SECTION 1

Planning Framework
INTENT

The purpose of this Above the Falls Regional Park Master Plan (2019 ATF Park Plan) is to guide the Park’s development, preservation, management, and improvement. The ATF Regional Park is part of the upper Mississippi riverfront generally located on both sides of the river between N Plymouth Avenue/8th Street NE and the Camden Bridge (43rd Avenue N/37th Avenue NE). The ATF Regional Park stretches 2.75 miles between North Mississippi Regional Park and the Central Mississippi Riverfront Regional Park. Community leaders and residents have recognized the opportunity in this area to celebrate the Mississippi River, and seek through this master plan to enhance connections to one of the great rivers of the country. Continued acquisition and development of the ATF Regional Park will create a continuous regional park along Minneapolis Mississippi River frontage. Ultimately, the vision is to provide recreational opportunities within an ecologically-functioning framework. The combined Minneapolis and Saint Paul riverfront park system is one of the most significant linear riverfront parks in the nation.

This master plan provides guidance and direction on the acquisition, development, management, and operation of the ATF Regional Park. Approximately 3.1 miles of the total linear riverfront along the upper River is currently owned by public agencies, more than half of the total riverfront within the Regional Park. This plan shows how these parcels can eventually be linked to create a continuous park system that provides a new destination for park visitors, expands access to the river, and enhances natural resource quality. Consistent with MN Statute 473.313 the Metropolitan Council requires a master plan to be developed and updated regularly for each regional park, park reserve, trail and special recreation feature. This plan was crafted to meet the requirements of the Metropolitan Council’s 2030 Regional Parks Policy Plan, and has been updated to meet the Council’s standards for their 2040 Plan. For more information, visit http://www.metrocouncil.org/parks/parks.htm.

PLANNING AGENCIES

METROPOLITAN REGIONAL PARKS AND OPEN SPACE SYSTEM

Regional parks are developed in the Twin Cities Metropolitan Area to preserve green space for wildlife habitat and provide a wide-range of natural resource-related recreational opportunities. Established in 1974, the Regional Parks and Open Space System is overseen by the Metropolitan Council in partnership with cities, counties, and special park districts. While the operation of the system is the responsibility of cities, counties, and special park districts, the Metropolitan Council supports it with planning, funding, and advocacy. In 2012, the system includes 51 regional parks and park reserves, 308 miles of 38 regional trails, and seven special recreation features.

MPRB’s planning time frame for this ATF Parks Plan is through the year 2030, corresponding with the Metropolitan Council’s (Met Council) 2030 Regional Parks Policy Plan. To maintain accuracy and relevancy, the ATF Parks Plan should be updated at least every 10 years. This Master Plan is consistent with both the 2030 and 2040 Regional Parks Policy Plans. Plan approval by the Met Council
Figure 1.1 The Metropolitan Council Regional Park Map showing Above the Falls Plan Area
is necessary to be eligible for regional parks system capital funding for land acquisition and development. Required plan elements addressed in this master plan include:

- Boundaries and acquisition costs
- Plan for stewardship
- Demand forecast
- Development concept
- Conflicts
- Public services
- Operations
- Citizen participation
- Public awareness
- Accessibility
- Natural resources management

**MINNEAPOLIS PARK AND RECREATION BOARD**

The Minneapolis Park and Recreation Board manages one of the most extensive urban park systems in the United States. The Minneapolis Park System has grown to over 6,800 acres of land and water in 180 park properties, including local and regional parks, playgrounds, golf courses, gardens, picnic areas, biking and walking paths, and nature sanctuaries. The system includes the 55-mile Grand Rounds National Scenic Byway. It is overseen by a nine-member Board of Commissioners which is an independently elected, semi-autonomous body responsible for maintaining and developing the system. MPRB provides planning, programming, maintenance, and police protection for the park and recreational facilities in its jurisdiction. The MPRB works cooperatively with the Metro Council, the Metropolitan Parks and Open Space Commission, State Legislature and nine other implementing agencies to operate the regional park system.

