SECTION 2

Park Background
LOCATION, HISTORY, AND CONTEXT

The Above the Falls Regional Park surrounds and includes 2.75 miles of the Mississippi River in Minneapolis. The park extends from the Plymouth Avenue bridge on the south to the Camden Bridge on the north. In Minneapolis, this reach of the river is known as the “upper river”. As illustrated in Figure 2.1, ATF is one of a series of regional parks encompassing the entirety of the Mississippi River’s reach through Minneapolis. To the north of ATF are North Mississippi Regional Park and St. Anthony Parkway Regional Trail and to its south are the Central Mississippi Riverfront Regional Park, Mississippi Gorge Regional Park, and Minnehaha Falls Regional Park as well as Fort Snelling State Park.

Land uses in the upper river corridor have evolved since western settlement in response to resource availability, market forces, technology and changing forms of transportation. Until the past twenty years, the constant thread across 140 years of change had been the goal of leverage the Mississippi River as a transportation resource in support of an upper river industrial economy. The district was first developed with lumber milling, foundries, breweries, and some agriculture to capitalize on its location just up-stream from St. Anthony Falls. As rail transport matched river transport in the latter decades of the nineteenth century, rail yards and support facilities were located on both riverbanks above the falls and new rail bridges were constructed across the river. Lumber milling and foundries gave way to metal recycling, retailing, technology, and industrial storage.

In support of industry and after decades of lobbying by city leaders, a pair of locks were constructed at St. Anthony Falls in the 1960s to push the head of Mississippi River navigation upstream from Saint Paul to the Minneapolis upper river. Preparation for barge transport lead to armoring much of the upper river shoreline, giving it the industrial character seen today. Preparation also prompted the City of Minneapolis to construct the publicly owned Upper Harbor Terminal, interlinking commodities transport by barge, rail, and road.

Several businesses on the upper river took advantage of barge transport and the Upper Harbor Terminal (UHT) supported the transport of bulk commodities for decades. However, transformation of the upper river into a dominant barging economy did not materialize. By the late 1990s, a different vision for the upper river began to emerge; one of land use transformation from industrial to a mix of jobs, housing and parkland. The 2000 Above the Falls master plan catalyzed the new vision for both redevelopment and parkland. The near simultaneous closures of the Upper Harbor Terminal and Upper St. Anthony Falls navigation lock in 2015 signaled the end of river industry and the commencement of the next chapter for the upper river.

Today, the MPRB has acquired a significant amount of riverfront parkland, developed several parks on both sides of the river and extended West River Parkway to Ole Olson Park. Many industrial uses continue within and outside the regional park boundary while other formerly industrial structures adjacent to the park are being adaptively reused. Technology, entertainment, and design businesses are moving to the upper river bringing new jobs and property investment with them. The current state of land use transformation can be expected to continue for years or decades. Integral to the riverfront parkland vision is MPRB participation as an active investor in land and park improvements within the upper river corridor.
Figure 2.1 Above the Falls Regional Park Location within the MPRB System
Figure 2.2 Above the Falls Regional Park Existing Park Components
INDIGENOUS LAND AND HISTORY

While the ATF Plan focuses on transformation of the currently industrialized river, it is important to understand how brief that industry, and all Euro-American history is, when compared to the time that Indigenous peoples spent around the river. The land on which Minneapolis now sits, is in the heartland of the Dakota people. To acknowledge the significance of indigenous peoples past, present, and future along the river, the ATF plan recommends further study and interpretive planning that can help respect and foster understanding of the deeper history of the area. As MPRB seeks to forge new connections with the river, there is much to learn from the stewardship of the Dakota and Ojibwe People.

The ATF area is part of a network of culturally and spiritually significant sites that include lands outside of Minneapolis, the Falls (St. Anthony Falls downtown), the Bdote, or confluence of the Mississippi and Minnesota Rivers, and the banks of Bde Maka Ska. Comprehensive interpretive planning can help establish an understanding of history, and create consistent messaging to create a memorable narrative. Interpretive planning can also be an engaging tool that helps form a program for building a relationship with the river, which can help guide park design. Through art, communications, food, programming, and more, the layers of meaning can expand the parks ability to meet the needs of those seeking historical, cultural, recreational, and arts based experiences. Respectfully acknowledging the history, including that which is challenging and difficult, will help the ATF appeal to a wider audience that is inclusive in terms of age, ethnicity, culture, abilities, and access needs.

