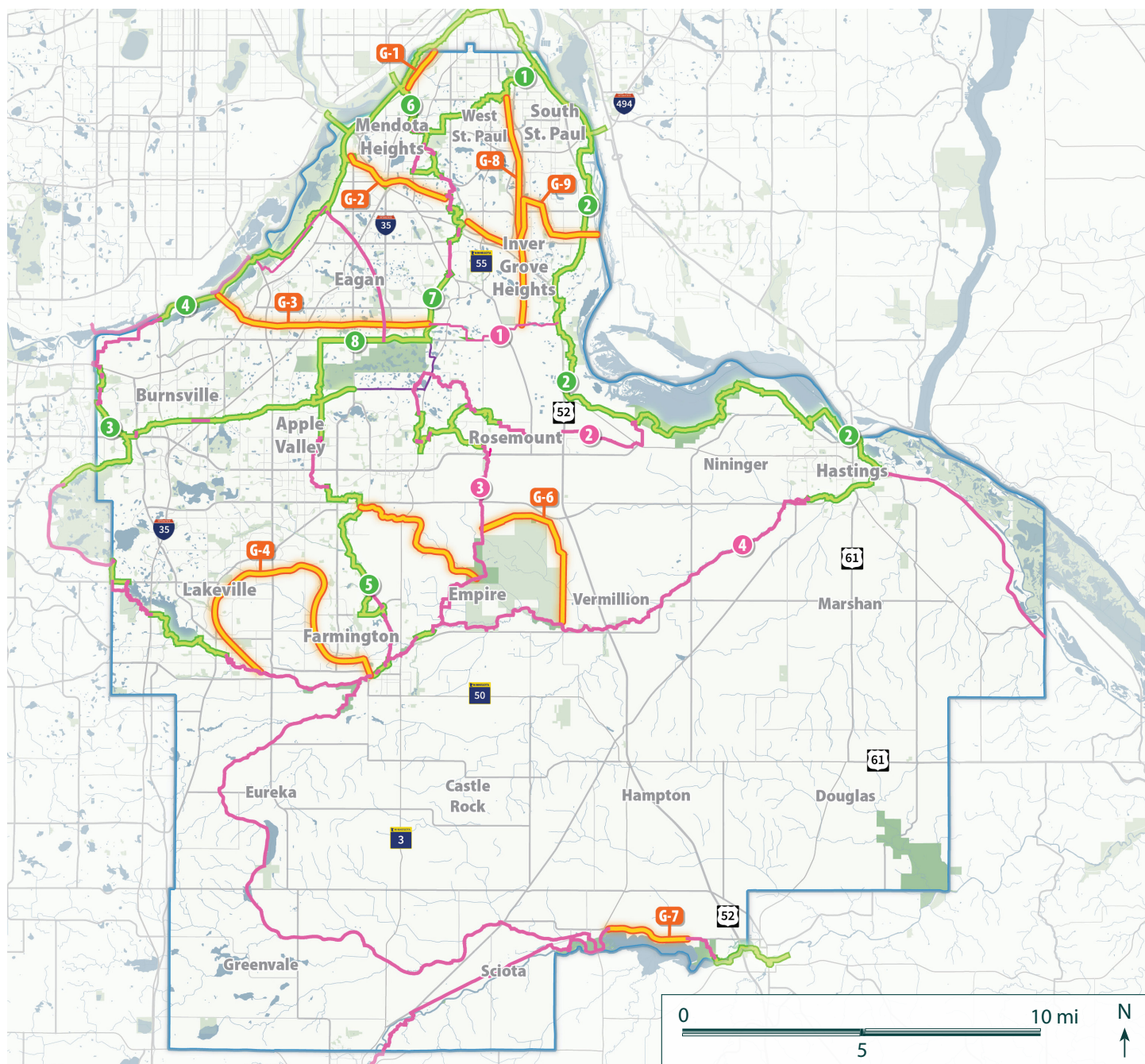
LEGEND

Existing/In Development County Greenways
1. River to River
2. Mississippi River
3. Lake Marion
4. Minnesota River
5. North Creek
6. Big Rivers Regional Trail
7. Lebanon Hills
8. Greenway Linking Route

2030 Greenway Vision
1. *Veterans Memorial Greenway*
2. *Rosemount Greenway*
3. *Vermillion Highlands Greenway*
4. *Vermilion River Greenway*

Greenway Linking Route

New Greenway Search Corridors
- G-1 *Lilydale - St. Paul*
- G-2 *Soo Line*
- G-3 *Highland Trail*
- G-4 *Farmington - Lakeville*
- G-5 *Empire Greenway - Mining Lakes*
- G-6 *Vermillion Highlands to Vermillion River*
- G-7 *Lake Byllesby Greenway*
- G-8 *Highway 52 Trail*
- G-9 *Lebanon Greenway to Mississippi River*

NEW GREENWAY SEARCH CORRIDORS

Map ID	Corridor Name	Potential P'ship	Suitability / Feasibility
G-1 Lilydale	Lilydale - St. Paul		Feasibility study needed. Connects Cherokee Regional Park and trail in St. Paul. Mile and a half gap from Highway 55 bridge to Cherokee Regional Park on top of bluff.
G-2 Eagan, Mendota Heights	Soo Line (alignment study)	Cities, MN Vikings	Feasibility study completed. Addresses freeway barriers. 3.5 miles Serves northern Eagan residential growth.
G-3 Eagan, Burnsville	Highliine Trail	City	Six-mile extension of Veteran's Memorial Greenway to the east. Facility 90% in place. Feasibility study for Burnsville segment needed.
G-4 Lakeville, Farmington	Farmington - Lakeville	Cities	Feasibility study needed. Most land in private ownership. Seven mile east-west connection between North Creek and Lake Marion Greenways. Potential to establish corridor in advance of/along with development.
G-5 Empire	Empire Greenway - mining lakes	Private Industry	Feasibility study needed. Opportunity to establish greenway with reclamation of gravel mining areas and newly created lakes
G-6 Empire	Vermillion Highlands to Vermillion River	Township	Feasibility study needed. Most land in public ownership. Greenway with trail following edge of Vermillion Highlands VMA. Added 6-mile greenway would create 14-mile recreational loop trail.
G-7 Randolph, City of Randolph, Waterford, Sciota	Lake Byllesby Greenway	DNR, City, Township	Current partnership with MnDNR, part of planned Mill Towns State Trail. Connection between Lake Byllesby east and west sections, currently identified in the Lake Byllesby Regional Park Master Plan.
G-8 Inver Grove Heights, West St. Paul	Highway 52 Trail		Feasibility study needed. Most land in public ownership. Six of eight miles existing. Would allow regional funding for gaps. Increases local community proximity to greenway.
G-9 Inver Grove Heights	Lebanon Greenway to Miss. River Greenway	City	Feasibility study needed. Five miles connecting Lebanon Greenway to Mississippi River Greenway. Addresses east west service gap in northeastern part of County.

