Introduction

Over thousands of years, the Mississippi River’s St. Anthony Falls has cut its way through limestone ledges and soft sandstone and in its wake left the only gorge along the mighty river’s length. Mississippi Gorge Regional Park (MGRP) encompasses and protects this unique landscape in Minneapolis. The park draws both local and regional visitors due to its central location in the Twin Cities metro area and its access to the Mississippi River. Hardwood forests on steep rocky bluffs and in muddy floodplains, hills draped in prairie, sandy beaches, and lawns for playing on, give the gorge a wild character loved and appreciated by local residents and park visitors. The park is an integral piece of Minneapolis’s historic Grand Rounds National Scenic Byway and lies within the Mississippi National River and Recreation Area, providing important water-oriented and trail recreation and places for people to gather along the river corridor. It is a national resource that serves regional, city-wide, and neighborhood audiences.

The 265-acre park is the result of visionary planning dating back more than 100 years, beginning with Horace W. S. Cleveland’s plan for a connected system of parks and parkways in Minneapolis and Saint Paul called the Grand Rounds. Since that time, numerous other planning and neighborhood organization efforts have helped shape the natural treasure known as the Mississippi Gorge Regional Park, including the 1982 Mississippi Gorge Regional Park Master Plan. In 1997, a Concept Plan for portions of the Mississippi River Gorge was prepared for the park, laying out strategies for keeping the park an undeveloped, semi-wild nature reserve in the middle of the city in partnership with Longfellow Community Council (LCC). Much has changed since the completion of that plan, including changing demographics and evolving trends that are shaping recreation, social gathering, environmental stewardship and sustainability. Additionally, greater use of the river and the parks, trails, and open spaces along it, concerns about sensitive landscapes and erosion impacts, the uncertainty of the future of the lock and dam system, and the need to address accessibility and safety concerns in the park warrant special attention and long-range planning of park improvements.
Figure 1-1. Vicinity Map
The purpose of the Mississippi Gorge Regional Park Master Plan is to establish a long-term vision for the park and provide a guide for managing, protecting, preserving, and maintaining the river gorge, and to prioritize action plans for recreation, environmental, shoreline, trail, and other improvements to park facilities. The master plan includes an assessment of existing conditions (parks, trails, river access and views, parkways, natural areas, shoreline, neighborhood context, etc.) along the river gorge to identify gaps, areas in need of improvement, and opportunities for new park user experiences. It also explores two possible futures for the river gorge – with and without the lock and dam system. Removal of the locks and dams could have a significant impact on river ecology and create new opportunities for park user experiences. The master plan meets Metropolitan Council requirements for regional parks and addresses implementation strategies including cost estimates, phasing strategies, and potential partnerships for funding and stewarding future improvements.

**Metropolitan Regional Parks System**

The regional parks system was established in 1974 when the Metropolitan Council (Met Council) and ten implementing agencies were put in charge of overseeing the acquisition and development of regional parks throughout the seven-county Twin Cities metropolitan area. The combined efforts of cities, counties, and special districts manage 52 regional parks and park reserves in a system that experiences more than 47 million annual visits.

“In considering the question of the selection of suitable lands for parks and connection lines of parkways or boulevards, let me ask you to bear in mind the fact that the Mississippi River is not only the grand natural feature which gives character to your city and constitutes the main spring of its prosperity, but it is the object of vital interest and the center of attraction to intelligent visitors from every quarter of the globe, who associate such ideas of grandeur with its name as no human creation can excite.”

- HWS Cleveland

The Met Council, with advice from the Metropolitan Parks and Open Space Commission, facilitates planning and funding for the regional parks system. Policies guiding this work support the regional goals for parks and open space, including protection of the region’s water quality, implementation of best management practices, and coordination with other regional functions like housing and transportation.

The Met Council works with implementing agencies, such as the Minneapolis Park and Recreation Board, to realize improvements according to Met Council policies and practices. The Met Council’s planning requirements help to ensure consistency throughout the region. Plan approval by the Met Council is necessary in order to receive acquisition, development, and operational funding.

**Minneapolis Park and Recreation Board**

The Minneapolis Park and Recreation Board (MPRB) oversees parks in the City of Minneapolis. The park system receives approximately 18 million visits each year across 179 park properties. Parks range from local neighborhood play lots to large nature areas, and include...
Figure 1-2. Map of the Minneapolis Grand Rounds
the 55-mile Grand Rounds National Scenic Byway (Figure 1-2). The MPRB provides administration, planning, development, maintenance, and police protection for parks and recreational facilities in the system. Environmental, recreational, and other programs and services are provided for park users of all ages and abilities.

Established in 1883, MPRB is the governing agency responsible for improving, operating, and maintaining Mississippi Gorge Regional Park. The nine-member Board of Commissioners is an independently elected body responsible for maintaining and developing the Minneapolis park system to meet the needs of the community. Every four years, commissioners are elected to this Board - one from each of the six park districts within the city and three that serve at-large. This unique structure allows independent decision making so the MPRB can efficiently oversee Minneapolis’s diverse system of land and water.

