RiverFIRST: A Park Design Proposal and Implementation Framework for the Minneapolis Upper Riverfront

Executive Summary

The Minneapolis Riverfront Development Initiative (MRIDI) is a visionary planning effort for the Minneapolis Upper Mississippi River corridor that has comprised extensive research and analysis, design inquiry, community outreach, and consensus building. The Initiative is a collaboration among its sponsor, the Minneapolis Park and Recreation Board (MPRB); two design firms—Kennedy & Violich Architecture (KVA), Boston and Tom Leader Studio (TLS) Berkeley; HR&A Advisors, a real estate and economic development planning firm from New York City; and Groundwork City Building, a Minneapolis-based planning firm which is responsible for guiding the process, with public relations firm Tableau Pro.

The 5-month long collaboration of the MRIDI followed a 6-month process that began with an international design competition which awarded the commission to KVA/TLS out of 55 entries from around the world. It culminates with this comprehensive vision and implementation framework for 5.5 miles of the Minneapolis Upper Mississippi River corridor.

RiverFIRST

The KVA/TLS concept, RiverFIRST, offers a dynamic vision for a renewed and revitalized Upper River corridor through a proposed series of eight areas of opportunity. RiverFIRST well fulfills the three goals of the design competition:

- Establish parks as the engine for economic development along the river
- Knit both sides of the riverfront together with their surrounding communities, thereby transforming the river from a barrier to a connector
- Re-focus the city toward one of the three great rivers of the world, an extraordinary environmental amenity that defines Minneapolis’ civic identity—past, present and future

The eight RiverFIRST areas of opportunity include:

**Riverfront Trails:** The RiverFIRST trail system—a combination of pedestrian and bicycle trails along the river’s banks and “Knot Bridges” attached to existing bridges—will complete critical connections in the Grand Rounds system, and better connect North Minneapolis to Northeast Minneapolis for pedestrians and cyclists.

**BioHavens:** A protected network of floating islands made of robust, lightweight geo-textiles and 100% recycled PET materials, the BioHavens will create riparian habitat for endangered species and migratory birds by providing nesting and staging areas for endangered aquatic and land animals and plants while also cleaning water.

**Downtown Gateway Park:** A dramatic gateway to Minneapolis at the historic gateway site of the Hennepin Avenue Bridge, linked to the new Public Library via a proposed signature park and to Nicollet Mall via a linear park. This project is lead by Trust for Public Land and downtown interests.

**Farview Park Expansion:** This major new park extension bridges Interstate 94 and reconnects the high point of the city and communities in North Minneapolis with the Mississippi River. The proposal could ultimately cap the portion of I-94 between N 26th Avenue and 28th Avenue N with a major expansion of Farview Park and the greening of both streets.

**Northside Wetlands Park:** A molded alluvial wetland landscape is reclaimed to create a civic-scaled climate change eco-infrastructure, providing bio-filtration for storm water flows, increased flood protection, and new riverfront habitats.

**Northeast Riverfront Park:** Ravine landscapes remediate storm water and form stepped eco-stairs for flows of water, people, and wildlife, and serve as high points to overlook the Mississippi, as well as downtown Minneapolis.
Scherer Park: With the restoration of Hall’s Island and the creation of a river beach cove, Scherer Park will serve as a recreational entry point to the Mississippi trail and park system for kayaks, bikes, skiers, runners and walkers. The park will become a signature 21st-century urban park landscape. It will be the center of a riverfront destination flanked by Boom Island and Sheridan Park and surrounded by a vibrant mix of development that will energize the riverfront.

Spirit Island: A sacred place for the Dakota Indians for generations, the now vanished Spirit Island will be symbolized by an illuminated river weir, which marks the site as the oracle and soul of the river. This visual gesture will mark a commitment to a much deeper cross-cultural understanding so important to the life of our city.

Implementation
Local Solutions, Regional Impact
The Minneapolis park system is renown for the network of parkways, trails and greenways that interlink regional park destinations. The RiverFIRST proposal builds on this powerful legacy with the creation of riverfront regional parks connected by a sophisticated network of ecological, infrastructure trail systems. It fills a gap in the Mississippi River parks and trails system and contributes significantly to the improved water quality of the river, completes a critical connection in the larger Minneapolis Grand Rounds and links into the existing corridor initiatives taking place on both sides of the river. Furthermore, it creates a healthy community network and opportunities for economic development, by tying into the expansive regional parks and trails system managed by the Three Rivers Park District and the Metropolitan Council. When realized, the RiverFIRST proposal will enhance our regional identity and reinforce our role as civic leaders in the 21st century.

