

COMPREHENSIVE PARKS AND TRAILS PLAN

CHISAGO COUNTY, MINNESOTA

APPROVED BY THE CHISAGO COUNTY BOARD ON APRIL 20, 2016



TABLE OF CONTENTS

Chapter One	Introduction
Chapter Two	County Background
Chapter Three	Analysis of County Parks and Trails
Chapter Four	Community Vision, Issues, Opportunities and Trends
Chapter Five	System Plan
Chapter Six	Implementation

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Executive Summary

The county park system plays an important role filling a niche between the smaller city parks and the larger state parks. Because of their size and dispersed locations, county parks showcase the diversity of the county's natural and cultural resources and meet the needs of a variety of populations. The county park system provides open space that preserves the county's unique and sensitive natural resources and provides recreational experiences not available by local, state or federal parks. The county park and open space system is meant to complement, not compete with or duplicate, facilities and services that other organizations provide. As the County plans for the next 20 or more years, key challenges lay ahead – constrained financial resources, new demands stemming from changing demographics, emerging environmental challenges and the increasing necessity of regional economic cooperation.

As part of the 2013-2015 plan update process, the County adopted newly refined vision and mission statements for the parks, trails and open space system. The County based these new statements on the current needs and goals for the parks and trails and from the original statements the County adopted in the 2002 Comprehensive Plan. Chisago County has adopted the following vision statement to guide future County park and trail acquisition, development and programming priorities:

VISION STATEMENT

“A park and trail system focusing on diverse natural resources and the recreational needs of Chisago County residents and visitors.”

The Chisago County Parks and Trails System adds value to the lives of people in the County. The System contributes to the well-being of local and regional communities by providing public enjoyment and education while maintaining and restoring high quality natural areas. By virtue of its size, quality facilities, and dispersed locations, the County Parks, Trails and Open Space System provides a place for users to find solitude, green space, access to natural resources, clean water and a place to recreate.

The County also adopted the following mission statement for its parks, trails and open space system:

MISSION STATEMENT

“Protect the natural resources, balance the demand for recreation with the need for conservation, offer recreation opportunities that encourage healthy lifestyles and provide clean, safe and accessible places for leisure time activities.”

This Chisago County Parks and Trails Plan sets the overall goals and policies that guide the development of the county-controlled sites and facilities. Master plans provide more detailed information about the development plans for individual park and trail facilities.

The primary goal of the Comprehensive Parks, Trail and Open Space Plan is to preserve features of the county parks and trails for present and future uses. The plan:

1. Provides background information, policies, rationale and guidelines for making decisions about parks, trails and open space in Chisago County.
2. Charts a course for future acquisition and development of parks, trails and open space.
3. Clarifies the role of the county and others in providing park land, recreation and open space.
4. Informs residents and others of the county's plans for parks, trails and open space.
5. Provides capital improvement guidance for the County Parks. It serves as a budgetary tool to help direct spending requests and allocations, guiding annual work priorities and the scheduling and sequencing of projects.

Vision or Key Points

The following is a summary of some of the key points that emerged from the development of this plan update:

1. Parks and trails can be a major contributor in addressing major social issues in the County and State. There are innumerable benefits that parks and open space provide to the citizens of Chisago County. These range from health benefits (and reducing health care costs), providing alternative transportation options, open space benefits and economic development opportunities that support quality of life for County residents. As noted in the vision statement, Chisago County should develop ***“a park and trail system focusing on diverse natural resources and the recreational needs of Chisago County residents and visitors.”***

2. The Parks department seeks to operate in as sustainable manner as possible. Sustainability for the County Parks Department means seeking to have as high a return on investment as possible while striving to ensure park fees do not become barriers to park use. The County should consider the transfer of costs to users through a mix of fees, vendors in parks, the selling of naming rights, sponsorships, advertising and innovative funding opportunities. The Parks department seeks to be socially sustainable by ensuring access to all to parks facilities. The park system also strives to contribute to environmental sustainability through the management of existing properties, acquisition of key habitat areas and by making improvements in operations.
3. The County Park system provides both local and regional park services. Chisago County Parks and Trails have a unique role as a regional service provider and should provide facilities that serve rural and urban residents with unique, often larger, regional destination parks.
4. The County is regional trail provider. Because Chisago County has several cities within it and directly adjoins four other Minnesota counties, the County has a special role in providing trails and trail connections. These trails are immensely popular and provide alternative transportation options. A high priority of the trails plan update is the continuing development of trails throughout the County.
5. Chisago County Parks have a very limited role in providing active and organized programs. There are many recreational program providers within the County, including cities and private athletic associations that provide such opportunities to residents.