Exhibit 3.3, New Greenway Search Corridor Chart

Map 3.3, New Park Search Areas
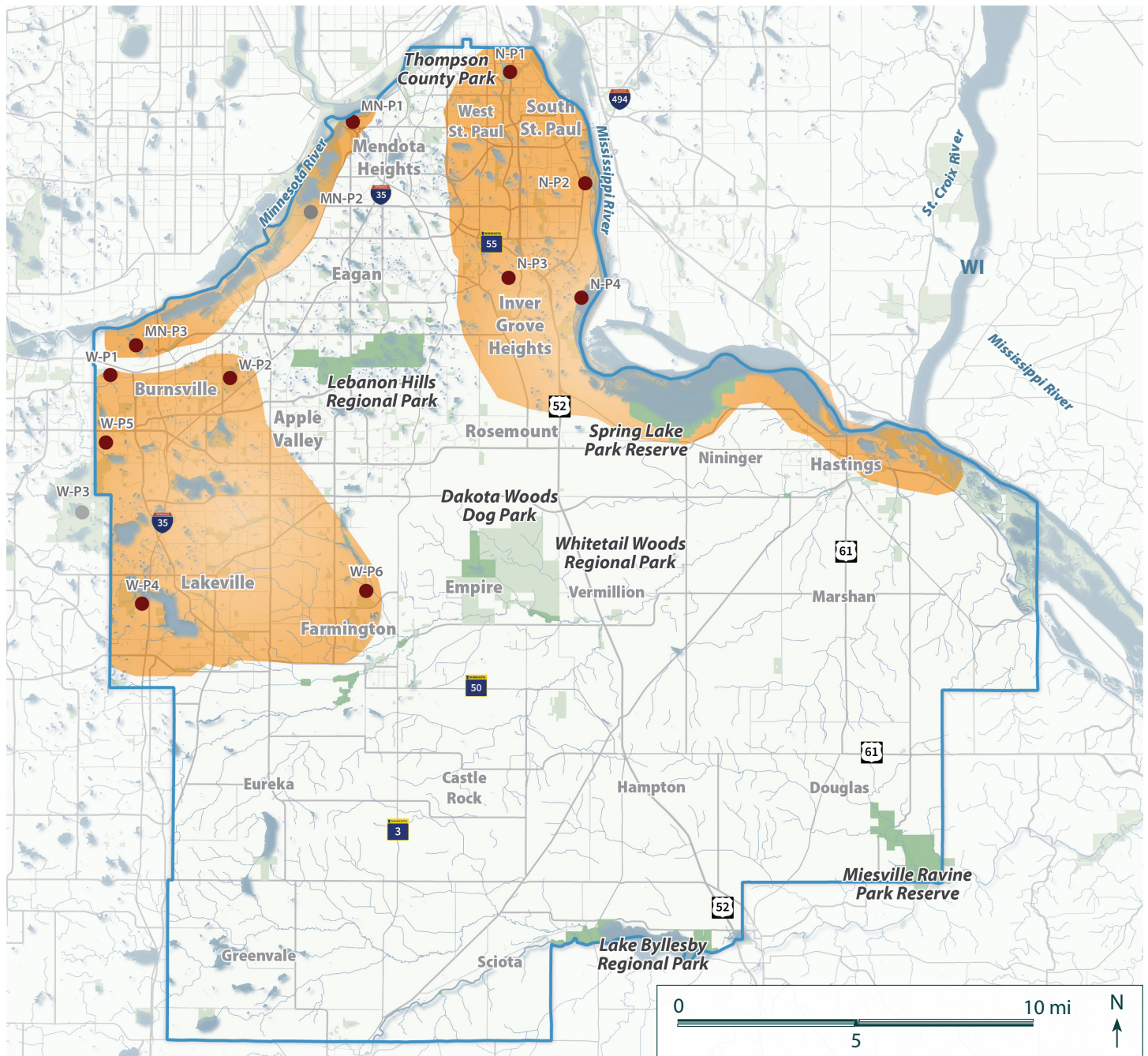
LEGEND

- ⫛ County Parks, Regional Parks, Park Reserves
- 🔴 Potential New Park Candidate Sites
- ⚫ New Park Candidate Sites
- 🟠 New Park Search Areas

