COMMUNITY ENGAGEMENT

The East of the River Park Master Plan is the result of more than one and a half years of planning and design by MPRB staff, the community, and hired technical consultants. More than 90 community engagement events were held and several different stages of input garnered thousands of individual comments on park plans, guiding principles, and the planning process itself. The backbone of community engagement was the 19-member Community Advisory Committee (CAC), a group of community members appointed by MPRB Commissioners, City Council Members, and Neighborhood Organizations. The CAC met 12 times as a group. CAC members also created a working group to address the Regional Trail system and Grand Rounds Missing Link. The workgroup delved in more deeply into their topic area and reported back to the full CAC along with a recommendation on the final route for the Grand Rounds Missing Link. Many CAC members also connected directly with their networks and neighbors to bring valuable insight to the planning process.

Throughout the process, MPRB staff expended significant efforts to reach out to community members often left out of planning processes, namely youth, seniors, and people of color. Staff and design team members attended numerous community events, both in and outside of parks, door knocked, and visited parks on busy days to talk with users. Southeast Minneapolis is home to the University of Minnesota, and reaching out to the student, staff, and faculty population was also a core strategy for outreach which included appointing a student to the CAC, presenting on the plan in courses, and even organizing a walking tour for a student club of neighborhood parks. Four other efforts were specifically envisioned to involve more East of the River stakeholders in the process and to make the design process itself more transparent: the Youth Design Team, the Data Jam, Design Week, and the Plan Van pop-up park engagement tour.

The Youth Design Team: The Youth Design Team (YDT) employed high school students to participate in the planning of neighborhood parks in NE and SE Minneapolis. During the year-long process, these youth worked with MPRB planning staff, design consultants, local artists, and community members to help bring important youth perspectives and creative ideas to the process and park plans. Youth Design Team participants went through a competitive application process, were 15-19 years old, live or attend school in Northeast or Southeast Minneapolis, and are interested in parks, design, and/or policy making. The YDT worked on all stages of the plan including site inventory and analysis, community data collection, data analysis, and park planning and design. The YDT had hands-on experience learning concepts, building skills, and gaining professional experience, all while helping to impact the future of parks in their communities.

All the gathered input was incorporated into the Data Jam (see appendix B) and provided to park designers. The Youth Design Team was the first of its kind at MPRB and unique in the public
sector, but did build off the success of other youth job initiatives at MRPB including the Green Team program.

Data Jam: At CAC meeting #5, the CAC and general public participated in MPRB’s first ever Data Jam. In an effort to involve the community in not just the gathering of data, but in the interpretation of that data, meeting participants were asked to sift through collected community engagement and demographic data. They developed major topics for both the service area as a whole, and for each individual park. They worked both individually and collectively, having excellent arguments about what the “public” was actually saying. The Youth Design Team, Park Staff, and design consultants also participated in a Data Jam.

Design Week: The results of the Data Jam fed directly into the initial designs of the parks themselves, which were also prepared in a new and different way. In order to diversify the pool of designers involved in the park designs and to open the process to the CAC and public, over twelve designers, planners, and park staff came together for one week and helped generate initial park designs. These multi-disciplinary design teams represented gender and race diversity. They worked during an intense four and a half days that involved site visits, a charrette-style working environment, and public events. Design week began with CAC #6, at which CAC members presented guidance from the Data Jam and working groups, then sat at tables with the designers and began thinking about park amenities and arrangement. Two days later, MPRB opened the design studio doors for a public walk-through, where community members could see the designers’ early ideas and chat again with them about park designs. Design week resulted in two concepts for each park and triangle in the service area that were a combination of the hopes of the community, innovations in park design, data, and policy direction. Each park concept balanced being a data driven and creative vision for the community.

Plan Van: Following design week, two concepts of each park were shared out with the general public for feedback. The planning team hosted four events during this period in addition to the online survey that was open for almost two months to facilitate robust community dialogue about the concepts for each park. The events included a BBQ with a DJ at a park, a happy hour at a local brewery, a bus tour of all the parks, and a pop-up engagement series in the parks across the service area, called the Plan Van. The Plan Van, hosted by the Youth Design Team and MPRB staff, included a mobile display of all the park concepts, free popsicles, and many opportunities for users of parks to spontaneously provide feedback on the park designs. The Plan Van took the planning process directly into the parks and made it

Image 12 | Community designed service area map. Source: MPRB
INTRODUCTION

possible for people with a deep understanding of the parks, the users, to weigh in on the designs without having to go online or attend a meeting.