The river was and continues to be an important transportation route for economic purposes and a crossroad for cultures. However, Above the Falls Regional Park encompasses an area that epitomizes the negative impact of urban and industrial environments on natural systems and communities. The Mississippi River was foundational to the Dakota and other Indigenous cultures for millennia. From that time to the banishment of the Dakota people from their homeland, to the neighborhoods broken apart by the Interstate in North Minneapolis, and to the heavy industry that damaged the health of the river and the nearby communities, looking backwards is an important part of shaping the future. As the industrial era passes, and the places for people are once again emerging, it is imperative that they be places of inclusion that honor the past and present cultural diversity of Minneapolis.

PARK DESCRIPTION AND BOUNDARY

The Mississippi River itself is the key feature of the Above the Falls Regional Park. The regional park boundary is intended to provide a continuous public park, with adequate depth for a riverfront parkway on the west bank, restored riverbanks, space for people to enjoy the riverfront, significant park components and areas for improved habitat and surface-water management.

As with other regional parks along the Mississippi River in Minneapolis, Above the Falls Regional Park comprises distinct, named parks, some connected by linear park features and trails. These existing parks form the foundation of ATF Regional Park and will benefit from the implementation of this plan as described in Section 6 - Park Development Concept.
EXISTING PARKS - WEST BANK

Refer to Figure 2.2 locations of the following parks

Orvin “Ole” Olson Park
2325 West River Road

“Ole” Olson Park is a 3.5 acre park located on West River Road, just north of N 22nd Avenue. The land was purchased by the Park Board in 2002, marking one of the first implementation pieces to emerge from the 2000 ATF Plan. Formerly the site of Midwest Paint, a large railroad roundhouse, and famed Riverview Supper Club, the property was heavily contaminated before the Park Board acquired it and invested in extensive soils remediation. The park opened in 2006 and was developed as part of the first phase of the 2000 ATF Plan. It features a spectacular view of the river and the downtown skyline with walking and cycling paths.

Riverbank parkland along West River Road North
between Plymouth Avenue North and 22nd Avenue North

This 12.4 acres of parkland does not have an official name within the MPRB system but is part of ATF Regional Park. Improvements completed between 2006 and 2008 include separated pedestrians paths and bicycle trails, which run continuously underneath the Plymouth and Broadway bridges. Additional paths allow users to experience the lower river terrace and river’s edge. A boat ramp is used for emergency response, bridge maintenance and by the River Rats water-ski performers. In the summer, large crowds gather on the river bank to watch the River Rats perform. Restored riverbanks, native plantings and stormwater management improvement were funded in partnership with the MWMO. Views from this area include the downtown Minneapolis skyline and the former Scherer Bros. Lumber site now owned by MPRB and planned for park development.
EXISTING PARKS - EAST BANK

**Sheridan Memorial Park**
1300 Water Street NE

The former site of a foundry adjacent to the Grain Belt Brewery complex, Sheridan Memorial Park is a 3.5 acre park which is actively and incrementally being developed. The first lot for the park was acquired in 1986 with expansions occurring in 1995, 2007, and 2009. Remediation of contaminated soils was completed prior to opening the parkland to the public to provide access to the riverbank by way of informal stone steps to the river's edge. The first phase of park development was constructed in 2013 and included a memorial honoring all U.S. veterans, a peace garden, picnic areas and a river overlook. A playground, sport courts, and lawn recreation are planned for 2019 construction.

**Gluek Park**
2000 Marshall Street NE

Encompassing 3.7 acres along the Mississippi River, Gluek Park is the site of the former Gluek Brewery and mansion, and was listed as a federal Superfund site due to soil contamination. In 2004 MPRB remediated the soils, and by 2008 park improvements were complete. The park features two river overlooks, a picnic shelter, pathways, gardens and interpretive signage.