NEW PARK SEARCH AREAS & CANDIDATE SITES

Map ID	Name	Potential P'ship	Suitability / Feasibility	Recommendation
N-P1 W. St. Paul, S. St. Paul	Thompson/ Kaposia/K. Landing	City	In public ownership. Meets regional size min. Lakes and streams present.	Explore reg. status and bridging facility status with Met Council, city, ISD 197.
N-P2 Inver Grove Heights	Swing Bridge Marina	City, private marinas, DNR, NPS	Partial public ownership. Could meet reg. size limit. River frontage. Motorized landing service gap. High vis., vehicle access.	Regional park or regional special use candidate site for further exploration.
N-P3 Inver Grove Heights	Marcott Lakes Nature Ctr.	Dodge Nature Center	Private ownership (some conserv. easemnts). Could meet 200 ac. size. Lakes present. Within CFA.	Regional park or regional special use candidate site - further explore (feas. study).
N-P4 Inver Grove Heights	Pine Bend Bluffs - Riv. Lake Area	NPS, DNR, private marinas	Partial public ownership. River frontage. Boat landing serv. gap. Somewhat remote. Within CFA.	Regional park or regional special use candidate - further explore.
MN-P1 Mend. Hts, Mendota	MN River Bluffs - Fort Snelling	Cities, DNR, Tribal	Pot. cultural dist., improved nature-based rec. & natural res. management on Fort Snelling Park land. MN River. Within CFA.	Regional special use candidate site or partnership project for further exploration.
MN-P2 Burnsville	US Fish and Wildlife Refuge	USFW	Potential to improve nature-based recreation and natural resource management on USFW land.	Regional special use candidate site or partnership project for further exploration.
MN-P3 Burnsville	MN River Quarry Lake	City, USFW, industry	In private ownership designated for redevelopment. MN River frontage. Pot. for park and water rec. Within CFA.	Regional park candidate site (long-term).
W-P1 Burnsville	R. Kramer Nature Preserve	City	In city ownership along Lake Marrion Gnwy. Current mix of sports invites new users.	Bridging facility or partnership candidate site for further exploration.
W-P2 Burnsville	Terrace Oaks Park	City	In city ownership. Meets regional park size threshold. No lake or river access. East & West = 240 ac.	Bridging facility or partnership candidate site for further exploration.
W-P3 Scott Cnty	Murphy Han Reg Pk	Three Rivers Park District	Existing reg. park reserve could better serve w/added facilities.	Explore partnership with Three Rivers.
W-P4 Lakeville	Ritter Farm Area - Lake Marion Park	City	Partial City ownership. Offer mix of rec. and nat. res. Meets 200-acre size. Lakefront. Within CFA.	Regional park or partnership candidate site for further exploration.
W-P5 Burnsville	Kelleher Park	City	Adjacent to Murphy Hanrehan. Does not meet 200-acre threshold. Along Lake Marion Greenway. Within CFA.	Bridging facility, partnership candidate, or Lk. Marion Grnway tailhead - further explore.
W-P6 Farmington	Jim Bell Nature Preserve	City	Does not meet 200-acre size (130 acres). Along N. Crk. Grnwy. Within CFA.	Partnership candidate site, or North Creek Greenway Trailhead - further explore.

Exhibit 3.4, New Park Search Areas & Candidate Sites Chart

CORE SERVICES AND AMENITIES

Goal 3 highlights the importance of core provisions in fostering safety and comfort in parks. Establishing a foundation of facilities that provide essential visitor support and the most sought-after activities helps visitors know what to expect and look for. For some visitors, particularly first time or infrequent visitors, large natural areas can be disorienting. The goal is to allow all visitors to enjoy the full park experience with the comfort of knowing that they are supported along the way.

Definition
An ACTIVITY is a specific action that someone does or participates in.

Definition
An AMENITY is a feature or facility that enhances the quality of a place.

Exhibit 3.5, Activity Menu by Facility Type provides examples of the types of activities expected in each park classification and is intended to be a starting point for determining the program that will be guided in long-range plans. Three tiers of activities can be expected in most parks:

1. Base activities and facilities that can be expected in all parks (Y)

2. Activities that have broad popularity and can be expected in most parks (M)

3. Signature activities intended to unique park qualities and provide unique experiences.

Community members identified comfort amenities such as bathrooms and water/drinking fountains as critical features.

ACTIVITY MENU BY FACILITY TYPE

Activity	Amenity	*C.P.C.	County Park	Regional Park	Regional Reserve	Regional Special Use	Greenway
Unit Access & Trail Heads							
Identification	Signage with unit name, boundary signage	Y	Y	Y	Y	Y	
Orientation	Kiosk with rules, wayfinding signs	Y	Y	Y	Y	Y	Y
Parking	Lot or on-street area		Y	Y	Y	Y	Y
Visitor Safety, Comfort, and Convenience	Shade, benches, water, electric charging, bike fix-it station, picnicking, trash, recycling, pet waste bags		Y	Y	Y	Y	Y
Non-motorized access	Paved trail connection to main trailhead		Y	M	M	Y	Y
Maintenance and upkeep	General maintenance and upkeep needed to ensure a positive visitor experience	Y	Y	Y	Y	Y	Y

Exhibit 3.5, Activity Menu by Facility Type Chart

ACTIVITY MENU BY FACILITY TYPE

Activity	Amenity	*C.P.C.	County Park	Regional Park	Regional Reserve	Regional Special Use	Greenway
Access to Nature							
Access to Nature	Natural habitat and/or water access near trailheads/visitor areas	M	Y	Y	Y	M	Y
Immersion in nature	Natural habitat further from park trailheads/visitor areas	M	Y	Y	Y		M
Wildlife Viewing	Habitat restored/managed for specific species (e.g. bird, bison)	M	Y	Y	Y		M
Scenic views	Overlooks, benches	M	Y	Y	Y		Y
Visitor Health and Safety							
Drinking water	Fountains and bottle fillers		Y	Y	Y	Y	Y
Restrooms	Restroom buildings		Y	Y	Y	Y	Y
Warming / cooling	Heating or cooling areas, shade structures		Y	Y	Y	Y	Y
Emergency preparedness	Storm shelter, cell service, phone, internet and/or emergency call posts, National Grid signage, public facing emergency response plan		Y	Y	Y	Y	Y
Equipment Rental							
Winter	Rental pod/trailer (e.g. skis, snowshoes, adaptive equipment)		M	M	M		
Summer	Rental pod/trailer (e.g. paddle boards, canoes, adaptive equipment)		M	M	M		

Exhibit 3.5 - Activity Menu by Facility Type * *County Park Conservation Areas (C.P.C.)*
**Include bridging facilities*