CHAPTER ONE

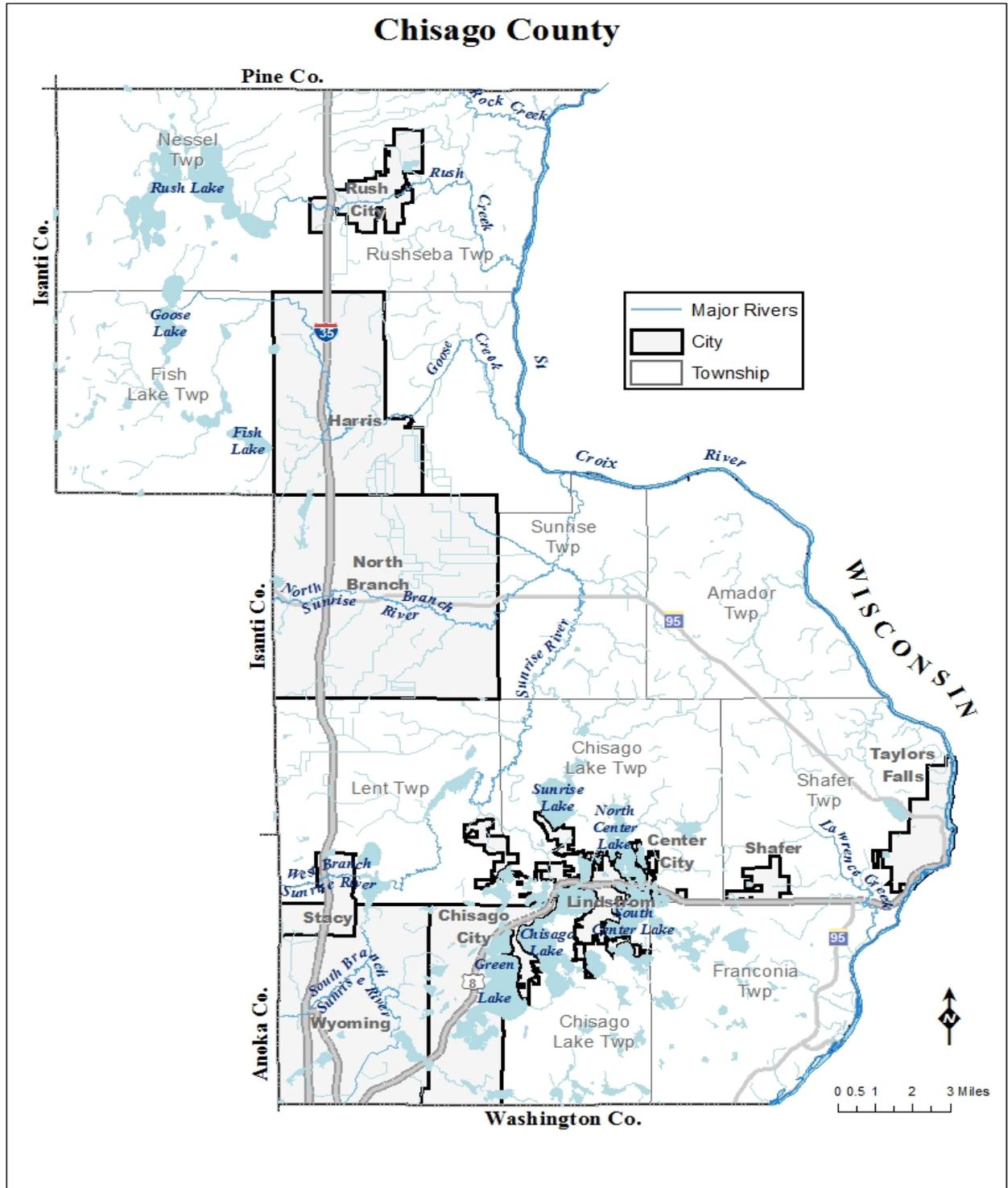
INTRODUCTION

Introduction

The Chisago County Park system includes parks and trails providing access to area lakes and rivers, water and natural areas. The parks have basic amenities that facilitate the use of the parks and trails. These facilities offer residents and visitors an escape away from urban and suburban noise, pavement and congestion. The County has protected these sites from over use and over-development and they represent an asset that residents will cherish for generations to come.

Chisago County is a growing county with a well-established park and trail system that requires extensive management, maintenance and planning. The County's park system contributes to the high quality of life for all residents and to the overall appeal of the County as a desirable place for people to live and recreate. The system includes over 800 acres of County owned and managed parks and open space land and the residents also have access to about 10,000 acres of city, state and federal owned park and open space land. The recent State Comprehensive Outdoor Recreation Plan (SCORP) prepared by the Minnesota Department of Natural Resources (DNR) stated that, "about two-thirds of all recreation use in the state occurs within a half hour of home." Chisago County provides outdoor recreation opportunities throughout the entire County, thereby providing most residents with recreation opportunities within a half an hour of their homes. In addition, the County's proximity to the Twin Cities metropolitan area provides easy day-trip opportunities for visitors from the seven county area.

This Plan provides an update to the existing Comprehensive Parks and Trails Plan dated June 2002. The previous writing provided an inventory of the entire parks system and while the County has made some changes or additions to the system, the overall plan remains valid for the purposes of this plan update. This plan update also describes how Chisago County will develop, maintain, improve and preserve its parks and trails system. System improvement is expected to continue and be focused on the enhancement of existing park and trail facilities and continued improvement and expansion of bike/walk trail system.



