SECTION 2

Park Background

LOCATION, HISTORY, AND CONTEXT

The 105-acre Above the Falls Regional Park is located along both banks of the upper Mississippi River in Minneapolis. The park extends from Plymouth Avenue North/8th Avenue NE on the south to the Camden Bridge (N 43rd Avenue/37th Avenue NE) on the north. The park encompasses a 2.75 mile stretch of the Mississippi River.

As shown in Figure 2.1, Above the Falls Regional Park is one of a series of regional parks along the Mississippi River in Minneapolis. To the north of ATF Regional Park is North Mississippi Regional Park, which extends to the City's northern boundary at N 53rd Avenue. To the south, the Central Mississippi Riverfront Regional Park extends from N Plymouth Avenue/8th Avenue NE to Interstate 35W on both sides of the river. Farther down river are Mississippi Gorge Regional Park, Minnehaha Regional Park, and Fort Snelling State Park.

Land use in the upper River corridor has fluctuated for the last 125 years in response to market trends, technology and available resources. Until the late 1990s, the vision for this part of the Mississippi was for a working river that would support an industrial economy. The area was first developed with saw mills, lumberyards, and foundries due to its location just above St. Anthony Falls. As rail transportation increased, railroad yards were located on both banks and a railroad bridge was constructed across the river. As lumber declined in the early decades of the twentieth century, scrap metal dealers located along the river's west bank. Beyond the industrial riverfront, extensive residential neighborhoods developed east and west of the river.

In the 1960s, a new lock and dam at the Upper Falls allowed barge traffic to reach this last mile of working river on the Mississippi. Unfortunately the lock did not transform the Upper River as anticipated. While the opening of the Upper Harbor Terminal (UHT) did result in some limited loading and unloading of bulk commodities, the redevelopment of the upper River into a prominent manufacturing center did not materialize. Upper Harbor Terminal closed in 2014, and the City of Minneapolis has determined that some of the land will be available for redevelopment as a park.

This document was updated in 2019 with the most current information on Upper Harbor Terminal land proposed to be added to Above the Falls Regional Park. See the Appendix for additional information.

The areas adjacent to ATF Regional Park contain a mixture of mostly industrial businesses including construction, printing/publishing, manufacturing, machinery and metalworking industries. As goods transportation changed with the transition from steam to diesel engines, the rail yard on the west side of the river became unnecessary and was removed. This allowed the extension of West River Road North with parks along the river and light industry west of the road. The West River Road North extension ends just south of the BNSF railroad bridge, near North 22nd Ave. Currently the BNSF railroad tracks and bridge are being used to serve customers on the west side of the river.