The Minneapolis Park and Recreation Board was created in 1883 by an act of the Minnesota State Legislature and vote by Minneapolis residents. The mission of the MPRB is to permanently preserve, protect, maintain, improve and enhance its natural resources, parkland and recreational opportunities for current and future generations. The MPRB exists to provide places and recreation opportunities for all people to gather, celebrate, contemplate, and engage in activities that promote health, well-being, community, and the environment.

The 2007-2020 MPRB Comprehensive Plan sets the vision and direction for the park and recreation system. A key implementation strategy is to “Continue to expand physical access to the Mississippi River in a manner that is aesthetically compatible with the riverfront and sensitive to ecological function, giving priority to implementing the Above the Falls Master Plan” (p. 24). This 2019 Above the Falls Regional Park Master Plan is an important step in realizing that strategy.
PREVIOUS PLANNING

PARK BOUNDARY EVOLUTION

It has been nineteen years since the Above the Falls Regional Park was created and codified with the original master plan in 2000 (Figure 1.2). In the convening years, the regional park boundary has evolved in minor but important ways from the original by means of several amendments adopted by the MPRB and approved by the Metropolitan Council (Figure 1.3). With this 2019 master plan update, the park boundary is further refined as shown in Figure 1.4. Boundary adjustments reflect changed circumstances in land use, realities in land acquisition, and refinements in redevelopment/park development strategies.

Because of the Above the Falls’ urban setting and the ambition expressed through the master plan to transform the upper river corridor from private land to public park, the activity of land protection (through acquisition, easement or other means) is an ongoing effort and will be for years to come. An important word or concept related to this issue is “inholding”. Inholding refers to lands inside the defined boundary of the regional park that are, at present, privately held. In 2000, there was a greater share of upland (non-river) within the ATF Regional Park boundary that was inholding than land in which the MPRB held a legal interest. Through successful land acquisition and easement activities, the balance has shifted to more than 50% of upland within the park boundary in which the MPRB holds a legal interest and a minority share still in the category of “inholding”. See Table 7.1 in Chapter 7 for a tabulation of current ATF Regional Park inholdings and associated land protection value.

ABOVE THE FALLS MASTER PLAN (2000)

Above the Falls: A Master Plan for the Upper River in Minneapolis (2000 ATF Plan) articulates the city’s vision for the upper Mississippi River. The plan was adopted in 2000 by both the City Council and the Minneapolis Park and Recreation Board (MPRB). Among other goals, the plan envisioned the development of the upper Mississippi riverfront into a regional park amenity. The plan was approved by the Metropolitan Council to establish Above the Falls Regional Park in 2000. The 2000 plan addresses more than park and open spaces; it seeks complementary redevelopment of areas adjacent to ATF Regional Park to capitalize on the River’s charms which are currently relatively unavailable to area residents and visitors. The 2000 ATF Plan articulated the following objectives:

- Provide public access to the river through a continuous system of riverfront parks and trails
- Create a system of Riverway Streets to link the adjacent neighborhoods to the river
- Enhance the ecological function of the river corridor
- Link the upper River to the Grand Rounds National Scenic Byway
- Realize the area’s potential for economic development
- Establish urban design guidelines for future development

Figure 1.2 Above the Falls Master Plan adopted by City of Minneapolis and MPRB in 2000
Figure 1.3 Above the Falls Regional Park Boundary prior to 2019 Master Plan Update
Figure 1.4 Above the Falls Regional Park Boundary (2019)

Legend
- Above the Falls Regional Park Boundary (2019)
- Minneapolis Park and Recreation Board

Upper Harbor Terminal parcels (excluded from the park boundary)
IMPLEMENTATION

Since 2000, significant progress has been made towards achieving the original Above the Falls vision, particularly in the areas of park and trail improvements. These are illustrated in Figure 1.5, and include:

- Trail and park construction in 2007 and 2008 on the west bank between Plymouth Avenue and the Burlington Northern Santa Fe (BNSF) railroad bridge north of Broadway
- Extension of West River Road North to the BNSF railroad bridge, with parks development of the adjacent riverbank land
- The construction of Edgewater Park in 2006 with funding support from the Mississippi Watershed Management Organization (MWMO)
- Acquisition, environmental remediation and park development of Gluek Park and Sheridan Memorial Park on the east bank
- Acquisition and environmental remediation of the Scherer Bros. Lumber site on 8th Avenue NE
- Ongoing acquisition of riverbank properties to expand ATF Regional Park, with recent progress made on the east bank