Park and Open Space Plan

Well-planned, developed and maintained park systems enhance the quality of life for residents and make communities healthy and attractive places to live, work, and visit. Park and open spaces benefit both present and future generations. Through the county's park and open space programs, the County has helped to preserve historic, geologic and natural features in county parks and vital natural systems.

Links to the past, to natural processes, to the landscape

Land forms and geology provide a record of how the land was shaped by glaciers and erosion and how it was occupied, used, and developed over time. Natural areas show the underlying physical and biological processes that have sustained humans over time. Archaeological sites show evidence of previous cultures and ways of life. Historic sites give insight into the lives of early settlers. The vision of having a County park and trail system that focuses on the diverse natural resources will help residents and visitors see and enjoy the links to the past and the natural processes and landscape in Chisago County.

Benefits in the present

Parks, with their amenities and recreational areas, provide an orienting sense of place and definition to communities. They contribute significantly to residents' relaxation and quality of life with facilities for interaction with friends and family. Evidence of the value of open space is seen in the generally higher property values around parks and open spaces. Having a County park and trail system that focuses on the diverse natural resources will provide benefits now and in the future to residents and visitors to Chisago County.

The aesthetic benefits of natural resources, including lakes, rivers, woods, wetlands and wildlife, are increasingly important as a contrast to urban land use and development. Chisago County residents continue to express a desire for outdoor recreation opportunities that provide for solitude, reflection, physical exercise, challenge and relief from the stress and tension of daily responsibilities.

Benefits for the future

Preserving parkland and natural areas now is critical to the County's livability, sustainability, stewardship and prosperity. These actions show concern for subsequent generations and will allow individuals in the future to experience the natural environment. The benefits of having additional park and open space lands with interconnected trails while protecting natural systems now will be even more important as the county's population grows. Increased development and higher property values will hinder attempts to acquire and protect critical areas in the future. This is important to note because as is stated in the plan mission statement, **“Protecting the natural resources, balancing the demand for recreation with the need for conservation, offer recreation opportunities that encourage healthy lifestyles and provide clean, safe and accessible places for leisure time activities” is a primary motivator and driver for this Comprehensive Parks and Trails Plan.**

Plan Objectives

The Comprehensive Parks and Trails Plan needs to address trails and environmental lands in addition to parks and recreation facilities. This Plan update should primarily focus on parks, trails and environmental lands. The following objectives shall help establish the steps necessary to provide quality parks, trails and recreation opportunities and facilities for both citizens and visitors to Chisago County.

Objective 1. The residents in Chisago County are our most important customers.

Objective 2. Chisago County recognizes the importance of communicating our presence to residents and visitors.

Objective 3. There are different expectations and service requirements and needs based on the nature of the urban, suburban and rural character of the different areas within the county. As such, the Chisago County should strive to coordinate with other agencies to provide facilities that address these differences.

Objective 4. Chisago County will facilitate the development of a well-balanced system of park and trail facilities that include active and resource based recreational opportunities for healthy lifestyles while meeting the needs of a variety of individuals and groups and the changing demographics of the County.

Objective 5. Chisago County will foster the identification and possible development of a comprehensive and connected open space, reserve, trail, waterway and bikeway system that provides scenic, eco-tourism and resource-oriented recreation.

Objective 6. Chisago County will strive to ensure equal access and maximum availability to all facilities, programs and services.

Objective 7. Chisago County will promote its natural environment and will establish policies and priorities for conserving, protecting and restoring existing natural features and amenities to ensure their ongoing availability, to support public health and to maintain a high quality of life.

Objective 8. Chisago County will develop, improve, maintain and manage its park and trail facilities and resources to promote a positive and safe image and will use sustainable practices wherever possible.

Objective 9. Chisago County recognizes that it is imperative to identify and implement methods to finance the on-going operation, management, needs and improvement of County park and trail systems.

Objective 10. Chisago County recognizes that survival, growth and effectiveness of its parks and trails will depend on the ability to focus on a formalized mission and the ability to develop and maintain partnerships

with cities, school boards, watershed districts, not-for-profit agencies and the private sector.

Objective 11. Chisago County recognizes that adding programming (whether publicly funded or privately sponsored) to the county parks would provide more and new opportunities to connect people to the outdoors.

Through the public engagement process for this plan update, residents and county park users clearly indicated that parks and trails are an important part of life in Chisago County. Parks and trails are a source of pride for residents and a commitment from the County for these resources will ensure that they will remain as such well into the future. In addition, the public noted their preference for Chisago County to enhance the park and trail system.

Their vision included a varied, accessible and interconnected open space system that a wide range of people can use throughout the year with local and regional trail connections to the parks system, the area cities and the surrounding areas.

The County will need to invest in and improve the quality of the park and trail facilities to keep pace with changing needs, lifestyles and demographics. The residents also envision improved water quality for the lakes and rivers making them a more enjoyable resource. All improvements to the County parks and trails systems, programs and service should be made to improve and expand recreational opportunities for Chisago County residents and visitors.

PURPOSE OF THE PLAN

The primary purpose of the Chisago County Parks and Trails Plan is to advance the County's vision and mission for the County parks and trail system. To help meet that purpose, the plan provides direction for land preservation, development and use of the various resources of the County's parks and trail system.