**Edgewater Park**
2326 Marshall Street NE

Named for its location as the site of the former Edgewater Inn, the 3.5 acre MPRB acquired the land in 1993, constructed the park in 2006-2007. The park is divided into two sections – the Prairie and the Metro with planting, layouts and signage evoking both themes. Walkways carve the park into three sections and mimic the alignment of the Mississippi and Minnesota Rivers. An overlook provides a wonderful vista of the Mississippi River and the recently-completed Lowry Avenue bridge.

**Marshall Terrace Park**
2740 Marshall Street NE

The 8.4 acre Marshall Terrace Park was acquired by MPRB in 1914 to serve as a neighborhood park with typical recreation facilities. Today the park includes fields for softball and baseball, a playground, basketball court and a wading pool. Two sets of wooden steps and overlooks lead to the water's edge, allowing the public to access the broad shoreline along this stretch of the river. However, the steps are not ADA-compliant; reconstruction of universally-accessible steps and ramps to the riverbank is a long-term goal. Adjacent the park are two river islands which have been colonized by dozens of nesting herons as well as eagles. The rookeries are visible through Xcel Energy's online bird-cam program. Xcel Energy maintains the islands in partnership with MN-DNR.
Figure 2.3 Land Use, 2016
LAND USE AND URBAN DESIGN

Above the Falls Regional Park continues to be influenced by its historic industrial roots. As shown in Figure 2.3 the predominant existing land use on the west bank is industrial. South of the BNSF railroad bridge is a mixture of commercial, residential, and civic uses, including the Riverview Townhomes, Broadway Pizza, and the Minneapolis Park and Recreation Board Offices. These uses were developed in the last few decades when a railroad line was abandoned and West River Road was extended. They demonstrate that there is the potential for uses other than industrial in this area.

A pivotal redevelopment site on the west bank is the Upper Harbor Terminal (UHT), a 48-acre former barge terminal facility owned by the City of Minneapolis. For over fifty years, the majority of the site was used for outdoor storage needed for a bulk-material-handling operation. Nine acres were used to store spoils from the U.S. Army Corps of Engineers’ annual channel-dredging. In 2015, the St. Anthony Falls lock ceased operation, dredging of a navigation channel above the St. Anthony Falls also ceased, and the UHT became an active redevelopment opportunity (including substantial regional parkland).

Since 2015, The City of Minneapolis and Minneapolis Park & Recreation Board have collaborated on a redevelopment strategy for the UHT that is described in detail in Appendix A.

TRANSPORTATION AND ACCESS

Within its urban context, Above the Falls Regional Park is connected to national, regional, and local transportation systems. Interstate 94 is located less than a half-mile west of the river, with exits at Broadway and Dowling Ave. connecting to the regional park. Lowry Avenue is a high-traffic east-west roadway with a river crossing that connects many neighborhoods to the regional park. River crossings also occur at Broadway, Plymouth Ave. North/8th Street NE and 43rd Ave. North/37th Ave. NE (Camden Bridge). Broadway and 26th Ave North also connect ATF Regional Park with Theodore Wirth Regional Park.

On the west bank, West River Road North extends from Plymouth Ave. North and the Central Mississippi Riverfront north to just past Broadway where it terminates at the BNSF Railroad line that crosses the Mississippi River. The area north of the BNSF Railroad bridge is an irregular grid of streets and discontinuous sidewalks extending to Lowry Avenue. North of Lowry, the area retains its industrial roots with limited street connectivity and large superblocks due to rail crossings. On the east bank, Marshall Street NE is a major north-south roadway owned by Hennepin County. The road’s western right-of-way line forms the ATF Regional Park boundary in this segment of the park. South of the BNSF railroad bridge is a grid of local streets. To the north, in the area currently occupied by Xcel Energy Riverside Plant, there are no local streets within the Regional Park boundary.
The significant amount of publicly-owned land within and adjacent to the ATF Regional Park boundary represents great opportunities for partnership with other agencies as MPRB seeks to expand and develop the park.
Some trail alignments shown within ATF Regional Park are conceptual and will be adjusted with adoption of this master plan document. Actual trail alignments will depend on land acquisitions and final designs.