ACTIVITY MENU BY FACILITY TYPE

Activity	Amenity	*C.P.C.	County Park	Regional Park	Regional Reserve	Regional Special Use	Greenway
Trail Activities							
Hiking	Natural-surface Trail		Y	Y	Y	Y	
Walking, accessible	ADA-accessible trail, winter snow removal		Y	Y	Y	Y	Y
Biking	Paved trail		Y	Y	M	Y	Y
Mountain Biking	Single track soft-surface course						
Cross Country Skiing	Groomed trails, classic or skate		Y	Y	Y		
Horseback Riding	Natural-surface trails, ~10-feet wide						
Snowshoeing	Existing trails or overland		Y	Y	Y		
Resting, viewing	Benches, overlooks, rest areas		Y	Y	Y	Y	Y
Geocaching	Existing soft and paved trail network		Y	Y	Y	Y	Y
Dog-powered sports	Natural surface trail		M	M	M		
Water Recreation							
Boating (power boating, rowing, and sailing)	Launch, put-in, trailer parking			Y	Y		
Paddling (canoe, kayak, paddle board)	Put-in, portage, signed water trail		Y	Y	Y		
Swimming, wading	Beach, lagoon		Y	Y	Y		
Fishing	Designated shore areas, piers		Y	Y	Y		
Sauna	Sauna		Y	Y	Y		

ACTIVITY MENU BY FACILITY TYPE

Activity	Amenity	*C.P.C.	County Park	Regional Park	Regional Reserve	Regional Special Use	Greenway
Programming							
Nature and cultural education and appreciation	Classes, tours, guided hikes, wildlife viewing areas/blinds, outdoor classroom/shelters		Y	Y	Y		
Nature and cultural interpretation	Self-guided displays		Y	Y	Y		
Recreation education	Skill-building classes		Y	Y	Y		
Events (festivals, concerts)	Gathering areas, indoor and/or outdoor performance spaces	M	Y	Y	Y		
Volunteerism	Organized volunteer program for stewardship, event		Y	Y	Y		
Public art	Displays, participatory activities, performance		Y	Y	Y		
Gathering Areas							
Congregation space, staff interaction	Visitor centers, interpretive/nature centers		Y	Y	Y		
Picnicking	Tables, grills, shelters, recycling/trash, non-reservation picnic shelters		Y	Y	Y	Y	Y
Play	Nature play area, accessible playgrounds		Y	Y	Y	Y	Y
Private event rentals	Visitor centers, picnic shelters		Y	Y	Y		
Lawn sports	Flexible flat lawn area		Y	Y	Y		
Sledding hill	Hill suitable for sledding		Y	Y	Y		

ACTIVITY MENU BY FACILITY TYPE

Activity	Amenity	*C.P.C.	County Park	Regional Park	Regional Reserve	Regional Special Use	Greenway
Camping							
Rustic tent	Designated camping areas and pit toilet		Y	Y	Y		
Tent	Staffed tent area with restroom/shower building		Y	Y	Y	Y	Y
RV	Staffed RV area with hook-ups, access roads, restroom/shower building		Y	Y	Y	Y	Y
Indoor (rentals)	Cabins, yurts with restroom/shower building		Y	Y	Y		

Whitetail Woods Camper Cabins

SIGNATURE FACILITIES

Many activities and facilities will occur less frequently within Dakota County Parks but contribute greatly to a park or place's overall identity. Strategically locating these unique amenities across the system, paired with core services, creates a consistently supportive park environment that also offers a variety of experiences. The concept of service areas may or may not be relevant to these amenities, as the character of the land and community may influence their provision. The following classifications and lists are intended to illustrate examples and are not exhaustive. These activities and facilities will be explored and recommended in individual park long range plans.

SIGNATURE EXPERIENCES

If an activity is not indicated as Base, or appropriate for most parks, it can be considered as a signature activity for that park classification as part of the park unit long-range plan. Examples of signature facilities include, but are not limited to:

- Disc golf
- Archery (Spring Lake)
- Climbing wall
- Golf-mini
- Farmers market
- Horse trails
- Maze (labyrinth)
- Sustainable perennial agriculture display
- Ropes/adventure course
- Sailing (Lake Byllesby)
- Snow making and lit ski trails
- Nature center / interpretive center
- Retreat center
- Support facilities for signature events for each park (e.g. overflow parking, electrical outlets, shelters, etc.)
- Support facilities and equipment for signature activities
- Facilities for astronomy

- Zip line
- Tubing
- Community gardens / food productive landscapes
- Water trails

Greenways may also support signature activities in select areas outside of the base activities. Some of these popular amenities are considered core for parks and some could be classified as signature. A potential list includes:

- Overlooks and observation towers
- Public art and gateway elements
- Nature play and recreation
- Community gardens
- Fishing and water access
- Gathering areas

ACCESSIBILITY

Embracing accessibility and universal design are an important way for Dakota County to set expectations that make visitors confident and comfortable in core services. Universal design strives to move beyond "separate but equal" access to make all places and facilities functional for everyone. While the goal is to strive for universal design across the system, this standard is especially critical for the core services and amenities. Inviting all people to integrally use the essential visitor support functions in every area sends a strong message about belonging and equity. This section provides initiatives and guidelines to maximize accessibility across the system.

"Universal design is a design that is usable by all people, to the greatest extent possible, without the need for adaptation or specialized design."
- Ron Mace

ORGANIZATIONAL STEPS:

- Complete/update the system's ADA transition plan, in accordance with US Access Board's Architectural Barriers Act (ABA) guidelines and information from other agencies and organizations (e.g., National Park Service, US Forest Service, State Parks, Minnesota State Council on Disabilities).

- Conduct training to advance the efforts, streamline the provision of services, and to connect staff with resources.

- Build a team of internal and external experts that can help Dakota County navigate complex decisions and codes.

UNDERSTANDING AND COMMUNICATIONS:

- Engage groups and individuals living with disabilities to gain insight on their needs and interests.

- Provide information on the system's accessibility improvements, through an accessibility webpage and in other public communications.

PROJECT/PROGRAM/PLACE BASED:

- Incorporate programs and services to serve a broad range of disabilities, where possible, mobility, visual, hearing, and sensory needs.

- Ensure that visitor facilities are accessible and provide comparable experiences for park defining activities (e.g., buildings, picnic areas, water access points, beaches, play areas, access paths, camping, and viewing areas).

- Provide at least one accessible trail loop in every park that is close to primary visitor facilities and provides a natural immersion experience, such as loops around lakes or loops with scenic views.