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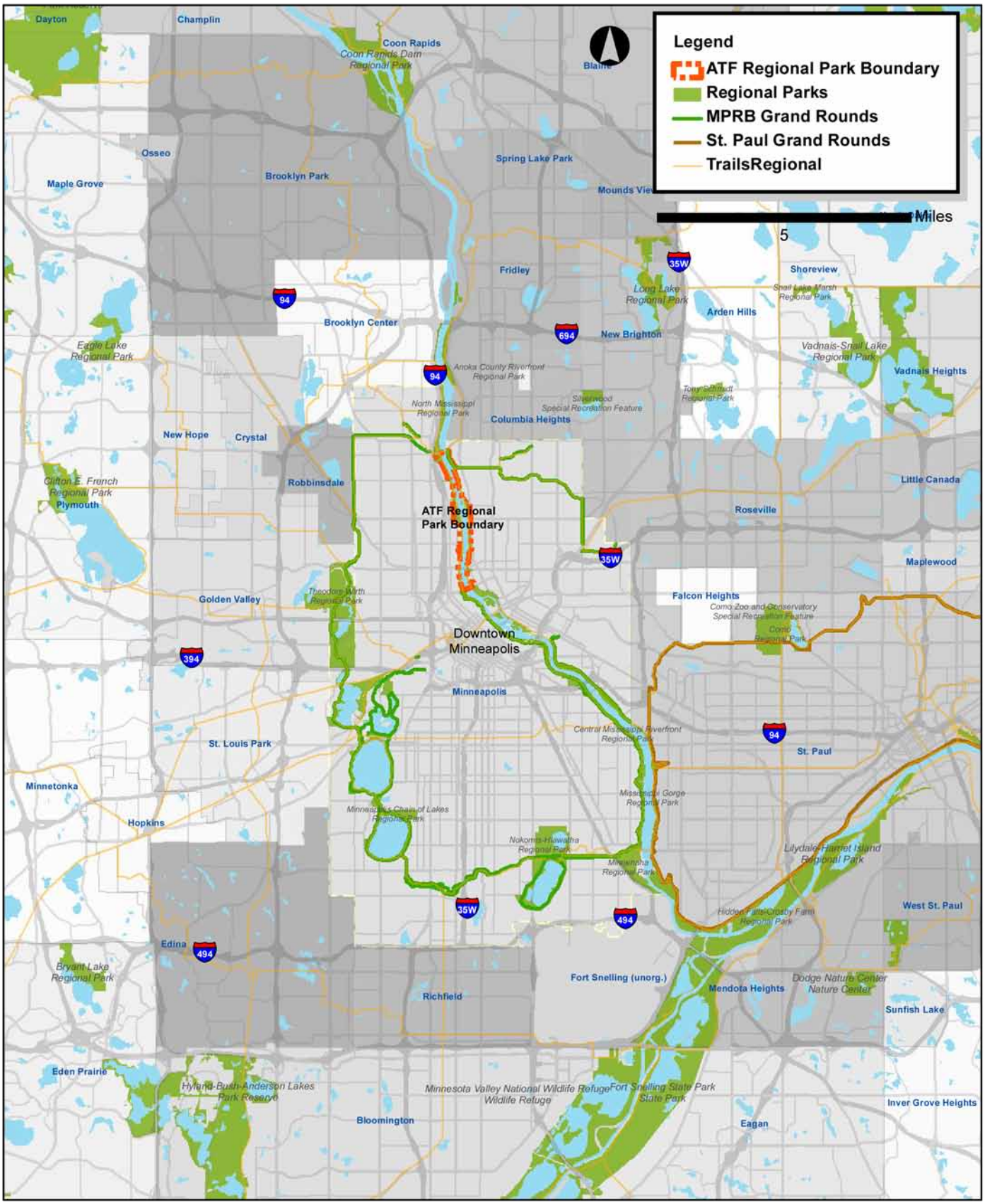