This plan includes narrative, goals and objectives to guide the County as it considers future park-related activities and opportunities over the next 10-20 years. The County Park Board and County staff work continually to refine its approach to diverse issues such as property acquisition, innovative funding approaches, facility maintenance and replacement strategies, operations, interjurisdictional coordination and sustainability. This plan describes the County's approach for addressing these and other issues by:

1. Documenting the existing system and the plan update process.
2. Presenting a Park System Concept that implements the vision and mission and builds on the County's past efforts.
3. Identifying future park, trail and facility needs as Chisago County grows and evolves.
4. Providing recommendations for each of the parks, trails and reserves.
5. Discussing approaches to operating and sustaining the system.
6. Providing criteria to prioritizing recommendations and projects in the coming years; and
7. Presenting an implementation plan.

Throughout the history of parks in this country, people have expressed concern about the need, cost, benefit, amount, and location of parks, trails, and open space. Over a century ago, when the City of Minneapolis struggled with the same concerns, W.H.S. Cleveland told the Park Commission the following:

“Look forward for a century to the time when the city has a population of a million, and think what will be their wants. They will have wealth enough to purchase all that money can buy, but all that wealth cannot purchase a lost opportunity, or restore natural features of grandeur and beauty, which would then possess priceless value, and which you (the Park Commissioners) can reserve if you but say the word and save them from destruction which certainly awaits them if you fail to utter it.”¹

“Look forward for a century...wealth cannot purchase a lost opportunity, or restore natural features of grandeur and beauty which you can preserve if you but say the word...”

W.H.S. Cleveland

¹ Dan Armitage, “The Curling Water: A West Bank History”, The Minnesota Daily (September 27, 1973), p. 19

Today, Minneapolis is known for its outstanding park system. But many of the City's exceptional parks would have been lost to private development, had it not been for the wisdom and forethought of the Park Commission, government officials, and the residents of Minneapolis.

Guiding Principles

Based on the vision and mission statements and the key points (noted earlier), the following is a list of guiding principles for this plan:

1. The County's parks, trails, open spaces, natural areas, recreation facilities and programs are essential elements that help create a livable, dynamic and economically vibrant county.
2. The County, the cities and region have an interconnected system of corridors, trails, parks, natural areas, streams, rivers and resources that the agencies must continue to protect and keep ecologically healthy. An integrated and coordinated system of community centers, parks, trails and other recreation facilities will serve all County residents and should contribute to regional diversity.
3. All of Chisago County's residents should have access to, feel safe and welcome in and are equitably served by the County's parks, open spaces, natural areas, recreation facilities, programs and services. The County must recognize the changing demographic make-up and the trends and needs that an aging population will bring to Chisago County. In addition, the County needs to engage the youth (the "plugged-in" generation) in outdoor recreation opportunities. The benefits of park use are many, including improvement to physical health, well-being, learning and family bonding. Therefore, it is imperative that all residents of the County have the opportunity to enjoy the resources that the County parks and trails can provide. To help with this, the County should work to remove or reduce barriers such as safety concerns, cost, transportation and a lack of information about facilities that prevent the use of parks and trails. If needed, the County should design new facilities and/or programs (including marketing programs) to increase the use of the County Parks and Trail system by all residents, irrespective of race, ethnicity, income and ability.
4. Chisago County resident's value and care for public spaces and resources, recognize and respect the intrinsic values of all organisms and are stewards for all elements of the built and natural world, sustaining them for future generations.
5. Since there is a wide range of users and recreation needs, Chisago County and other area agencies must plan for and maintain a full spectrum of diverse, high-quality parks, trails, open spaces, natural areas and recreation facilities, programs and services. This will create a wide range of recreation opportunities that will bring joy, relaxation, fulfillment and growth to the lives of Chisago County's residents.

6. Beautiful public spaces and innovative park designs can provide places for a wide variety of experiences ranging from quiet contemplation and relaxation to active recreation in the entire County.
7. The County, State and Federal governments have acquired and protect ample lands and facilities to provide a wide variety of high-quality parks, trails, open spaces, natural areas and recreation facilities to meet current and future recreation, open space and natural protection needs. The decision to acquire additional public park and open space land should meet a higher burden of proof – i.e. just because it is free, do not necessary take it. Future acquisitions should emphasize important natural resource features, access to water bodies and natural resource features that enhance outdoor recreation. Because of strong public attraction to water resources, the County should give the acquisition of additional public water frontage a high priority. The high demand and escalating value of water frontage will only make those lands more costly in the future. The priority is to acquire water frontage lands when they are most affordable – when they are undeveloped or, at least, developed with less expensive homes. The County should consider the longer-term return on the investment or its ability to invest in such properties when considering acquiring any additional property. As noted earlier, W.H.S. Cleveland emphasized the importance of “looking forward for a century ... and think what will be their wants.”
8. Activities in County parks must be tied to the natural resources of the parks, but not adversely affect them. Some recreation uses are not compatible with others and the County has the responsibility to determine what if any uses should be permitted and where those activities should occur in Chisago County. Examples of activities that the County can now accommodate in the parks include boating, bicycling, fishing, hiking/walking/trail running, nature appreciation, picnicking, cross country skiing and swimming. When new recreational activities become popular, Chisago County will need to determine if those activities are appropriate in the County parks. For example, according to the Outdoor Foundation, adventure racing, kayaking, standup paddle boarding, triathlons and windsailing have become increasingly popular in the last ten years. To accommodate new recreation activities in the County parks, Chisago County must first decide how well the proposed activity meets the vision and mission the County parks and then determine how it would meet the County’s standards for recreational activities. Any significant change to a park or to a park master plan to accommodate new uses should include a significant public engagement process.