Related Planning Efforts and Agencies

While the Mississippi Gorge Regional Park Master Plan sets the vision for the next 20 years, it is not the only planning document influencing park development, water quality, river ecology, stormwater management, access, and connectivity in the gorge. Other planning efforts, governing agencies, and partnerships impact the park and its users. Examples of agencies and organizations whose work impacts the gorge include:

» National Park Service – natural and cultural resources
» Mississippi Watershed Management Organization – water quality and biodiversity
» Minnehaha Creek Watershed District – water quality and biodiversity
» Minnesota Department of Natural Resources – natural and cultural resources
» City of Minneapolis – land use, transportation and stormwater management
» City of Saint Paul – transportation, stormwater management, park and trail connections
» Hennepin County – transportation, stormwater management, and water rescue
» United States Army Corps of Engineers – lock and dams, flood control, dredging for waterway navigation
» Minnesota State Historical Society – historic and cultural resources
» University of Minnesota – education, recreation, trail connections
» Friends of the Mississippi – natural resources
» Minneapolis Rowing Club - competitive and recreational rowing
» University of Minnesota Rowing - competitive rowing
» Mississippi River Paddlers - through-paddling the river
» Metro Transit – transportation/transit

Related plans and studies conducted in and around the study area that should be considered by future park development include, but are not limited to:

Ecological System Plan (MPRB, Ongoing)

The Minneapolis Park and Recreation Board (MPRB) and the Mississippi Watershed Management Organization (MWMO) are preparing the first-ever Ecological System Plan. This plan will set a vision for making parks and public lands more friendly to the environment.

The Ecological System Plan will seek to first understand the ecology of the city and watershed, then plan for parks and public lands management and improvements that benefit both humans and nature. It will address specific threats such as climate change, decreasing water quality, explosion of invasive species, increasing runoff, and fragmentation of habitat. It will envision a more environmentally sound way of managing the impacts of the city, so that the city can be cleaner, greener, cooler, and more efficient.

Specifically, the ecological system plan will:

» Compile, create, and illustrate city-wide ecological data;
» Craft a vision for natural resources and public lands within the watershed and city;
» Outline guiding principles for management; and
» Challenge the community to rethink the city around them—from the local neighborhood park to the Grand Rounds to backyards—in terms of ecological function, benefit, and health.
Minneapolis Locks Disposition Study (USACE, Ongoing)

The USACE describes the project as:

A disposition studies examine the benefits and costs of continuing to operate federal projects which are no longer serving their authorized purpose. Disposition studies are conducted in two phases:

» Phase 1 uses existing data to determine whether or not disposal of the properties would be the appropriate course of action
» Phase 2 includes soliciting input from stakeholders and evaluating alternatives, possibly leading to an order by Congress to dispose of the property.

A Phase 1 study was completed on Upper St. Anthony Falls, Lower St. Anthony Falls locks and Lock and Dam 1 in 2017, and the decision was made to proceed with Phase 2.

Phase 2 of a study for all three facilities began April 2018 and several public meetings were held in July 2018. In October 2018, the Water Resources and Development Act of 2018 directed that a disposition study for Upper St. Anthony Falls Lock and Dam was to be completed separately from the other two sites. As such, the study was re-scoped to focus just on Upper St. Anthony Falls Lock and Dam. A separate study for Lower St. Anthony Falls Lock and Dam and Lock and Dam 1 will be conducted at a later time.

Phase 2 study for Upper St. Anthony Falls, will resume in late spring 2019. A likely outcome of Phase 2 will be a report containing recommendations to deauthorize and dispose of all or part of the Upper St. Anthony Falls Lock and Dam property. A draft report will be made available for public comment in summer 2020.

Federal property disposal is managed by the General Services Administration as governed by federal law. If disposal of the properties is not confirmed, additional studies may be performed to modify the projects to serve existing or new authorized purposes, or for additional uses identified by a potential non-federal sponsor and authorized under a new feasibility study.

(Source: https://www.mvp.usace.army.mil/MplsLocksDisposition/)

Minnehaha Creek Parkway Regional Trail Master Plan (MPRB/MCWD, Expected completion in 2019)

The Minneapolis Park and Recreation Board (MPRB) is conducting planning efforts on the Minnehaha Parkway Regional Trail Master Plan. The project involves looking at all of the parkland along Minnehaha Creek from the western city limits east to Minnehaha Regional Park, to envision improvements over the next 20 to 30 years.

The master plan is being prepared in a three-agency collaboration between the MPRB, City of Minneapolis and
Over the next year, project partners will work together to develop principles and concept designs for many aspects of the park corridor.