Figure 2.1 Above the Falls Regional Park Location within the MPRB System

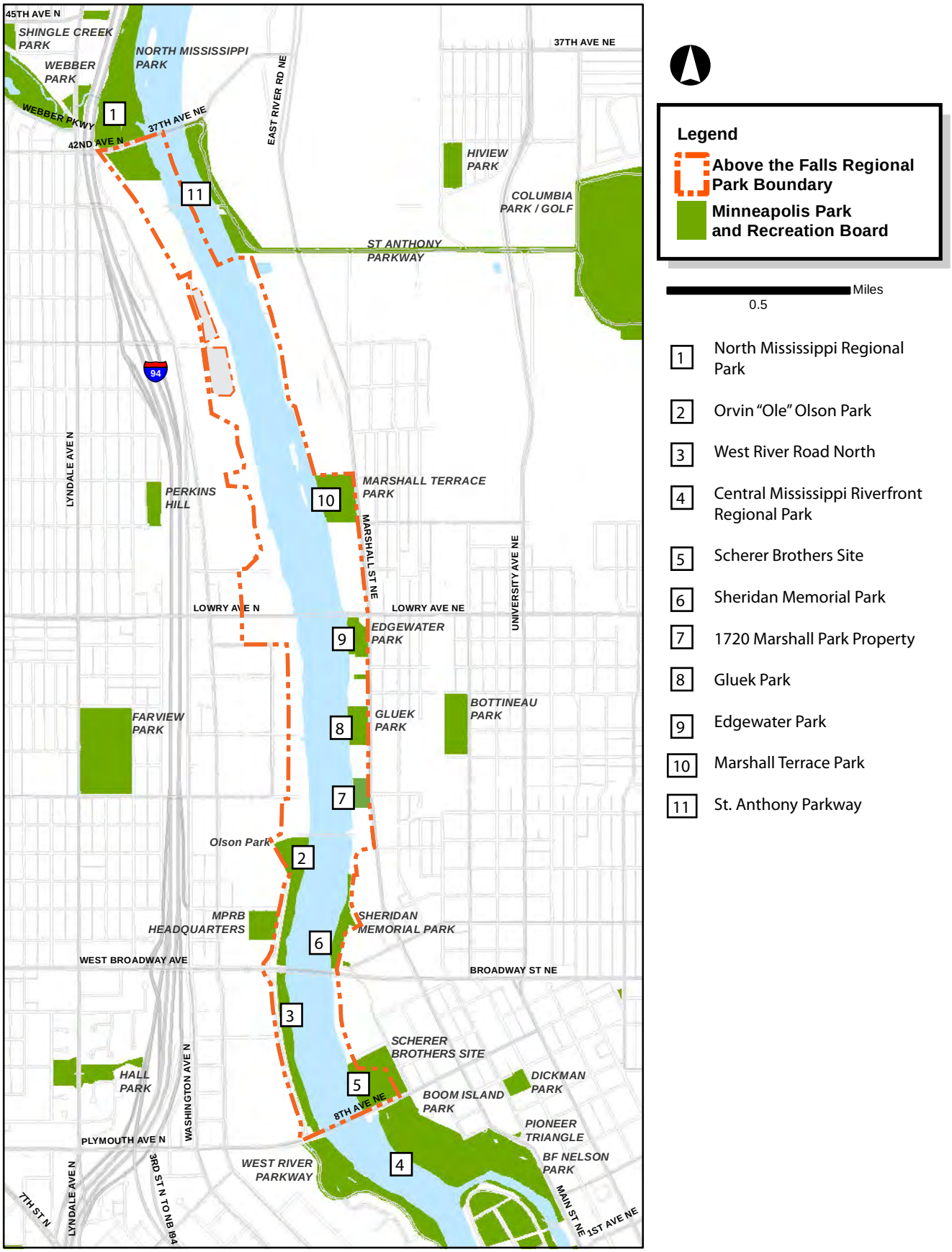

Figure 2.2 Above the Falls Regional Park Existing Park Components

INDIGENOUS LAND AND HISTORY

While the ATF Plan focuses on transformation of the currently industrialized river, it is important to understand how brief that industry, and all Euro-American history, is when compared to the time that Indigenous peoples spent around the river. The land on which Minneapolis now sits, is in the heartland of the Dakota people. To acknowledge the significance of indigenous peoples past, present, and future along the river, the ATF plan recommends further study and interpretive planning that can help respect and foster understanding of the deeper history of the area. As MPRB seeks to forge new connections with the river, there is much to learn from the stewardship of the Dakota and Ojibwe People.

The ATF area is part of a network of culturally and spiritually significant sites that include lands outside of Minneapolis, the Falls (St. Anthony Falls downtown), the Bdote, or confluence of the Mississippi and Minnesota Rivers, and the banks of Bde Maka Ska. Comprehensive interpretive planning can help establish an understanding of history, and create consistent messaging to create a memorable narrative. Interpretive planning can also be an engaging tool that helps form a program for building a relationship with the river, which can help guide park design. Through art, communications, food, programming, and more, the layers of meaning can expand the parks ability to meet the needs of those seeking historical, cultural, recreational, and arts based experiences. Respectfully acknowledging the history, including that which is challenging and difficult, will help the ATF appeal to a wider audience that is inclusive in terms of age, ethnicity, culture, abilities, and access needs.

The river was and continues to be an important transportation route for economic purposes and a crossroad for cultures. However, Above the Falls Regional Park encompasses an area that epitomizes the negative impact of urban and industrial environments on natural systems and communities. The Mississippi River was foundational to the Dakota and other Indigenous cultures for millennia. From that time to the banishment of the Dakota people from their homeland, to the neighborhoods broken apart by the Interstate in North Minneapolis, and to the heavy industry that damaged the health of the river and the nearby communities, looking backwards is an important part of shaping the future. As the industrial era passes, and the places for people are once again emerging, it is imperative that they be places of inclusion that honor the past and present cultural diversity of Minneapolis.