Some new recreation uses may be compatible with the vision and mission of the Chisago County Parks system. In some instances, new uses may enhance the viability of the County parks and expand the range of recreation opportunities available in the parks, park preserves and trails. Other recreation uses may substantially reduce the ability of the park facilities to carry out their planned roles or may diminish the quality of a persons’ recreational experience.

9. Wherever possible, encourage and use County park and trail design to reasonably accommodate trail users of all abilities and those with mobility impairments (such as motorized wheelchairs or three-wheeled bicycles).
10. The County must protect the investment in acquisition and development of parks and trails by assuring that every component and facility is able to carry out its designated role as long as a need for it can be demonstrated.

Plan Direction

The updated County Parks and Trails Plan places an emphasis on developing, maintaining and improving a park and trail system that:

1. Recognizes the changing recreational and leisure needs and interests of the residents.
2. Provides park land, facilities, programs and services that are properly designed, developed and maintained for established and changing County demographics.
3. Show cases the County's heritage through conservation, restoration and interpretation of cultural and natural resources.
4. Improves personal and community health by providing an interconnected and coordinated trail system and natural resource-based park features that encourage unstructured active outdoor recreation opportunities for youth, adults and families.
5. Promotes improved and expanded access to County parks and trails.
6. Strengthens the use of County parks and trails by all County residents and visitors to Chisago County including those across age, race, ethnicity, income, national origin and ability.
7. Provides a comprehensive park and trail system that preserves high-quality natural resources, fosters healthy outcomes, connects communities and enhances the quality of life in Chisago County.

The County should continue to cooperate with other units of government in developing a trail and recreation system that provides experiences that are coordinated with but not now available in the County.

Chisago County also embraces the four strategic directions established by and in the State of Minnesota Parks and trail Legacy Plan documents. These include:

- Connect people and the outdoors.
- Coordinate among partners.
- Take care of what we have.

- Acquire land, create opportunities.

These four strategic directions parallel the policy direction in Minnesota's Statewide Comprehensive Outdoor Recreation Plan (SCORP, 2014). SCORP, noting the changing demographics and declining per-capita participation in nature based outdoor recreation, emphasizes the importance of connecting people to the outdoors.

Background

Since Chisago County adopted the Comprehensive Parks and Trails Plan in 2002, the County has seen important changes including a growing population and ever tightening budgets. This plan update includes clear and concise action-oriented goals to help guide future planning efforts. There also is an increased focus on trail development and connections in this plan. The trail system will require land and easement acquisition and development to complete the system as this plan outlines.

Now is the time for Chisago County to look forward. Not only is there a need for additional recreation opportunities to meet the demands of the county's growing population, but there is also a need to identify those special areas of the county that should be preserved for future generations. There is an old adage that says, "You don't know what you have until it's gone." This Comprehensive Parks and Trails Plan will help ensure that the County knows what it has and that it has a plan for preserving, enhancing, and developing parks, trails, and open space so present and future generations may enjoy the beauty of Chisago County.

More specifically, this plan serves several purposes including the following:

1. It continues the process of updating recreation and planning efforts as the county grows and matures.
2. It provides background information, policies, rationale, and planning guides for those who plan and make decisions regarding recreation and open space affecting the county.
3. It charts a course for future acquisition and development of recreation and open space.
4. It clarifies the role of the County in providing recreation and open space as it relates to other recreation providers at the federal, state, local, and private levels.
5. It communicates the County's vision for parks with residents, property owners, other recreation and open space providers, and other units of government.

USE OF THE PLAN

Several parties will find this plan update useful:

1. County staff and elected officials will use the plan to assist them with a variety of tasks including acquisition, use, and maintenance of County parks, trails and open space.
2. Other governments (federal, state, surrounding counties, cities and towns) will refer to this plan to help determine how their parks, trails, and open space may relate to the County's system.
3. Clubs, associations, and special interest groups can use this plan to determine how they might work with and complement the County's parks, trails and open space.
4. Developers and private landowners can use this plan to develop an understanding of how existing and future development might relate to the County's parks, trails, and open space.
5. Residents can refer to this plan to learn about parks, trails, and open space in the county.

The standard for decision-making in recreational planning is sound professional judgment, defined as a reasonable decision that has given full and fair consideration to all relevant information, that is based upon principled and reasoned analysis and the best available science and expertise and that meets all applicable laws. A recreation plan is a contract with the recreating public and affected stakeholders transcends any one person or administration, and as such, should be detailed, unambiguous and provide accountability.