A Focus of City-Building
Like the Minneapolis Grand Rounds have done throughout history, the RiverFIRST proposal establishes the Minneapolis Upper River corridor as a central public amenity around which economic development in this part of the City will focus.

Multiple Leaders
The proposal provides the opportunity for multiple organizations, institutions and community interests to take leadership and/or collaborative and supporting roles in implementation, depending on the project and the myriad variables that define the project.

Flexibility
The RiverFIRST proposal offers built-in flexibility to phase investments and to be opportunistic. Land availability, funding changes, philanthropy and development interests prompt the importance of altering course to capitalize on opportunities. The RiverFIRST proposal facilitates flexibility for those overseeing implementation.

Phasing
Given its ambition, RiverFIRST will likely be built over a generation, or more. Successful completion of the plan will depend in substantial part on thoughtful phasing. Getting the first phases right will set the stage for the long-term build-out of the grand vision presented in this document. The early phases will need to embrace at least four criteria for success:

- Bring the city from all neighborhoods and backgrounds to the river
- Foster advocacy for plan completion from citizens, businesses, and institutions alike
- Secure positive media attention and promote a Minneapolis brand of 21st century parks
- Cooperation among public sector agencies and partnership with private sector organizations and institutions

Priority Projects: 0-5 Year Plan
Based on the refinement of preliminary plans, extensive community engagement, and the five guiding implementation criteria listed above, a series of systems and sites have emerged as priority demonstration projects for implementation in the near term:

Riverfront Trail System + Farview Park Connections: Development of pedestrian and bike trails, “Knot Bridges” and implementation of the Farview Park connections to the River via the North 26th Avenue Greenway and 28th Avenue connection. The 26th Avenue North Greenway along with the 22nd Avenue Northeast Greenway create an environmental education corridor connecting Edison High School to Nellie Stone Johnson Community School.

BioHavens: Builds on the highly successful demonstration project launched in August, 2011 by ASLA at Spring Lake in Minneapolis.

Scherer Park: The proposal leverages a new signature riverfront park for economic development, and captures a portion of that value for the long-term operations and maintenance of that park.
Northside Wetlands Park: Re-establishes historic floodplain wetlands that create a public and ecological amenity offering an opportunity to partner with research and education institutions. The park could anchor and create value for the Upper Harbor Terminal redevelopment.

Downtown Gateway Park: Establishes a downtown park destination of national significance, reestablishes an open space link between downtown and the riverfront, and leverages existing efforts led by the Trust for Public Land and downtown stakeholders.

These five projects each have the potential to establish a successful first phase of development that can build momentum for the overall completion of RiverFIRST over time. They can be pursued simultaneously, with support from multiple stakeholders, or in smaller combinations, depending on resource availability.

Long Term Vision: 5 Years and Beyond

Farview Park Extension: Builds on priority projects with the establishment of the 26th Avenue and 28th Avenue connections. The longer-term vision would realize a green cap over I-94 and transform the existing garbage transfer station into a river-related community education facility.

Northeast Riverfront Park: Long-term acquisition of land and easements allows the creation of park, storm water cleaning ravines, neighborhood connections and river access.

Spirit Island: Begins a process of substantive engagement with the Dakota community to determine interest in the creation of a commemorative art project and long-term collaboration to realize the project.

Operations and Maintenance Funding

Similar to capital costs, operating expenses and ongoing maintenance of these sites will be sourced from a combination of public and private funding, as well as in-kind landscape management and strategies for developing earned income. A substantial portion of funds for operations and maintenance must be provided by MPRB, as is standard practice in Minneapolis and cities across the country. A stable and substantial base of City funding is a prerequisite for maximizing philanthropy, and will be required to ensure the park meets its civic aspirations.

In the initial years of the park development and operations, MPRB funding will likely be the only major source of operating revenue for the park. Over time, however, as the vision is implemented and the MR|DI system becomes more successful – and requires more investment – MPRB will need to rely on several potential sources of additional revenue to fill the likely funding gap. These sources should include the following:

Capital Funding

Great ideas supported by great designs—like those envisioned for River FIRST—paired with strong leadership from government, citizens, businesses and institutions, have significant capacity to attract capital. Groundswells of popular support for compelling projects can secure substantial capital funds from local, state, and federal governments. While a strategy for capital funding is being developed for each project consideration should be given to:

- Investment from local institutions interested in particular portions of the RiverFIRST plan should be priority stewards
- Portions of signature projects should be targeted for philanthropic investments from individuals, foundations, and not-for-profit organizations
- Use of the Elwell law and other funding strategies should be investigated to supplement other sources with funding from special assessments
- MPRB, the City of Minneapolis, Hennepin County, and the Metropolitan Council should be prepared to make capital funds available for each of these projects to help leverage third-party sources