PARK DESCRIPTION AND BOUNDARY

The Mississippi River itself is the key feature of the Above the Falls Regional Park. The boundary of this urban-infill park fit carefully around adjacent private property and existing structures and urban redevelopment sites. The regional park boundary is intended to provide a continuous public park, with adequate depth for a riverfront parkway on the west bank, restored riverbanks, space for people to enjoy the riverfront, significant park components and areas for improved habitat and surface-water management.

As with other regional parks along the Mississippi River in Minneapolis, Above the Falls Regional Park comprises distinct, named parks, some connected by linear park features and trails. These existing parks form the foundation of ATF Regional Park and will benefit from the implementation of this plan as described in Section 6 - Park Development Concept.

EXISTING PARKS - WEST BANK

Refer to Figure 2.2 locations of the following parks

2006 grand opening of Orvin "Ole" Olson Park

Orvin "Ole" Olson Park

2325 West River Road

"Ole" Olson Park is a 3.5 acre park located on West River Road, just north of N 22nd Avenue. The land was purchased by the Park Board in 2002, marking one of the first implementation pieces to emerge from the 2000 ATF Plan. Formerly the site of Midwest Paint, a large railroad roundhouse and other industrial facilities, the property was heavily contaminated before the Park Board acquired it and invested in extensive soils remediation. The park opened in 2006 and was developed as part of the first phase of the 2000 ATF Plan. It features a spectacular view of the river and the downtown skyline with walking and cycling paths.

Watching the River Rats water-ski team from park land on West River Road North

Riverbank parkland along West River Road North

between Plymouth Avenue North and 22nd Avenue North

This 12.4 acres of parkland does not have an official name within the MPRB system but is part of ATF Regional Park. Improvements completed between 2006 and 2008 include separated pedestrians paths and bicycle trails, which run continuously underneath the Plymouth and Broadway bridges. Additional paths allow users to experience the lower river terrace and river's edge. A boat ramp is used for emergency response, bridge maintenance and by the River Rats water-ski performers. In the summer, large crowds gather on the river bank to watch the River Rats perform. Restored riverbanks, native plantings and stormwater management improvement were funded in partnership with the MWMO. Views from this area include the downtown Minneapolis skyline and the former Scherer Bros. Lumber site now owned by MPRB and planned for park development.

EXISTING PARKS - EAST BANK

Sheridan Memorial Park
1300 Water Street NE

The former site of a foundry adjacent to the Grain Belt Brewery complex, Sheridan Memorial Park is a 3.5 acre park which is actively and incrementally being developed. The first lot for the park was acquired in 1986 with expansions occurring in 1995, 2007, and 2009. Remediation of contaminated soils was completed prior to opening the parkland to the public to provide access to the riverbank by way of informal stone steps to the river's edge. The first phase of park development was constructed in 2013 and included a memorial honoring all U.S. veterans, a peace garden, picnic areas and a river overlook. A playground, sport courts, and lawn recreation are planned for 2019 construction.

2007 dedication of Sheridan Memorial Park

Gluek Park
2000 Marshall Street NE

Encompassing 3.7 acres along the Mississippi River, Gluek Park is the site of the former Gluek Brewery and mansion, and was listed as a federal Superfund site due to soil contamination. In 2004 MPRB remediated the soils, and by 2008 park improvements were complete. The park features two river overlooks, a picnic shelter, pathways, gardens and interpretive signage.

Gazebo and river overlook in Gluek Park

Edgewater Park
2326 Marshall Street NE

Named for its location as the site of the former Edgewater Inn, the 3.5 acre MPRB acquired the land in 1993, constructed the park in 2006-2007. The park is divided into two sections – the Prairie and the Metro with planting, layouts and signage evoking both themes. Walkways carve the park into three sections and mimic the alignment of the Mississippi and Minnesota Rivers. An overlook provides a wonderful vista of the Mississippi River and the recently-completed Lowry Avenue bridge.