2001 – 2002 PLANNING PROCESS

In late 2000, Chisago County authorized the distribution of a Request for Proposals to solicit a professional planning consultant to assist with the development of a Comprehensive Parks and Trails Plan. Following a thorough review process, the County selected the Saint Paul firm of Sanders, Wacker, Bergly, Inc., Landscape Architects and Planners. The County also organized a planning task force that included representatives from the County Park Board, the Parks and Trails Foundation and the Bicycle Trails Task Force (a subcommittee of the Parks and Trails Foundation). These groups, working with the consultants and County staff, completed the Chisago County Comprehensive Parks and Trails Plan in 2002.

This update to the Comprehensive Parks and Trails Plan guides Chisago County in the development and maintenance of a park and trail system that will meet the needs and desires of its current and future residents. To help accomplish this goal, the plan has the following objectives:

1. Analyze existing park and recreation facilities, natural and cultural resources, and existing and future land use. Determine existing park and recreation limitations and opportunities (see Chapter 2).
2. Research demographic data to determine how existing and future population characteristics may affect Chisago County's park system (see Chapter 3).
3. Analyze recreation trends and standards and assist residents in defining their vision for Chisago County's park system. Determine Chisago County's park and recreation needs (see Chapter 4).
4. Prepare recommendations for the County's parks, trails, and natural areas (see Chapters 5).
5. Prepare implementation recommendations to help the County prioritize and fund recommendations (see Chapter 6).

2013-2015 PLAN UPDATE PROCESS

In 2013, the County Park Board identified the need to update the County's Comprehensive Parks and Trails Plan, including creating action-oriented goals, updated vision and mission statements for the system and updating the master plan for each park. On September 18, 2013, the Chisago County Board authorized the County Park Board and county staff to work together to update the County's Comprehensive Park and Trail Plan. The update process included several meetings with the County Park Board, input from the County's Environmental Services staff, using social media and surveying park and trail users to get updated information about trends in park and trail use.

Public Involvement Process

The County created an on-line questionnaire to gauge the concerns and thoughts of County parks users. The survey was initially available from September 2013 to December 2013. The County promoted the survey on the County website, with signage in the County Courthouse and in the County parks and with a direct mailing to all City Clerks and townships in the County. Staff also included information about the survey in the fall 2013 issue of the "Environmental Connections" newsletter that the County mails to all property owners. Those that responded to the survey answered 20 questions related to the parks and trails in the County and provided the County with comments.

The public is generally supportive of the County parks and trails, appreciates access to park facilities and the benefits parks the trails provide to users (including open space preservation and habitat values). The Chisago County residents that participated in the survey for this plan update reflected the regional and state trends of prioritization of trails and walking/hiking

opportunities as their top priority for facilities, followed by leisure activities and water access as their next highest priorities.

The County Park Board also held two public open houses (one in July 2014 and one in August 2014) to take comments about the County parks and trails. A total of 23 persons attended these meetings and provided the County with helpful comments and insights about the County parks and trails.

The following are the key points that staff and the County Park Board learned from the public involvement process:

1. There are a wide variety of recreational interests represented in the County.
2. Trails are extremely popular and continuing to provide and expand trail opportunities is a priority. This could include paving trails in parks or between parks and points of interest and adding more primitive or basic -types of trails in parks.
3. There is interest in the County for completing the Swedish Immigrant Regional Trail.
4. The Sunrise Prairie Regional Trail in particular is extremely popular and the County should carefully review suggestions for trail improvements and maintenance.
5. Focusing on outdoor recreation amenities and water resources should be priorities.
6. Water access continues to be a priority. The county should pursue opportunities for providing more options and locations for access to the water.
7. The County should prioritize its efforts on maintaining and improving existing parks when considering the acquisition or development of new sites.
8. Response to questions about park funding drew comments. Special funding for parks is a sensitive issue that needs careful consideration by the County.
9. There is interest in developing mountain bike trails in the County.
10. The public expressed support for improving or restoring parks to more natural conditions with shoreline improvements, the removal of invasive species and the planting of native grasses and plants.

Although the public was generally positive about the condition of park facilities, as reflected in the public survey results (70 % either somewhat or strongly agreed with the statement that they were satisfied with the condition of park facilities), there was a definite focus on prioritizing maintenance/use of existing facilities over developing new ones expressed in the comments the County received from the survey respondents.

One of the challenges associated with renovating park facilities is identifying funding for the work. The focus on park maintenance in recent years has meant funding was targeted toward those efforts and the reduction in available funding now means that dollars are not available for park development or to make park improvements.

Parks Financing

All actions pursued by the Parks department require funding to support the effort. A mix of sources now provides funding for the County parks and trails system. These include Chisago County general funds, grants, user fees, donations and sponsorships. The County identifies and determines the funding for the Park Department budget each year as part of the annual County budgeting process. The parks also generate limited revenue through a variety of methods that are distributed back to County's general fund. These fees provide a minimal contribution to the funding the County provides for parks operations.

