SECTION 1
Planning Framework
INTENT

The upper reach of the Mississippi River through Minneapolis is on the cusp of a renaissance. Over the past few decades, land uses have been transitioning from predominantly heavy industry to an influx of jobs, housing, arts/design/culture, and entertainment. Environmental contamination is being remediated. Industrial transport on the river has ceased. Recreational use of the river is increasing. And there is growing focus on activating the riverfront as dynamic public realm.

In 2000, the Minneapolis Park & Recreation Board and City of Minneapolis pointed the way with the visionary Above the Falls Master Plan, which was a combined park and urban redevelopment plan for the future of Minneapolis’ upper river corridor. The 2000 plan expressed a vision for converting the riverfront from numerous private backlots to a contiguous ribbon of public parkland on both banks that serves as an address to adjacent redevelopment and the community’s front yard. The plan set the stage for establishing the Above the Falls Regional Park as the MPRB’s newest addition to its collection of regional parks.

This master plan document is an update to the 2000 master plan. Consistent with MN Statute 473.313 compelling regional park implementing agencies (including the MPRB) to establish and regularly update regional park master plans and submit them to the Metropolitan Council for authorization. This plan was crafted to meet the requirements of the Metropolitan Council’s 2040 Regional Parks Policy Plan http://www.metrocouncil.org/parks/parks.htm. Unlike the 2000 plan, this document is exclusively a park plan. It has been closely coordinated with but doesn’t address land use guidance, which is under the jurisdiction of the City of Minneapolis. The plan is an aspirational as well as practical and strategic document intended to guide land assembly, park development/preservation, and park operations & maintenance activities within the boundary of the park for the next 15+/- years. The plan reflects inherent qualities and context of the park’s urban riverfront setting in combination with community values and recreational interests. The plan is formulated in the context of multiple rounds of community engagement including a formal public comment period and public hearing through which comments have been received, documented and, to the extent warranted, incorporated into the document.

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.
Established in 2000, Above the Falls Regional Park is the youngest of 8 regional parks and several regional trails in the MPRB system. MPRB is one of 10 regional park implementing agencies in the Twin Cities Metro.
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 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**


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, which continue to apply to this master plan update:

- 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

**IMPLEMENTATION TO-DATE**

Since the Above the Falls Regional Park was established and original master plan adopted in 2000, progress toward park implementation has been made. In addition, non-park investments have been made within and outside the park boundary that impact the park and the way people engage with it. A compilation of the significant improvements is illustrated in Figure 1.3 and generally described below.

**Land Assembly.** Roughly 64 acres of the 140 upland acres (45%) within the ATF Regional Park boundary is currently under MPRB ownership through fee title or easement. In addition, the MPRB is working toward an agreement with the City of Minneapolis to assume ownership of roughly 20 acres of the Upper Harbor Terminal property as parkland. Often associated with land assembly is the cleanup and demolition of acquired properties, which often have buildings to be removed and require some level of environmental remediation. The MPRB has created an internal real estate staffing position to manage the pursuit of land assembly opportunities and demands.
Park & Trail Development. Roughly 40 acres of parkland has been developed for recreational and ecological uses with the ATF Regional Park. Some of these lands, such as Hall's Island and Sheridan Memorial Park are in the midst of multi-year phases of park development while others such as Gluek Park and Marshall Terrace Park are generally built out. Trail extensions happen in stages as land is assembled with the most current example being the East Bank Trail from Plymouth Avenue to the BNSF rail bridge.

Current Pursuits. The MPRB is actively pursuing additional land assembly and park development within ATF Regional Park. While land assembly efforts are often private discussions, the Upper Harbor Terminal is an example of one that is public. Active park development efforts include 26th Avenue North Overlook, Graco Park, Upper Harbor Terminal and others.

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 ABOVE THE FALLS SMALL AREA PLAN BY THE CITY OF MINNEAPOLIS

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 1.3 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 1.4 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 1.5 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. See Section 6: Park Development Concept for more details.
Figure 1.4 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.
Figure 1.5 RiverFirst 5-year vision for parks development (2012)

Components of this near-term parks vision have been integrated with this 2019 ATF Park Plan.

Legend
1. Northside Wetland Park
2. Lowry Connector
3. West River Road Extension
4. Scherer Park District
5. Sheridan Park
6. Riverfront Trail System