Edgewater Park and Marshall St NE

Marshall Terrace Park
2740 Marshall Street NE

The 8.4 acre Marshall Terrace Park was acquired by MPRB in 1914 to serve as a neighborhood park with typical recreation facilities. Today the park includes fields for softball and baseball, a playground, basketball court and a wading pool. Two sets of wooden steps and overlooks lead to the water's edge, allowing the public to access the broad shoreline along this stretch of the river. However, the steps are not ADA-compliant; reconstruction of universally-accessible steps and ramps to the riverbank is a long-term goal. Adjacent the park are two river islands which have been colonized by dozens of nesting herons as well as eagles. The rookeries are visible through Xcel Energy's online bird-cam program. Xcel Energy maintains the islands in partnership with MN-DNR.

River overlook in Marshall Terrace Park

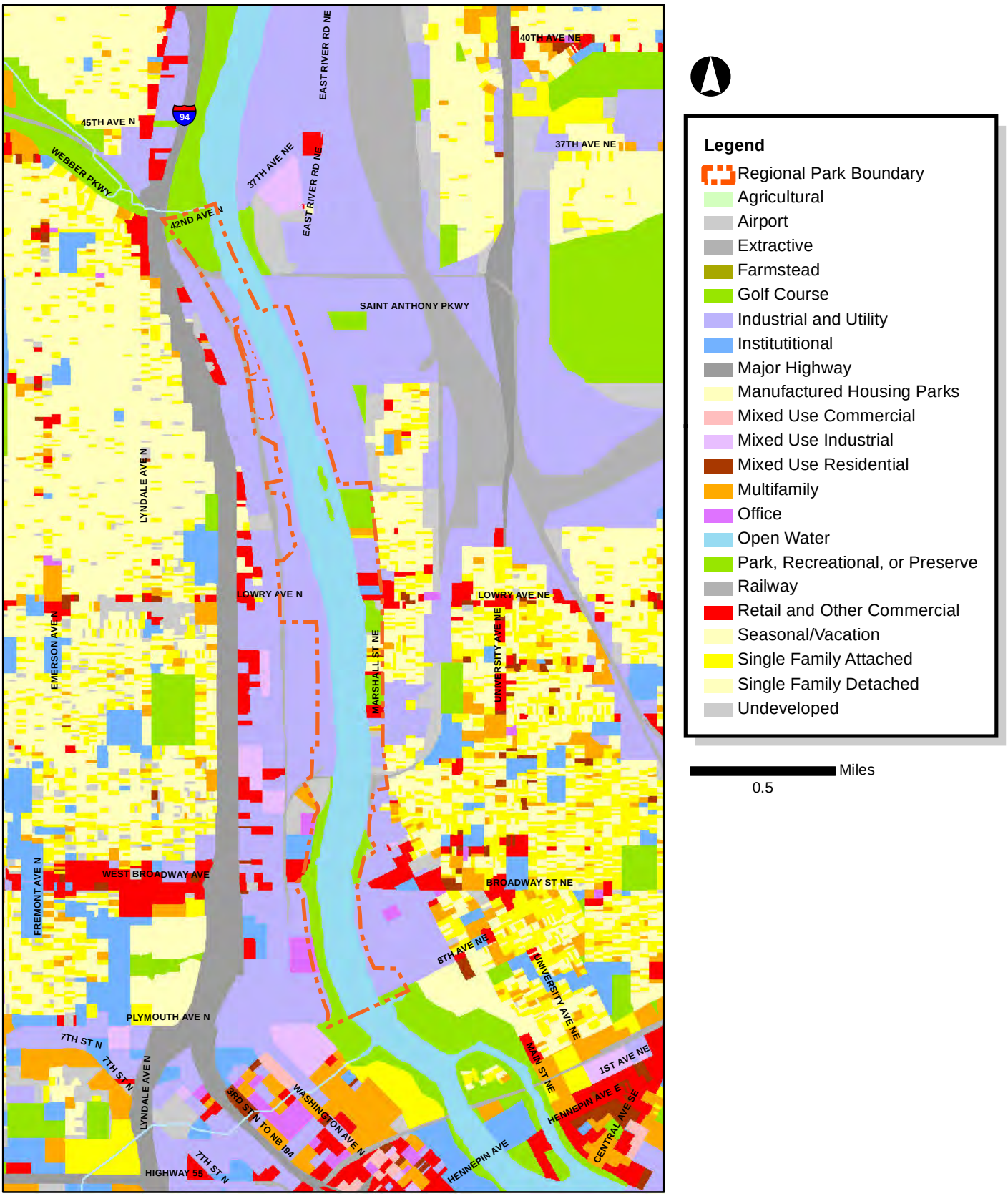

Figure 2.3 Land Use, 2010

LAND USE AND URBAN DESIGN

Above the Falls Regional Park continues to be influenced by its historic industrial roots. As shown in Figure 2.3 the predominant existing land use on the west bank is industrial. South of the BNSF railroad bridge is a mixture of commercial, residential, and civic uses, including the Riverview Townhomes, Broadway Pizza, and the Minneapolis Park and Recreation Board Offices. These uses were developed in the last few decades when a railroad line was abandoned and West River Road was extended. They demonstrate that there is the potential for uses other than industrial in this area.

A pivotal redevelopment site on the west bank is the Upper Harbor Terminal (UHT), a 48-acre former barge terminal facility owned by the City of Minneapolis. For over fifty years, the majority of the site was used for outdoor storage needed for a bulk-material-handling operation. Nine acres were used to store spoils from the U.S. Army Corps of Engineers' annual channel-dredging. In 2015, the St. Anthony Falls lock ceased operation, dredging of a navigation channel above the St. Anthony Falls also ceased, and the UHT became an active redevelopment opportunity (including substantial regional parkland).