Real Estate Development and Assessments: With the implementation of Scherer Park, new value will be created for the surrounding district. Therefore, since real estate is typically the greatest potential source of privately-generated funds for parkland operations and maintenance, and since either MPRB or the City of Minneapolis control developable land in the district, development on and/or around Scherer, Boom Island, and Sheridan Park should be prioritized. And, in exchange for the right to develop, development agreements should outline long-term participation in operating expenses.
• Institutional Partnerships: Portions of the RiverFIRST plan should be stewarded by major institutions in Minneapolis and the region. Allowing existing organizations to operate programs on the sites contemplated for redevelopment can support the plan’s operational sustainability by displacing a need for public funds to maintain the lands. MPRB, the City of Minneapolis, and other project stakeholders should explore how organizations like the St. Anthony Falls Laboratory or the University of Minnesota, among others, might support the ongoing operations of certain RiverFIRST proposals through institutional programming. Certain sites may even be deeded (within the bounds of certain restrictions due to regional park funding) to such organizations with agreements for public access and programming in perpetuity.

• Environmental Benefits: Implementation of certain elements of the RiverFIRST plan, such as the wetlands at Upper Harbor Terminal and the stormwater ravines along the Northeast Bluffs, can reduce the amount of impervious surface along the riverfront and can also clean stormwater. As a result, property owners may be able to avert stormwater fees, which can run into the tens of thousands of dollars every year. Where there is a net saving of stormwater runoff, MPRB should seek to capture the excess in stormwater fees that a property owner would have to pay if runoff were not averted or cleaned, so long as the property owners’ net operating income is not disproportionately negatively affected.

• Philanthropy, Sponsorships, and Programming: In addition to the three primary sources targeted above, RiverFIRST stakeholders should cultivate the philanthropic community, potential corporate and institutional project sponsors, and major events like those held at Boom Island, to help offset the costs of operating the new parks. While these sources will be important for the sustainability of the plan, they are likely to be limited in terms of total dollar value.

Governance
Implementation of the RiverFIRST plan will affect lands owned by many different parties, each of whom will have responsibilities for plan stewardship. It also will have economic and fiscal impacts of interest not only to MPRB, but also the City of Minneapolis, Hennepin County, and the entire Twin Cities Metropolitan Region. Stewardship of the RiverFIRST plan, both in terms of implementation guidance and ongoing parkland operations and maintenance, must, therefore, be a collaborative effort.

The City Department of Planning and Economic Development should work closely with MPRB as it finalizes the revised Above the Falls plan to ensure that land use recommendations and investments in public infrastructure are properly coordinated. These two agencies must also work together to attract appropriate development to riverfront sites and set in place agreements for such real estate developments to provide ongoing sources of funds for parkland benefits.

The five priority projects for RiverFIRST should follow an action plan established by lead organizations:

- MPRB should spearhead the completion of the Riverfront Trail System/Farview Park connections and the recreational/supportive development of Scherer Park.
- The City Department of Planning and Economic Development should advance the comprehensive redevelopment of the Upper Harbor Terminal site, implementing the proposed wetlands as part of its plan.
- The Trust for Public Land should continue to work with downtown stakeholders, the City of Minneapolis and MPRB to implement the Downtown Gateway Park.
- Multiple key organizations should collaborate to implement BioHavens (floating islands).

Suggested Next Steps
The project team will present and deliver copies of the RiverFIRST proposal and implementation framework to the Minneapolis Park and Recreation Board on September 21, 2011.

MPRB Staff intent for the project from this point forward is to allow an “incubation period” for the revised RiverFIRST plan over the next two months. That time could include a formal public comment period, ongoing project management and communication activities, as well as preparation by Staff of proposed next steps for consideration by the Board later this year. Examples of next-step actions are:

- Formal approval of the report
- Authorization of phase 1 implementation/construction documents
- Authorization to initiate a collaborative effort with the City of Minneapolis to update the Above the Falls Master Plan.
Implementation Guide

To maintain momentum and cultivate greater public trust, near-term implementation of projects is essential. This will require action by many leaders and collaboration with supporting partners. The Implementation Guide is an outline of the projects, leadership, milestones, budgets and funding sources.