Dakota County Parks and Greenways in Proximity to Elderly and Disabled Populations

Residents with an ambulatory difficulty	River to River Greenway (7.2% of people within 1 mile)
	Spring Lake Park Reserve (4.7% of people within 3 miles)
Residents with any other disabilities	River to River Greenway (6.3% of people within 1 mile)
	Spring Lake Park Reserve (5.3% of people within 3 miles)
Residents Age 65+	River to River Greenway (27.5% of people within 1 mile)
	Spring Lake Park Reserve (17.4% of people within 3 miles)

Exhibit 3.6, Proximity to Elderly and Disabled Populations Chart

Thompson County Park is currently the Dakota County Park in proximity to the most senior housing units in the county.

About 12" of groups visiting a Dakota County Park surveyed by Met Council had a resident with a disability.

IMPLEMENTATION

The Dakota County Parks, Greenways, and Natural Areas 2050 Vision Plan lays out a bold and transformative path for the future of the county's outdoor spaces. To bring this vision to life, a well-structured implementation strategy is essential; one that balances ambition with feasibility, leverages available resources, and fosters strong partnerships. This chapter outlines the key components necessary for translating long-term aspirations into actionable steps that will sustain and enhance Dakota County's parks, greenways, and natural areas for generations to come.

Successful implementation will require a combination of funding strategies, organizational capacity building, strategic partnerships, and clearly defined priorities. This plan identifies the multiple funding tools available to Dakota County for diverse and sustainable financial resources for land acquisition, park development, and ongoing maintenance. Also as part of the financial equation, this chapter introduces the long-term opportunity of partnering with a philanthropic organization dedicated to securing private funding and fostering community investment in Dakota County's green spaces.

To maximize financial sustainability, the implementation strategy also explores a cost recovery model that aligns funding sources with park services while maintaining affordability and access. Expanding revenue opportunities such as concessions, programming, lodging, and rental services will further support the financial viability of the system and enhance visitor experiences. At the same time, ensuring that the county's organizational structure is equipped to effectively manage and implement the vision will be crucial.

Establishing clear priorities will help Dakota County focus its efforts on projects and initiatives with the greatest impact guided by community needs, environmental benefits, and financial feasibility. Finally, this chapter concludes with priorities and next steps, outlining the actions needed for a thriving and resilient park system through 2050 and beyond.

FUNDING TOOLS

Dakota County has historically and continues to apply a broad range of funding tools to its system of parks, greenways and natural areas. The following charts offer an overview of general funding sources (Exhibit 4.1). Specific state and federal funding opportunities can be found in Appendix C.

Exhibit 4.1 distinguishes between "sustainable" and "innovative" types of funding. Sustainable funding can be thought of as typical revenue streams that can be expected year-over-year even though the level of funding may vary from each. Innovative funding require deliberate and dedicated pursuits, partnerships, and actions that go beyond typical.

Dakota County Parks Funding

Funding Source	Tool	Type	Description	Potential Use
Regional Funding	Local	Sustainable	State funding (bonding, Legacy, ENRTF, etc) partially matched by Met Council & distributed to impl. agencies.	Land acq., capital investment, op. & maint.
County Levy	Local	Sustainable	Direct funding from Dakota County's general fund or special levies.	Operations, maintenance, and park development.
Federal Grants & Programs	Federal	Innovative	Federal grants for parks and recreation projects through NPS, Forest Service and others.	Land acquisition, infrastructure improvements, environmental conservation.
State Grants & Programs	State	Innovative	Environment and Natural Resources Trust Fund, Minnesota DNR, etc.	Habitat restoration, park devel. trail expansion, historical preservation.
Bond Measures	Local	Innovative	Voter-approved bonds for major park investments.	Major cap. imprvmts, new park facilities, land conservation.
Sponsor Recognition	Local	Innovative	Corporate sponsorship of facilities or events (subject to legal and statutory review).	Signage, amenities, community events funding.
Philanthropic Donations	PPP	Innovative	Contributions from individuals, foundations, or non-profits.	Cap. & conservation projects, youth programs, ed. initiatives.
Program & User Fees	Local	Sustainable	Rental fees, program fees.	Facility maint., event funding, staffing.
Public/Private Corporate Partnerships	PPP	Innovative	Collaborations with businesses or non-profits for shared programs.	Recreational programming.
Revenue-Generating Activities	Local	Sustainable	Programs, classes, events, concessions, merchandise.	Supplemental funding for park services and programs.

Exhibit 4.1, Core Funding Chart

PHILANTHROPIC PARTNERSHIP

The partnership with a philanthropic organization could enhance funding, engagement, and long-term sustainability. Agencies with philanthropic partners can experience benefits through private donations, grants, and sponsorships while fostering community involvement and stewardship.

A critical early decision in partnering with a philanthropic partner is determining the extent of direct engagement by Dakota County. Some agencies find success through direct formation and hands on operational leadership while others take an arms-length approach to the relationship with a not-for-profit specifically organized to support the mission of the park agency. The earlier may demand special legislative authority.

Either way, success will be built around shared values, common mission, and a deeply collaborative relationship. A formal memorandum of understanding (MOU) can define roles, expectations, and shared goals. Dakota County can provide expertise, project priorities, and logistical support, while the nonprofit secures funding, mobilizes volunteers, and builds long-term philanthropic relationships. Transparent communication and aligned objectives ensure efficiency and prevent conflicts over responsibilities. Philanthropic organizations leverage multiple revenue streams to support parks. These can include:

- **Individual Donations:** Annual giving programs, major gifts, and planned giving campaigns can create a steady funding source.

- **Corporate Sponsorships:** Local businesses may sponsor park events, trail restorations, or facility upgrades in exchange for recognition.

- **Grants:** Foundations and government entities offer grants for environmental conservation, recreational programs, and infrastructure projects.

- **Special Events and Campaigns:** Fundraising galas, community festivals, and crowdfunding initiatives can generate significant contributions.

- **Membership Programs:** Offering tiered memberships with perks such as free event access, exclusive tours, or discounts on rentals can encourage ongoing support.