Since 2015, The City of Minneapolis and Minneapolis Park & Recreation Board have collaborated on a redevelopment strategy for the UHT that is described in detail in Appendix A.

TRANSPORTATION AND ACCESS

Within its urban context, Above the Falls Regional Park is connected to national, regional, and local transportation systems. Interstate 94 is located less than a half-mile west of the river, with exits at Broadway and Dowling Ave. connecting to the regional park. Lowry Avenue is a high-traffic east-west roadway with a river crossing that connects many neighborhoods to the regional park. River crossings also occur at Broadway, Plymouth Ave. North/8th Street NE and 43rd Ave. North/37th Ave. NE (Camden Bridge). Broadway and 26th Ave North also connect ATF Regional Park with Theodore Wirth Regional Park.

Between 2007-2012, the overall tonnage of commodities passing through the Upper Locks at St. Anthony Falls declined by 47%.

On the west bank, West River Road North extends from Plymouth Ave. North and the Central Mississippi Riverfront north to just past Broadway where it terminates at the BNSF Railraod line that crosses the Mississippi River. The area north of the BNSF railroad bridge is an irregular grid of streets and discontinuous sidewalks extending to Lowry Avenue. North of Lowry, the area retains its industrial roots with limited street connectivity and large superblocks due to rail crossings. On the east bank, Marshall Street NE is a major north-south roadway owned by Hennepin County. The road's western right-of-way line forms the ATF Regional Park boundary in this segment of the park. South of the BNSF railroad bridge is a grid of local streets. To the north, in the area currently occupied by Xcel Energy Riverside Plant, there are no local streets within the Regional Park boundary.

There are few existing off-road trails within Above the Falls Regional Park. On the west bank, multi-use trails are located along the river between N Plymouth Avenue and the BNSF railroad bridge, developed by MPRB as part of the West