In recent years, the County has reduced funding to the Parks system. The funding reductions over the last 10 years have resulted in reduced staffing levels for the parks. The County parks department is continually seeking opportunities for other funding sources to help support and provide services. Private foundations, such as the Chisago County Parks Foundation, have been created to support the County parks and trails. Such organizations have the potential to supplement public spending with private funds for the betterment of the County parks and trails. Special endowments also may be created to support specific parks or park functions, such as adding improvements, maintenance and stewardship.

Parks and Trails Legacy Funding

In November 2008, Minnesota voters approved a constitutional amendment commonly known as the Clean Water, Land and Legacy Amendment. The amendment created a 3/8ths cent sales tax to be collected from 2009 until 2034. The State places the revenue from this sales tax into four dedicated accounts. One of those accounts is called the Parks and Trails Fund. Legislation enacted by the State in 2009 directs how money from the Parks and Trails Fund is distributed.

In 2011, the State released the *Parks and Trail Legacy Plan* that outlined the Parks and trails vision for Minnesotans. The vision states:

"In 2035, our world class parks and trails connect everyone to the outdoors. They create experience that inspire a legacy of stewardship for the natural world and they provide fun outdoor recreational opportunities that strengthen friendships, families, health and spirit, now and into the future. Minnesotans experience the full range of benefits that outdoor recreation provides, reinforcing our identity as an outdoor culture."

The Parks and Trails Legacy Plan specifies four strategic directives:

1. Connect People and the Outdoors

Develop stewards of tomorrow through efforts to increase life-long participation in parks and trails.

2. Acquire Land, Create Opportunities
Create new and expanded opportunities to serve current and future users.
3. Take Care of What We Have.
Provide safe, high-quality experiences through regular re-investment in infrastructure and natural resource management.
4. Coordinate among Partners
Enhance coordination among the network of public, private and nonprofit park and trail partners.

These strategic directions serve as a guide for how agencies and governments should spend Parks and Trail Fund dollars. The County should consult the Parks and Trails Legacy Plan for additional information and guidance when considering projects for such funding. Chisago County has a responsibility to ensure that projects in the County using these funds capture the strategic direction outlined in the Parks and Trails Legacy Plan.

Parks and Sustainability

The Chisago County Parks department is very fiscally aware and seeks to achieve the highest cost recovery possible for its services while balancing social and environmental sustainability in all its actions. The Parks department seeks to offset its expenses through a mixture of appropriate user fees (as for park shelters) and increased use of facilities that charge user and parking fees. The County may want to explore the use of vendor contracts, allowing private concessionaires to operate in the parks, the selling of naming rights and sponsorships (among others) as ways to increase revenue to the Parks Department.

User fees for parks can be a controversial issue. Some parks users believe that charging to use parks excludes certain members of the public from accessing those facilities. Access to recreation opportunities is a tool for addressing rising obesity rates and access to parks in general carries many benefits. As such, access limitations to facilities caused by charging a fee are a matter that the County needs to carefully consider.

In a time when staffing is historically low and budgets have remained stagnant or reduced, it is a challenge to continue to provide facilities and services to a growing County. It is likely that the County will need to implement a mix of methods (using vendors in parks, sponsorships and selling naming or advertising rights) to increase revenues for the parks and trails system.

The Parks Department also is interested in methods of providing services at a lower cost. Examples of this include the use of Sentence to Serve

(STS) workers to complete mowing, trimming and other labor intensive tasks and implementing efficiency upgrades and system improvements to reduce operating costs. Unfortunately, staff is expecting that any cost savings created by the Parks Department will be offset by increasing regulatory requirements and operational needs such as compliance with the County's National Pollutant Discharge Eliminations System (NPDES) permit, the requirements of the 2010 Americans with Disabilities Act (ADA) and state shoreline and shoreland protection standards.

Sustainability for parks includes social sustainability: ensuring that users are able to access and enjoy park facilities. This includes having safe, clean and open facilities but also relates to evaluating user fees, making sure they do not become a barrier to access. Access for all citizens also includes evaluating park sites for ADA compliance. The 2010 ADA regulations are to ensure that people with disabilities have the same opportunities as everyone else to participate in American life including participating in government programs and services. These latest standards include requirements for recreation features that were not previously defined. This means that the County should:

1. Conduct a system-wide evaluation of compliance and then form a program of recommended improvements. Ensuring ADA compliance also helps address facility needs for Chisago County's aging population.

Both the new regulation and the age and degradation of existing facilities (e.g. root lift in sidewalks) have led to the need to:

2. Identify areas of degradation of existing facilities (e.g. root lift in sidewalks) and develop a plan for addressing them to ensure that facilities are safe and available to all the public.

The County parks have the opportunity to contribute to county-wide environmental sustainability through operational practices including maintenance of existing properties, acquisition of key habitat areas, operational efficiencies, coordination with other County departments and other agencies and the careful design of park improvements and new facilities. The Parks Department manages and maintains about 800 acres of parks and reserve land, much of which (about 700 acres) the County leaves undisturbed. These lands contribute to County-wide sustainability by providing valuable habitat, storm water treatment and infiltration and flood attenuation. Where practicable, the Parks department also participates in habitat acquisition to provide open space to the citizens and to the environment.