Beyond financial support, a philanthropic partner organization can drive volunteerism and community engagement. Organizing clean-up events, nature education programs, and citizen science, arts and cultural initiatives strengthens public investment in park stewardship. Engaged volunteers often become donors, advocates, and long-term supporters of park initiatives.

A well-structured philanthropic partner organization could enhance Dakota County's ability to achieve its vision by securing a broader diversity of funding, engaging the community, and deepening a culture of stewardship. A mindful approach, strong partnerships, and transparent governance are key to success in the endeavor.

COST RECOVERY

In recent years, park agencies across the United States have been rethinking their cost recovery models to prioritize equity. Traditionally, these models were designed to maximize revenue generation through user fees, partnerships, and sponsorships. However, as communities recognize the vital role parks play in community well-being, agencies are shifting to models that ensure access for all.

The equity-focused approach to cost recovery acknowledges that parks facilities are public goods that should be available regardless of income, race, or geography. Rather than relying heavily on user fees, agencies are developing tiered pricing structures, sliding-scale fees, and scholarship programs to reduce financial barriers. Many are also reallocating funding toward communities with fewer resources, ensuring that historically marginalized populations receive fair access to high-quality recreational opportunities.

Another shift in cost recovery models involves diversifying funding sources to reduce dependence on user fees. Agencies are seeking increased public funding through general tax revenues, bonds, and grants to sustain parks as essential services. Philanthropic partnerships and corporate sponsorships are also being structured to directly support equity initiatives, such as free programming for low-income residents or investment in underfunded park infrastructure.

Data-driven decision-making is also playing a key role in this transformation. Many park agencies are using equity mapping tools to identify gaps in service and prioritize funding in areas where residents face financial or geographic barriers to accessing parks. This allows agencies to allocate resources where they are needed most, rather than distributing funding evenly without considering disparities.

Additionally, community engagement is becoming a cornerstone of equitable cost recovery. Agencies are involving residents in budgeting decisions, seeking input on fee structures, and ensuring that revenue-generating programs do not disproportionately burden low-income communities.

The transformation of cost recovery models to prioritize equity represents a fundamental shift in how park services are valued. Rather than over-emphasis on revenue-generating entities, parks are increasingly recognized as vital public assets that should be accessible to everyone. As this shift continues, the challenge will be balancing financial sustainability with the goal of ensuring that no one is excluded from the benefits of parks due to cost.
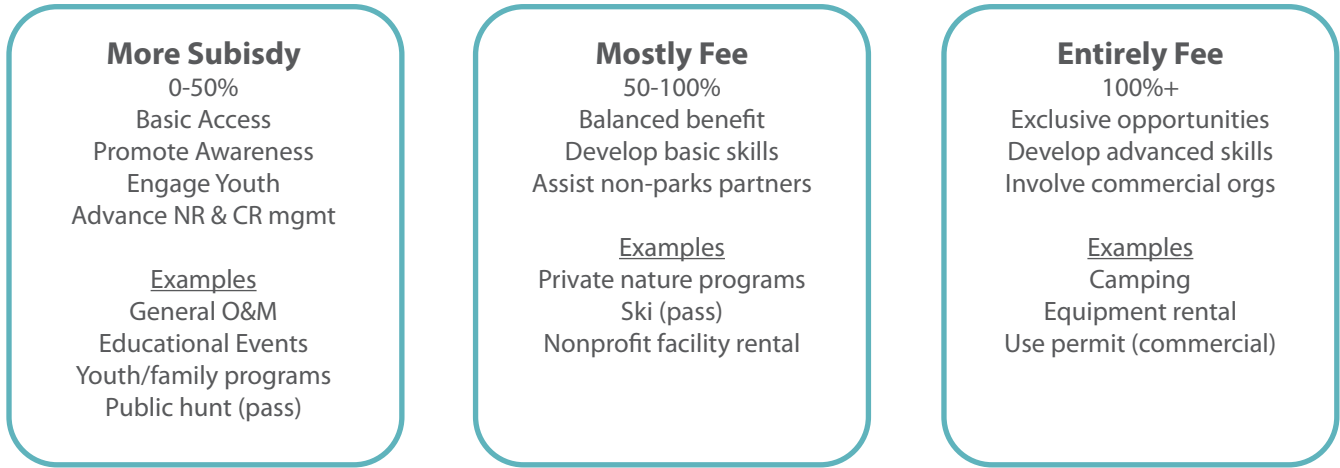
More Subisdy	Mostly Fee	Entirely Fee
0-50%	50-100%	100%+
Basic Access	Balanced benefit	Exclusive opportunities
Promote Awareness	Develop basic skills	Develop advanced skills
Engage Youth	Assist non-parks partners	Involve commercial orgs
Advance NR & CR mgmt		
	Examples	Examples
Examples	Private nature programs	Camping
General O&M	Ski (pass)	Equipment rental
Educational Events	Nonprofit facility rental	Use permit (commercial)
Youth/family programs		
Public hunt (pass)		

Exhibit 4.2, Cost Recovery Framework

REVENUE GENERATING ACTIVITIES

Even in evolving approaches to cost recovery, revenue generating activities remain an important subset of services. They are intended to generate at least as much revenue as the cost to provide them. They serve to buffer challenging financial times, bolster operating efficiency, and enhance visitor experience. Most importantly, they diversity revenue streams to support the broader mission and vision. Revenue generating activities can:

Generate & Diversify Revenue

- Special use permit fees: Access charge to premium facilities, campgrounds, amenities.

- Membership programs & passes: Offering annual or seasonal memberships that provide benefits like discounts or exclusive access.

- Facility rentals: Renting out venues such as cabins, lodges, pavilions, and amphitheaters for weddings, corporate events, or gatherings.

- Concessions & retail: Partnering with vendors or operating in-house concessions for food, beverages, and merchandise.

- Guided tours and equipment rental: Offering specialized experiences such as wildlife tours, historical site visits, or outdoor skill workshops.

- Eco-tourism & adventure recreation: Providing revenue-generating activities like zip-lining, kayaking, rock climbing, and biking.

- Public-private partnerships (P3s): To fund infrastructure projects, operate attractions, or manage services.

- Philanthropy: Engaging with corporations and nonprofit foundations to support park initiatives through donations or grants.