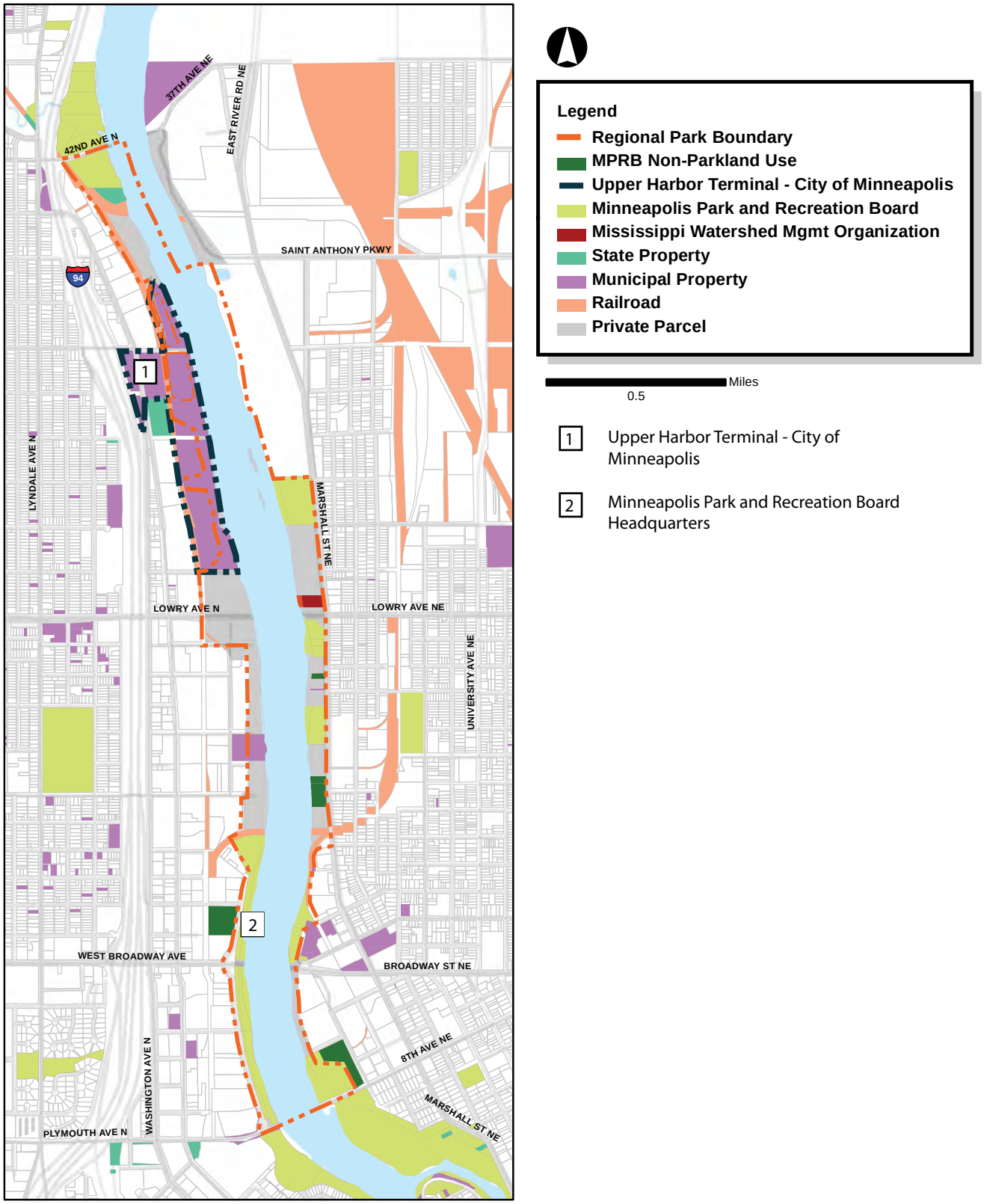

Figure 2.4 Public Land Ownership, 2012

The significant amount of publicly-owned land within and adjacent to the ATF Regional Park boundary represents great opportunities for partnership with other agencies as MPRB seeks to expand and develop the park.