NEED FOR A PLAN UPDATE

In 2009, the Minneapolis City Council renewed its commitment to this area by directing City planning staff to pursue a review and update of the 2000 ATF Plan. Led by the Department of Community Planning and Economic Development, the City’s Above the Falls Master Plan Update was adopted by City Council in 2013. At the same time, the Minneapolis Park and Recreation Board initiated a high-profile and ambitious initiative to refresh the park vision for the same area, resulting in RiverFirst: A Park Design Proposal and Implementation Plan for the Minneapolis Upper Riverfront (RiverFirst). These combined efforts (along with subsequent implementation and developments since then) have informed the MPRB’s creation of this Above the Falls Regional Park Plan.

THE 2013 CITY OF MINNEAPOLIS ABOVE THE FALLS MASTER PLAN UPDATE

The City’s 2013 ATF Update renewed the vision of the original 2000 ATF Plan, focusing on guiding land use while “developing the Mississippi riverfront into a regional park amenity in north and northeast Minneapolis.” The plan supports new investment and improved environmental quality - leveraging the unique and valuable asset that is the Mississippi River.

The 2013 ATF Update differs from the original 2000 ATF Plan in some areas by recommending changes to land use guidance based on extensive market-feasibility analysis and community engagement. The plan affirmed a renewed appreciation for some uses that were initially dismissed in the original plan. It also articulated a more robust implementation section strategy with clearer action steps. The plan recognized that the vision must be realistic and achievable within a given time frame. While the City’s 2013 ATF Plan Update supported the long-term view of the original 2000 ATF Plan, it focused more attention on near-term implementation, some of which has already been accomplished.
Figure 1.5 Implementation steps and other development completed since the 2000 ATF plan
RiverFirst is a long-term vision for transformation of the Mississippi River in Minneapolis beyond its historically industrial roots to address contemporary opportunities including new forms of recreation that engage the river, ecological stewardship, mobility, and a green economy that employs local residents. Within this sweeping vision is a set of design recommendations for phased parks development, in particular along the upper Mississippi River.

The RiverFirst vision for parks along the upper Mississippi was approved by the Minneapolis Park and Recreation Board on March 14, 2012, following an international design competition and subsequent visioning process led by design team TLS/KVA in 2011. This gave rise to the RiverFirst Initiative, an interagency partnership of MPRB, the City of Minneapolis and the Minneapolis Parks Foundation focused on realizing the RiverFirst vision by implementing priority projects.

Since initiating RiverFirst, there has been some justifiable confusion about the relationship between it and the Above the Falls Regional Park Master Plan. The ATF Regional Park Master Plan (like other regional park master plans) is adopted policy of the MPRB used to guide the organization’s actions and investments within the park’s boundary. RiverFirst is the brand of an ongoing community call-to-action for transforming Minneapolis’ upper riverfront from private shoreline to public parkland with adjacent redevelopment. It suggests park and other public space investments across two regional parks (ATF and Central Riverfront) and investments within but also beyond regional park boundaries.

Figure 1.6 shows RiverFirst’s long-term vision, which goes beyond parks, stormwater management and trails to address larger urban design issues by envisioning the growth of creative industries, commercial amenities, and residential communities in a way that reinforces both the RiverFirst initiatives and the City’s redevelopment goals.

Figure 1.7 summarizes RiverFirst’s near-term vision for parks, stormwater management, and trails -- particularly those within the ATF Regional Park boundary.

Many components of the RiverFirst park vision have been integrated with elements from the 2000 ATF Plan to inform this updated 2019 ATF Park Plan Update.
Figure 1.6 RiverFirst long-term urban design vision (2012)

This expansive vision extends far beyond the ATF Regional Park boundary, and addresses many urban development issues in addition to park development.
Components of this near-term parks vision have been integrated with this 2019 ATF Park Plan.