Increase Operational Efficiency & Cost Recovery

- Implementing a cost-recovery pricing structure, where user fees contribute to maintaining and improving facilities.

- Optimizing staff allocation based on seasonal demand to reduce labor costs.

- Leveraging technology (e.g., automated kiosks, digital ticketing, and reservation systems) to streamline operations.

- Using data analytics to track visitor trends, identify popular services, and adjust pricing models accordingly.

Enhance Infrastructure Investment & Asset Optimization

- Expanding or modernizing accommodations like cabins, lodges, and campgrounds.

- Upgrading trails, restrooms, parking facilities, and visitor centers to attract more visitors.

- Implementing green infrastructure projects, such as solar-power and eco-friendly transit.

- Repurposing underutilized spaces for new attractions.

Enhance Marketing, Branding, and Community Connections

- Digital marketing campaigns, social media promotions, and optimized websites.

- Loyalty programs, referral discounts, and seasonal promotions to encourage repeat visits.

- Community partnerships with local businesses and tourism agencies to cross-promote attractions.

- Leveraging storytelling and branding to highlight unique aspects of the park, such as historical significance, wildlife conservation, or adventure tourism.

Leveraging innovative revenue streams, strategic investments, and efficient operations through revenue generating activities can deepen a healthy balance between community service, conservation, and fiscal responsibility.

ORGANIZATIONAL STRUCTURE

Dakota County's structural approach to operating parks and natural areas plays a crucial role in its ability to effectively manage and maintain resources, deliver services, and fulfill its mission. The organizational structure into which Dakota County Parks and Natural Areas has evolved, is fairly dispersed across multiple arms of county government. While Dakota County manages it amazingly well, it is possible that a more consolidated organizational structure would lead to greater and more efficient achievement of the 2050 Vision and organizational mission. The benefits and drawbacks of moving to consolidated organizational structure is something the organization may choose to explore further.

A consolidated organizational structure or even the creation of a special park district, where all park operations are unified can offer significant advantages. By centralizing leadership, improving coordination, and streamlining decision-making, this approach enhances efficiency, accountability, and service delivery. A unified structure fosters better resource management, strengthens

strategic planning, and ensures a consistent visitor experience. Ultimately, consolidating operations could empower the agency to operate as a cohesive entity, better fulfilling its mission. Some key areas of benefit include:

- Streamlined operations and efficiency

- Improved budgeting and resource allocation

- More coherent strategic planning and long-term visioning

- More consistently exceptional visitor experience

- A more effective, resilient, and visionary system

- Readiness for transition to a Special Park District should that become desired

A consolidated structure could strengthen day-to-day operations, ensuring that it remains financially sustainable, highly valued by the public, and true to its mission.
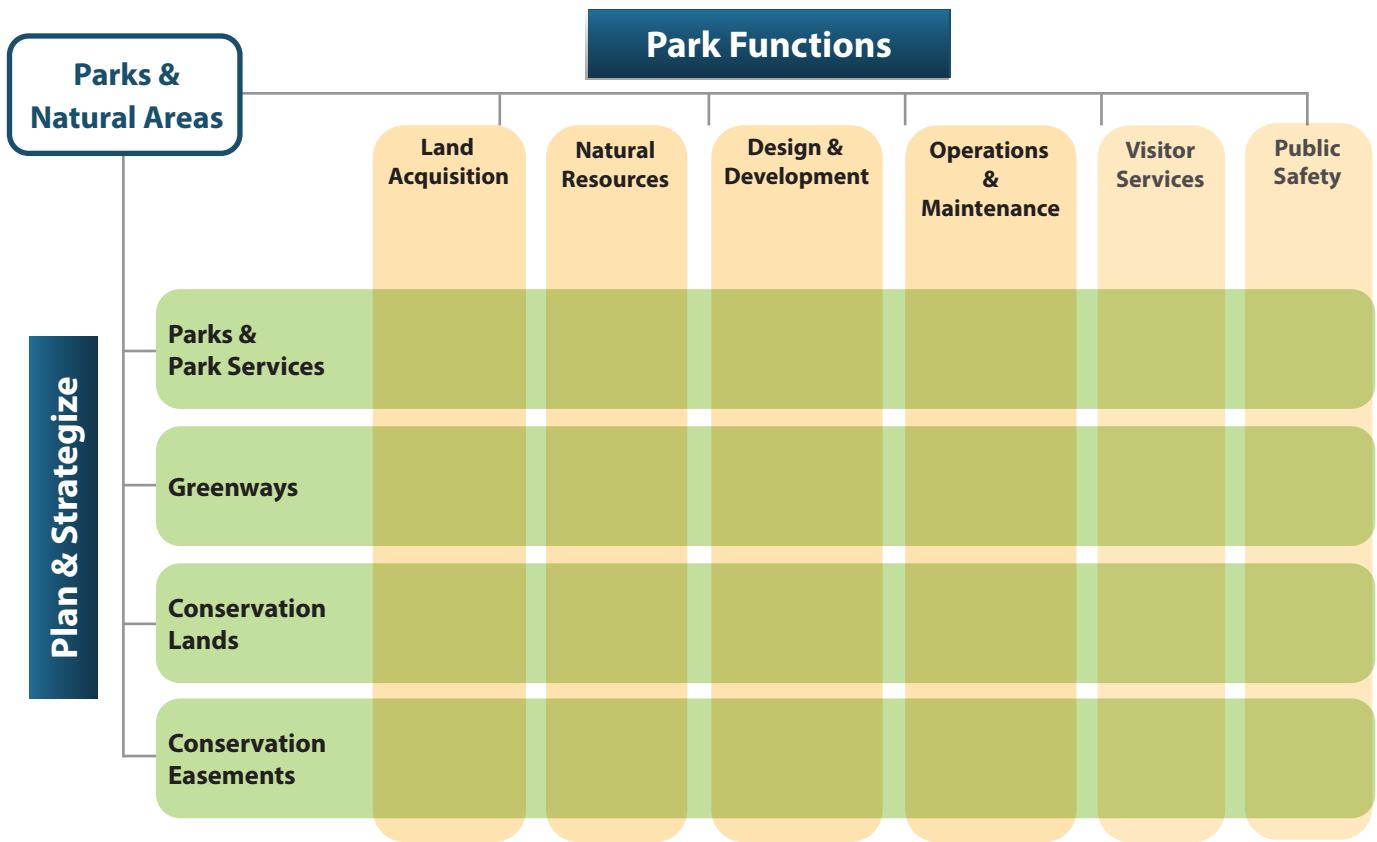
Structural Realignment