The Community Advisory Committee (CAC), project partners, and park users will examine ecology, history, trails, the creek, the roadway, tennis courts, bridges, water access, and anything else brought up during the planning process. The plan will determine the next decades of improvements in parkland that traces its history back to original plans presented by Theodore Wirth (Superintendent of the Minneapolis Park System) in 1928.

The final plan will contain the following elements:
» An overview of Minnehaha Parkway history that tells the story of conditions that have shaped it into what it is today
» A detailed Conditions Assessment of the access points, trails, open spaces, shoreline, and altered areas (either by human activity or invasive plants)
» A corresponding Needs Assessment for the areas described above
» Recreation programming potential
» Conceptual plans for different amenities throughout the parkway corridor (trails, creek, open spaces, courts, bridges)

The East of the River Park Master Plan is the result of more than 18 months of community participation in designing neighborhood parks in Minneapolis east of the Mississippi River, along with a regional facility - the Grand Rounds Missing Link. The main purpose of the plan is to describe and illustrate the vision for the NE and SE service area parks. Specifically, the plan is intended to do the following:
» Show the Minneapolis community what it can expect from MPRB
» Guide development of the Capital Improvement Program for neighborhood park improvements each year, through resources such as concept design plans and cost estimates
» Set a framework for collaboration with outside groups around implementation of, stewardship of, and fundraising for park improvements
» Create an MPRB-wide framework for park design and maintenance, so all divisions are on the same page
» Provide resources for tracking progress, so MPRB is continually accountable to the promises made during the service area planning process

There are several neighborhood parks within convenient walking distance from the West River Parkway, including Murphy Square, Matthews Park, Brackett Field, Seven Oaks Oval, and Hiawatha School Park. Riverside Park, though within the MGRP, is considered a neighborhood park under MPRB’s funding equity metrics. It’s important to consider strengthening pedestrian and bike connections between neighborhood parks and the MGRP.

South Service Area Master Plan (MPRB, Completed 2016)

The South Service Area Master Plan establishes a future vision for all of the neighborhood parks south of downtown, and east of I-35W in Minneapolis. It is a long-term plan intended to guide capital improvements in the neighborhood parks of South Minneapolis. Specifically, the plan is intended to do the following:

There are a few neighborhood parks within walking distance from the East River Parkway, including Tower Hill Park and Luxton Park, located in the Prospect Park neighborhood. It’s important to consider strengthening pedestrian and bike connections between neighborhood parks and the MGRP.
Central Mississippi Riverfront Regional Park Master Plan (MPRB, Completed 2016)

The Central Mississippi Riverfront Regional Park Master Plan provides a future vision and guidance on the redevelopment and enhancement of existing facilities and resources, as well as the acquisition of additional property and the expansion of the regional park boundary. The CMRRP Master Plan addresses the riverfront running through the historic Mill District and the Downtown Minneapolis core. The plan envisions a more connected, natural, and adaptable regional park for future generations. Connections between the CMRRP and the MGRP should be seamless and enhanced where appropriate, such as the connection between bridge #9 and the trail on East River Road. Other areas to connect the two parks are through the cultural, recreational, and economic histories of the area.

MPRB Comprehensive Plan (MPRB, Completed in 2007)

In 2005, the Minneapolis Park and Recreation Board initiated a public process to complete a comprehensive plan for the Minneapolis park system. Throughout 2006, commissioners, staff, residents, and local leaders worked together to share their impressions of the Minneapolis park system, including its strengths and areas needing improvement. The vision, goals, and strategies established in the comprehensive plan were informed by an extensive outreach process. The plan provides a vision, goals and direction for improvements to the Minneapolis park system until 2020, ensuring that the Minneapolis park system will continue to be essential to quality of life in Minneapolis, and play a vital part in supporting the health and well-being of Minneapolis residents and visitors.

The 2020 vision for the Minneapolis park system is that it is a "premier destination that welcomes and captivates residents and visitors. The park system and its beauty are part of daily life and shape the character of Minneapolis. Natural, cultural, artistic, historical, and recreational resources cultivate outstanding experiences, health, enjoyment, fun, and learning for all people. The park system is sustainable, well-maintained, and safe. It meets the needs of individuals, families, and communities. The focus on preserving land continues, with a strong emphasis on connecting people to the land and each other. Aware of its value to their lives, residents are proud stewards and supporters of an extraordinary park and recreation system.

The Comprehensive Plan is being renewed over the next two years. That effort will result in a new plan and vision for the park system by 2020. The Comprehensive Plans guiding principles and goals will continue to inform future park development in the Mississippi Gorge Regional Park.

(Source of information regarding MPRB Projects: Minneapolis Parks and Recreation Board)

2007 Comprehensive Plan Vision Themes:

- **Vision Theme 1** - Urban forests, natural areas, and waters that endure and captivate
- **Vision Theme 2** - Recreation that inspires personal growth, healthy lifestyles, and a sense of community
- **Vision Theme 3** - Dynamic parks that shape city character and meet diverse community needs