The high amount of community engagement events, the Youth Design Team, the Data Jam, Design Week, and the Plan Van were all done in an effort to ensure that the planning process was open and equitable, and to perform work in the spirit of a racial equity lens. Community engagement unfolded in three main phases, in concert with the gradual evolution of park plans over 19 months (for a detailed list of engagement events, see Appendix A). While there is always room for improvement, and we always learn how to improve our work with every planning process, we can confidently say that the extensive engagement associated with the East of the River Park Master Plan garnered input and dialog from a broad cross-section of the community. The planning team worked hard to reach the broader community in the effort and was supported by local media in getting the word out through radio and TV news coverage and almost monthly articles in local and neighborhood papers. The ERPMP is the result of input that spans ranges of age, gender, economic status, race and ethnicity, and historic involvement with park planning.

Most importantly, the planning process and park designs changed over the course of the project in response to the community’s voice. The ERPMP process unfolded slowly and deliberately over more than a year and a half, repeatedly asking the community to weigh in at each stage: at the initial visioning, on the community engagement data; on early hand-sketched designs; at the stage of design refinement; and even on this very document.

Though a park planning process cannot solve the deeply entrenched institutional bias that exist. It can do its part to make decisions that set the stage for eliminating that bias in areas where MPRB has jurisdiction. MPRB recognizes the importance of the commitment to the ERPMP process many community members have made—especially at a time of heightened tension and dialog around race—and the agency is indebted for that service.

The ERPMP is a significant step forward in ensuring that racial and other bias is eliminated. It envisions a neighborhood park system that meets the needs of the changing community. It aligns park plans with community needs and investment in areas where those needs are greatest. It does not assume the parks will be remade just as they are now. It remakes the parks in the image of the present and future Minneapolis.
INTRODUCTION SERVICE AREA VISION PARK PLANS IMPLEMENTATION PLANNING PROCESS EAST OF THE RIVER PARK MASTER PLAN OPERATIONS AND MAINTENANCE

PROJECT TIMELINE

The ERPMP process unfolded in six distinct stages. The following is a brief stage-by-stage overview of the project.

1: EARLY CONNECTIONS AND THE CAC

At the inception of the project, MPRB staff met with multiple community organizations and neighborhood organizations in the Northeast and Southeast Service Area. The purpose of these meetings was to build awareness of the planning process and to also ask for help in broadening the applicant pool for the CAC. In addition, MPRB staff attended park events during this start-up phase, to gather input and encourage CAC applications.

MPRB staff worked closely with appointments on the CAC to ensure a broad representation of viewpoints. It must be noted here that, as with any CAC, attendance was never perfect. MPRB recognizes that the multiple evening meetings demanded by the current CAC process can disproportionately affect members of color and those with lower incomes. MPRB will continue to work on improving access to CAC meetings, including continued consideration of altered meeting formats, always providing food during dinner-time meetings, providing children’s activities, and bringing individual CAC members up to speed after the fact when they cannot attend meetings.

2: INVENTORY, ANALYSIS, AND DATA

Somewhat outside the CAC and community engagement process, MPRB and its consultant team prepared an inventory and analysis of park assets, with descriptions of condition and quality, and also a demographic analysis of the service area. These documents were presented during CAC #4 and were included in the Data Jam.

FIGURE 3 | PROJECT TIMELINE
3: VISIONING COMMUNITY ENGAGEMENT

MPRB staff, consultants, community connectors, and CAC members attended dozens of events in fall of 2017, both in the parks and elsewhere. There were also maps of each park and a description of the plan on display in each recreation center for several months where park users could make notes. No park designs were merely presented. Rather, the engagement activities were designed to get people thinking generally about what the park system as a whole should be and what they would like to change or preserve in their local park. And finally, since much of this stage of engagement fell during winter months, when there are fewer community events to attend to get input, the design team developed a series of Park Design Sessions. The Park Design Sessions were hosted in almost every neighborhood in NE and SE Minneapolis and were open to the public. They were designed as hour long creative sessions focused on the parks and triangles in each of the neighborhoods. An average of 20 people attended each of the 18 of park design sessions. As a result of these engagements, the design team produced summaries of responses associated with each park and parks in general in the service area. This information was included in the Data Jam and provided critical insight as the design team began drawing the first initial park plans. Also during this phase, MPRB planning staff and consultants met with each recreation center leader as well as with an MPRB team from across the organization. The general input and summaries of the data from this phase are in Appendix B (DATA JAM PACKETS).
DATA SUMMARY: COMMUNITY ENGAGEMENT