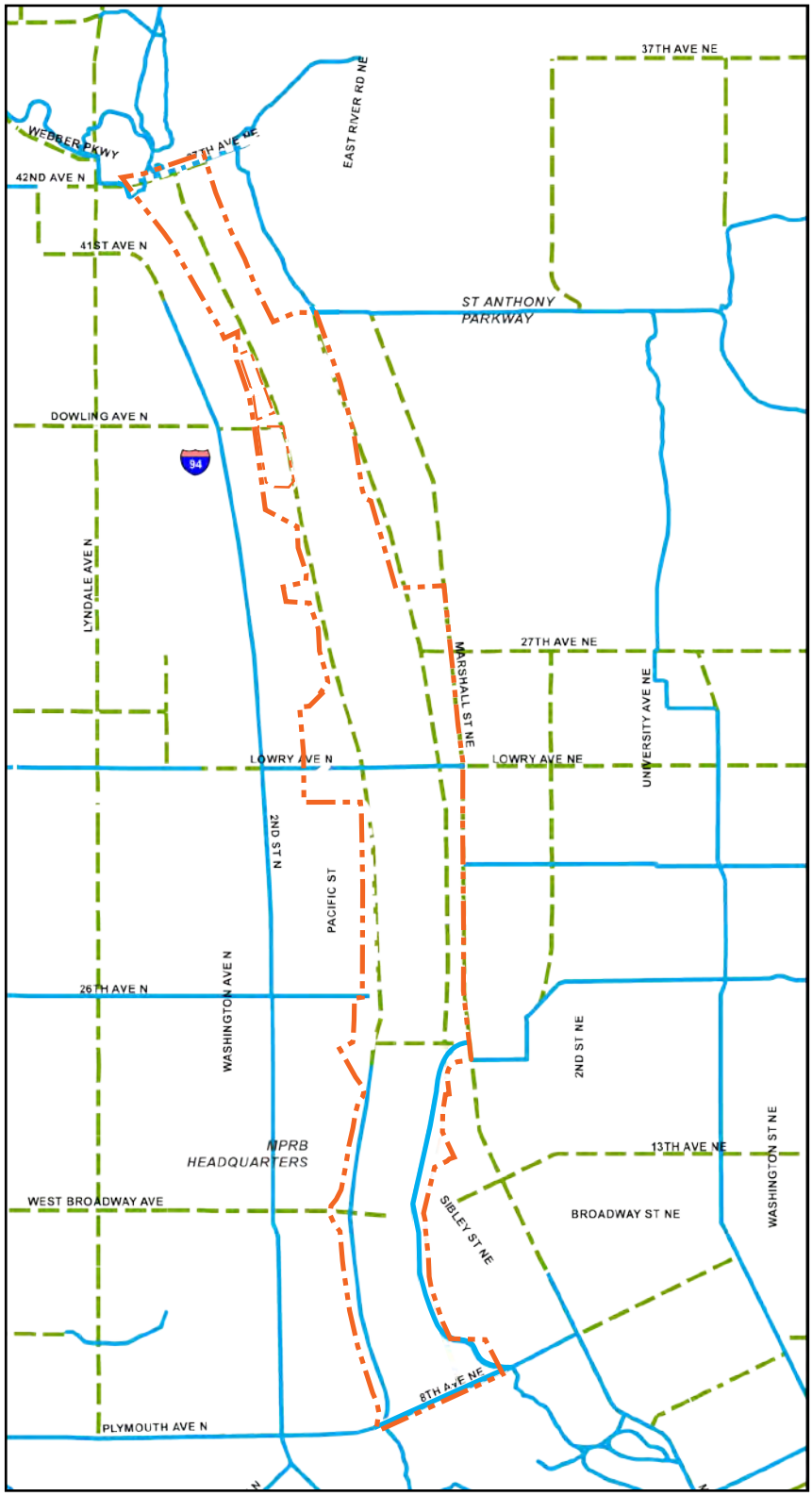

Figure 2.5 Existing and Planned Bikeways (City of Minneapolis and MPRB)

Trails shown on future park land within the ATF Regional Park boundary are conceptual and for planning purposes only. Actual trail alignments will depend on land acquisitions and final designs.

River Road North improvement in 2006 to 2008. To the north, trails pass under the Camden Bridge to connect Soo Avenue with North Mississippi Regional Park. On the east side of the river, trails are located in the Marshall Terrace, Gluek, and Edgewater Parks. The first phase of the East Bank Trail is complete, running from Graco Park at 8th Avenue, north to the BNSF railroad bridge, where it meets Marshall Avenue. The St. Anthony Parkway Regional Trail abuts the northern boundary of ATF Regional Park, connecting to the Grand Rounds National Scenic Byway, across the Camden Bridge to North Mississippi Regional Park, and to Anoka County's Mississippi River Regional Trail.

Additionally, over the next several years a $1.5 million initiative by the National Park Service will improve alternative transportation options to and within the Mississippi National River and Recreation Area corridor which surrounds ATF Regional Park. In partnership with MnDOT, MN-DNR, the City and MPRB, this program will add bicycle rental locations, facilitate transit connections to the river, improve wayfinding and enhance programming opportunities. All this will increase visitation to ATF Regional Park.

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