Exhibit 4.3, Structural Realignment

NEXT STEPS

The vision, goals, and strategies in the 2050 Vision Plan are aspirational and general. Detailed tactics, along with metrics and targets needed to operationalize the vision, goals, and strategies will be identified in updated five-year plans for Visitor Services, Natural Resources, and Greenways. Nonetheless, there are key steps that are needed to achieve the Vision Plan. Some, like taking care of what we have, are a continuation of what Dakota County Parks is currently doing and are on-going. Others, like developing a sustainable funding plan for the Parks will lead to new practices and programs. Exhibit 4.4 identifies the key steps for the first 10 years of the plan to advance goals.

NEXT STEPS

Next Steps	Status (continuation, expansion, new)	Goals Supported
Land & Natural Systems Conservation		
Update Natural Resource Management System Plan (NRMSP) every 5 years. In the update of the 2017 plan, incorporate tactics and metrics from the 2020 Land Conservation Plan	continuation	**1, 9, 15**
Implement NRMSP 5-year work plan and deliver 5-year CIP	continuation	**1, 15**
Prepare Natural Resource Management Plans for all greenways	continuation	**1, 9, 11, 14, 15**
Work with land conservation easement landowners to develop Natural Resource Management Plans	continuation	**1, 9, 11, 15**
Update Natural Resource Management Plans for parks and greenways every 10 years	continuation	**1, 9, 14, 15**
Develop Natural Resource Management Plans for County Park Conservation Areas	new	**1, 9, 15**
Use preliminary Conservation Focus Areas (CFAs) as a framework for protecting and connecting natural areas and habitat	continuation	**9, 11, 15**
Employ Indigenous experts and apply Traditional Ecological Knowledge (TEK) that stewards healthy water and land	new	**1,7, 11, 15**
Seek legislative authority to own land for conservation purposes	new	**9**
Help landowners to protect park inholdings, greenway corridors, conservation focus areas, and groundwater recharge areas	continuation	**1, 8, 9, 11**

Exhibit 4.4, Next Steps

NEXT STEPS

Next Steps	Status (continuation, expansion, new)	Goals Supported
Operations		
Maintain high-quality facilities and grounds	continuation	**1, 2, 15**
Incorporate Vision Plan goals and strategies into daily operations and track implementation/achievement • CIP Development • Annual programs/events • Design Process • Hiring of personal • Long-range planning • Goal tracking	new	**1 - 15**
Update the 2010 Greenway Guidebook: • Codify greenway collaborative cost-share • Establish level of county support for local trail loops and greenways connections • Establish guidelines to provide support for nature-based recreation facilities in city parks along greenways	expansion	**8, 11**
Update the Visitor Services Plan every 5 years	continuation	**1, 2, 4, 5, 6,7, 11, 14**
Implement the Visitor Services Plan	continuation	**1, 2, 4, 5, 6, 7, 11, 14**
Develop a Capital Replacement Program	new	**1, 3**
Develop staffing model with less dependence on temporary staff for year-round operations	new	**1, 3, 13**
Evaluate benefits of organizational structural changes from operational consolidation to creation of Special Park District that would improve system service delivery	new	**1, 2, 13**
Develop a strategy to evaluate and add operations staff along with system growth and development	new	**13**
Park & Greenway Development		
Deliver the 5-year CIP and complete current projects	continuation	
Develop phase two ADA transition plan for parks and greenways to improve universal access to services/amenities and key programs beyond minimum ADA requirements	new	**3, 4**
Continue to update park long-range and greenway plans every 10 years	continuation	**4, 6, 8, 9, 14**

NEXT STEPS

Next Steps	Status (continuation, expansion, new)	Goals Supported
Develop long-range plans for County Park Conservation Areas	new	8, 9
Implement park long range plans	continuation	3, 4, 6
Continue to implement the acceleration of the 2030 Greenway Vision	continuation	8, 6, 11
Continue to implement the acceleration of the 2030 Greenway Vision	continuation	1, 10
Incorporate new park search areas and greenway corridors into the Metropolitan Council Regional Parks Policy Plan	new	1, 8
Prepare land acquisition plan for new parks	new	8, 11
Study options for bringing Thompson County Park into the Regional Park System	new	8, 11
Prepare long-range plans for greenway search corridors	expansion	1, 8, 11
Prepare interpretive plans for each park and greenway	continuation	5, 10
Conduct Traditional Cultural Places surveys, develop plans for Indigenous sites within the park system	expansion	7, 11
Prepare Public Art Framework	new	4, 10, 14

Partnership

Next Steps	Status (continuation, expansion, new)	Goals Supported
Partner with health-related organizations to integrate education and wellness to park environments	new	6, 11
Work with outreach partners to engage the public, host targeted programs, and build relationships with under-represented groups	expanded	11
Partner with environmental stewardship organizations to restore and enhance natural areas	continuation	5, 6, 8, 11, 12, 15
Invest in municipal partnerships to implement new parks and greenways	continuation	8, 11
Partner with cities and private landowners to restore land in greenways and conservation focus areas	continuation	1, 9, 11
Partner with Indigenous communities and organizations to establish consultation protocols and collaborative processes	new	7, 11

NEXT STEPS

Next Steps	Status (continuation, expansion, new)	Goals Supported
Funding		
Develop a sustainable funding plan to establish, build and operate parks, greenways, and natural systems	new	**12**
Partner with a trusted philanthropic organization and/or seek legislative change to allow County to establish a non-profit philanthropic organization	new	**12**
Continue to pursue grant funding for capital projects and operations	continuation	**12**
Continue to pursue public / Private Corporate Partnerships in support of enhanced programming and capital projects.	continuation	**12**

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