METHOD 1: ACTIVITY SELECTION
ATTENDED: 50+ COMMUNITY EVENTS SINCE AUGUST 2017

METHOD 2: DREAM PARK CARDS

METHOD 3: DESIGN SESSIONS
COUNT: 582

METHOD 4: SURVEY
COUNT: 80+

METHOD 5: CANVASSING
COUNT: TBD IN PROCESS
COUNT: 260 COUNT: 289 COUNT: 582 COUNT: 80+

FIGURE 4 | VISIONING COMMUNITY ENGAGEMENT METHODS
FIGURE 5 | SUMMARY OF COMMUNITY ENGAGEMENT FROM INITIAL CONCEPT REVIEW DURING SUMMER 2018.
4: INITIAL PARK DESIGN FEEDBACK 
COMMUNITY ENGAGEMENT

Synthesizing the first round of community engagement, park design innovation examples from across the globe, data about each of the parks and surrounding communities, and building off existing plans and policies, the expanded design team prepared the initial park concepts. During Design Week, the design team reviewed all the community engagement to date and hand-sketched one or two different concept ideas for each park. The team refined these sketches over the course of several weeks and then brought them back out to the community. The designs were intended to spur community discussion, test different ideas, and then be revised in a later stage.

The initial concepts were brought out to the community in several open houses scattered throughout the service area. The open house set-up was such that community members could gather around the different designs and discuss them with neighbors, at times even drawing new solutions right on the initial sketches. MPRB also met with some stakeholder groups during this process and initial concepts were available online with an accompanying survey.

MPRB staff were also asked to weigh in on the concepts through two “in-houses” where the draft concepts were displayed for staff feedback from across the agency. Over forty staff attended each open house to provide comments and insights on the plans from a variety of perspectives including maintenance, aquatics, events, ecological management, and recreation. Technical advisors from other agencies were also invited to the open houses and for one-on-one conversations about the process as needed. The technical advisors included:

- Metro Transit Planning
- Met Council Parks
- UofM Planning
- City of Minneapolis Long Range Planning
- City of Minneapolis Health Department
- City of Minneapolis Public Works Transportation Planning
- Hennepin County
- City of St. Paul Parks and Bike/Ped staff
- MnDOT
- City of St Anthony
- Minneapolis Public Schools
- Mississippi Watershed Management Organization

All input—online, open house, stakeholder, MPRB staff, technical advisor etc.—was entered into MPRB’s on-line survey system to generate detailed records of feedback for each park. The general input themes are included in the park packet for each park, in Chapter 4.

5: PREFERRED CONCEPT COMMUNITY ENGAGEMENT

Based on input about the initial concepts, the design team met again in a workshop to discuss revision of the designs. Each park was considered individually and in the context of the service area as a whole, with the draft guiding principles (see Chapter 3) also driving decision-making. The team produced a single “preferred concept” for each park. The service area-wide maps and charts were updated to reflect the preferred concepts.

In CAC #7, members heard from MPRB staff about Operations and Maintenance at MPRB. This session was designed to provide the CAC with more detailed understanding of the maintenance needs and possibilities for the proposed park improvements.
After a year of extensive community engagement with a wide range of people and groups that know and love their parks, the final stages of community engagement around the preferred concepts centered on the CAC. The preferred concepts were discussed in meetings 10, 11, 12—meetings that regularly attracted between 10 and 20 members of the general public in addition to the CAC members. CAC meeting #10 featured a process of sorting the parks into those that the CAC felt were in the realm of consensus toward recommendation and those that required further discussion. The general public had an opportunity to speak about each park in turn as it was raised to the floor (see Appendix 3 for CAC meeting notes showing the details of the discussion). CAC #11 began the discussion of the “non-consensus” parks. CAC #12 was the final meeting, with the CAC recommending the overall guiding principles, preferred and alternate route alignments and design considerations for the Grand Rounds Missing Link, and the designs of all parks to the MPRB Commissioners. The CAC did request further exploration of the Caleb Dorr triangle concept with the technical advisory committee and the neighborhood during the public comment period, of which the final plan reflects the consensus of the TAC.

6: PUBLIC COMMENT ON THE ERPMP DOCUMENT AND FINAL APPROVAL

At the conclusion of the CAC process, MPRB staff and consultants prepared the draft ERPMP document and provided it to the community for formal public comment. The document was made available online and in print at all service area recreation centers. Surveys were also made available online and as hard copies at all NE/SE recreation centers as well as MPRB HQ.

As the conclusion of the 45-day comment period, MPRB staff tabulated the comments, made necessary changes to the document to reflect that input, and brought the final ERPMP before the Board of Commissioners for approval with a public hearing.