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<th>Project Description</th>
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<th>Partners</th>
<th>Capital Budget</th>
<th>Action to Progress</th>
<th>Milestones</th>
<th>Capital Sources</th>
<th>Operating Sources</th>
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<td>Planning Initiatives</td>
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| Priority Projects: 0–5 years                                                      |                |                                               |                |                                           |                                        |                                                                                 |                     |
| Plymouth Ave to BNSF Loop                                                         | MPRB           | City, BNSF                                    | $ 27m 1,2      | Feasibility Study/Schematic Design        | Schematic Design approval by MPRB      | MPRB Regional Park funding, Local transportation funding, Transportation grants, public-private partnerships | City, MPRB          |
| BNSF to Lowry Ave Loop                                                           | MPRB           | City, BNSF                                    | $ 15m 1,2      | Approval                                  |                                        |                                                                                 |                     |
| Lowry to Camden Loop                                                             | MPRB           | City, Three Rivers Park District              | $ 15m 1,2      | Schematic Design approval by MPRB         |                                        |                                                                                 |                     |
| Knot Bridges                                                                      | MPRB           | County, City, CP, BNSF                        | $ 18m 1,2      | Feasibility Study/Schematic Design        | Schematic Design approval by MPRB, agreements with partner agencies | MPRB Regional Park funding, Transportation grants | City, County, MPRB |
| Biohavens™                                                                        | MPRB           | NPS, ACOE, DNR, MPF, U of MN – SAFL           | $ 12m 1,2      | Feasibility Study                         | Feasibility study completion in 2012   | MPRB Regional Park funding, grants, philanthropic | MPRB, philanthropic, grants |
| 26th Avenue North and 28th Avenue North Greenways (Farview Park Extension)        | MPRB           | City                                          | $ 5m 1,2       | Schematic Design, State bonding request   | Schematic Design approval by MPRB, agreement with City, successful State bonding | MPRB funds, State bonding, local transportation funding,                           | City, MPRB, public-private partnerships |
| Scherer Park District                                                             |                |                                               |                |                                           |                                        |                                                                                 |                     |
| Scherer Park, Hall’s Island and pedestrian connection to Boom Island Park         | MPRB           | City, ACOE, NPS                               | $ 28m 1,2      | Feasibility Study/Schematic Design        | site cleanup 2012; Schematic Design approval by MPRB | MPRB Regional Park funds, philanthropic | MPRB, public-private partnership |
| Sheridan Park                                                                     | MPRB           | City                                          |                | Veterans memorial completion, Water Street extension | Phase I park completion               | MPRB Regional Park funds, State bonding, philanthropic | MPRB, public-private partnership |
| Northside Wetlands Park                                                           | City           | MPRB, U of MN – SAFL                          | $ 54m 1,2      | City Council determination on Upper Harbor Terminal | Close or consolidate Upper harbor Terminal | Public private partnerships, MPRB Regional Park funding, U of MN – SAFL, local transportation funding | City, MPRB, public-private partnership |
| Downtown Gateway                                                                  | City           | TPL, MPRB, DID                                | tbd            | Define comprehensive project scope        | Determine project scope, budget and partner responsibilities | tbd                                 | tbd                 |

**TOTAL FOR PRIORITY PROJECTS (0–5 years)**                                 $ 174m 1 + Downtown Gateway (see notes below)

**Visionary Proposals: 5–20 years**

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<tr>
<th>Project Description</th>
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<th>Operating Sources</th>
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<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Farview Park Extension</td>
<td>MNDot</td>
<td>MPRB, City</td>
<td>tbd</td>
<td>Feasibility study</td>
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<tr>
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<td>MPRB</td>
<td>MWMQ, City</td>
<td>tbd</td>
<td>Convene project partners, define project scope</td>
<td>Determine project scope</td>
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<td>Spirit Island</td>
<td>MPRB</td>
<td>ACOE, NPS, HPC, Native American communities</td>
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Notes

1. Project budgets include soft costs and contingency.
2. Land acquisition costs not included.
3. MPRB – Minneapolis Park and Recreation Board
4. City – City of Minneapolis
5. CIB – City of Minneapolis Capital Improvement Budget
6. County – Hennepin County
7. Three Rivers – Three Rivers Park District
8. CP – Canadian Pacific
9. BNSF – Burlington Northern Santa Fe
10. MPF – Minneapolis Parks Foundation
11. DNR – Department of Natural Resources
12. ACOE – Army Corps of Engineers
13. NPS – National Park Service
14. U of MN – SAFL – University of Minnesota, St. Anthony Falls Lab
15. MNDoT – Minnesota Department of Transportation
16. MWMO – Mississippi Watershed Management Organization
17. AFCAC – Above the Falls Citizens Advisory Committee
18. TPL – Trust for Public Land
19. DID – Downtown Improvement District