Although many of the older facilities have operational challenges, the County should design and construct all park improvements or new park projects to be as low-impact as possible. The County can integrate rain gardens, pervious pavement, high-efficiency fixtures, retained and enhanced natural areas, reduced lawn area and solar panels into park improvement projects. Maintenance efficiencies also should be designed into facilities whenever possible. Money the County spends on facility improvements must take into consideration the facilities income potential

and the long-term impact of the completed project on the County's maintenance and operation budgets. In other words, the County should do a cost benefit analysis on each major improvement project to compare the lower up-front costs versus lowest long-term costs of each proposal.

Through the plan update process, the County Park Board and staff determined that there are citizens who do not have a clear understanding of their Chisago County Parks system, which parks the County owns and manages and what programs the County provides. To help improve this lack of public knowledge, the County should do a better job of identifying facilities and branding/marketing the parks and trails system including using social media.

Major Initiatives (or Goals)

The County Park Board and staff developed the following list of major initiatives or goals for this plan update based on the vision and mission statements, the key points from the public involvement process and the guiding objectives and principles (as noted above):

1. Strengthen Connections to the Water.

Chisago County is blessed with an abundance of water – including chains of lakes and the St. Croix River. The “water” is often the reason people come and stay in Chisago County. Residents and visitors flock to the beaches and waterfronts to relax, play, swim, fish, boat, canoe and kayak. The County needs to continue as the leader in waterfront/resource protection, including the role of facilitator/coordinator with federal, state and city agencies. At the same time, the County needs to preserve, expand and promote recreational access to the water, including expanding or improving beach accesses, parking, boat ramps, canoe and kayak “trails” and launches and the development of marked “water trails” or routes.

2. Continue the Development of First Class County-wide systems.

The County should continue supporting the development of first-class County-wide systems, local and regional parks, trails and water access. The County should update design standards and concepts, however, to reflect the increasing urbanizing character of the County. Chisago County roadways, for example, should be designed and redesigned for pedestrian/bicycle safety and comfort with sidewalks and/or trails, bike lanes and cross walks. The County should do a better job of marketing the existing parks (including using social media) and develop a series of both web-based and printed guides to promote the County's systems, to make them more “user-friendly” and to inform residents and visitors about the specific details of each system and site location.

3. Increase Protection for County Parks and Reserves.

As the County urbanizes and as the area around the parks develops (making vacant land scarce) and as the demand for active recreation facilities increases, the County reserve sites and parks are coming under increasing pressure for use and recreational development. The County needs to resist this pressure in order to protect the parks and preserves for future generations and find other ways to meet residents' needs for active recreation. Chisago County should consider developing resource protection tools for each reserve and the County parks including proactive management plans for each site (to guide their development and management), encourage best management practices (BMPs) when making park and trail improvements and promote community involvement for each facility.

Protection for the parks and reserves also can mean the acquisition of additional lands next to existing County parks and reserves, adding security cameras to the parks, removing exotic plants and using native plants during park restoration and improvement projects and increasing staff, patrol and enforcement activities to discourage night time usage and to reduce vandalism.

4. Inject Life, Color and Energy into the County Parks and Preserves.

The County's Park system includes some of the finest examples of natural resource-based parks in Minnesota. The parks are known and treasured for their solitude, sweeping views of trees and water access. However, many of the parks have become "one-dimensional" over time, offering limited activities and/or areas of interest to hold visitors' attention. Without compromising the parks integrity, the County could do more to energize the parks and build a broader base of political and financial support (with more promotion and marketing) for their continued protection, management and maintenance. Several additions to the system would inject more life and color into the parks and natural preserves, including self-guided tour information, updated maps and signage with QR codes in each park, a lodge for winter gatherings, outdoor classrooms and pavilions, environmental/historical/cultural exhibits and kiosks and canoe and kayak launches and rentals. Adding facilities such as archery, an obstacle course, climbing mazes, adult outdoor exercise equipment and geo-caching would create destination parks that would bring in more people from outside the County. By encouraging programming to some or all of the parks, the County would bring more attention to them and it would create more opportunities for residents and visitors to enjoy the parks and to connect to the outdoors. Such programs and activities could be coordinated with area cities and school districts and could include environmental education/outreach programs.

5. Continue to Improve the Trail System.

In spite of the obstacles and difficulties, the idea of creating a county-wide trail system is worthwhile when considered in context of current demands for recreational and utilitarian demands. As fuel costs rise, residents will

look for alternative transportation options and the County can help provide an accessible trail system to provide additional travel options. Additionally, as the aging baby-boomers reach retirement, demands for recreational opportunities and well-connected facilities will be critical to keeping this population group in Chisago County. A complete system of trails will provide those opportunities and will add to the overall quality of life for county residents.

This plan identifies an integrated, easy to use and friendly trail and corridor system as a priority and component of this plan. Since the last planning effort, the County has been working to integrate trail development as part of road reconstruction projects. Those efforts are recognized, and this plan update seeks to build on the existing system to make a more comprehensive and accessible county-wide trail system.