

**METROPOLITAN COUNCIL**  
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**DATE:** January 30, 2012

**TO:** Metropolitan Parks and Open Space Commission

**FROM:** Arne Stefferud, Planning Analyst-Parks (651-602-1360)

**SUBJECT:** (2012-xxx) Blakely Bluffs Park Reserve Master Plan, Scott County (Referral No. 50019-1)

## **INTRODUCTION**

The *2030 Regional Parks Policy Plan* adopted in 2005 identified a search area for a park reserve in Blakely Township in southwestern Scott County. Scott County has submitted an acquisition master plan for Blakely Bluffs Park Reserve. The plan proposes acquiring 2,440 acres at an estimated cost of \$14.85 million based on the 2012 tax assessed values of the land. This does not include related costs to acquire the land (appraisals, property tax equivalency payments and stewardship costs). Acquisition will occur from willing sellers. Plan approval by the Metropolitan Council allows Scott County to seek grants from the Metro Council to finance acquisition of parcels within the approved park boundary. This memorandum analyzes the master plan against the criteria for reviewing regional park master plans. It recommends approving the master plan because it is consistent with applicable portions of the *Updated 2030 Regional Parks Policy Plan*.

## **AUTHORITY TO REVIEW**

Minnesota Statute 473.313, Subdivision 1 requires Regional Park Implementing Agencies to, "...prepare, after consultation with all affected municipalities, and submit to the Metropolitan Council, and from time to time revise and resubmit to the council, a master plan and annual budget for the acquisition and development of regional recreation open space located within the district or county, consistent with the council's policy plan." (i.e., the *2030 Regional Parks Policy Plan*)

Minnesota Statute 473.313, Subdivision 2 authorizes the Metropolitan Council to review, with the advice of the Metropolitan Parks and Open Space Commission, master plans for the regional park system. Plans are reviewed for their consistency with the *2030 Regional Parks Policy Plan*. If a master plan is not consistent with Council policy, the Council should return the plan to the implementing agency with its comments for revision and resubmittal.

## **MASTER PLAN ANALYSIS**

### **1. Boundaries and Acquisition Costs**

The master plan refined the 6,000 acre park search area to an identified boundary for the park reserve that encompasses 2,440 acres. Eight acres are currently owned by Scott County, the remaining 2,432 acres are in private ownership. The park reserve boundary in context of the search area is shown on **Figure 1: Map of Blakely Bluffs Park Reserve**. This map also depicts natural resource features which would be protected and managed in the park.



The 2012 tax assessed values of the private land in the park’s boundary is \$14.85 million. Since acquisition will occur through negotiated sales from willing sellers over time and be based on independent appraisals, this estimated cost provides context to what may be the actual acquisition costs. Other costs related to acquisitions including appraisals, property tax equivalency payments and stewardship costs are not included in the tax assessed value noted above.

The plan includes a comprehensive analysis explaining how the boundary was selected. **Table 1** illustrates the criteria that were used to determine the park’s boundary.

**Table 1: Blakely Bluffs Park Reserve Parcel Review Criteria**

<i>Parcel Review Criteria</i>	<i>Alignment Considerations</i>
<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Quality of Natural Resources</li> <li>• Scenic Views of River Valley</li> <li>• Extent of Bluff and Ravine Areas</li> <li>• Buffer Lands for Bluff and Ravine Areas</li> <li>• Known or Potential Cultural Resources</li> <li>• Access to Minnesota River</li> <li>• Adjacency with Minnesota Department of Natural Resources Lands</li> <li>• Buildable Area for Park Development</li> <li>• Proximity to cities of Henderson and Blakeley</li> </ul> <p style="text-align: center;">Proximity to Ney Nature Center</p>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Utilize easily recognized features to create clear boundaries (roadways, distinct topographic features)</li> <li>• Minimize impacts to landowners. Follow parcel lines and agricultural fields</li> <li>• Community interest in supporting long-term agriculture</li> <li>• Landowner interest</li> <li>• US Fish and Wildlife acquisition plans for the Minnesota Valley National Wildlife Refuge</li> <li>• Contiguous land areas</li> </ul>

## 2. Stewardship Plan

The master plan includes a plan to address how lands acquired for the park reserve would be managed prior to developing and opening the park for outdoor recreation uses. It proposes managing agricultural and residential lands by maintaining those uses through rental agreements. Other stewardship activities include general cleanup of acquired sites when needed, identifying property boundaries, noxious weed control, building maintenance and invasive species control.

More detailed natural resource analysis of acquired land would occur at the time land is acquired. Whether lands are maintained as cropland or other cultural uses (e.g. lawns) related to residential rentals or converted to natural cover will be based on the natural resource analysis, planned near-term site use, and funding. Overall, lands will be secured and appropriate measures taken to protect it until park development and subsequent park operations/maintenance activities occur.

### 3. Demand Forecast

The 2030 Parks Policy Plan adopted in 2005 proposed a park reserve search area in Blakely Township. The plan includes an extensive analysis on what the park reserve could provide which is best summarized in the goals and vision statement for the park:

#### Goals and a Vision

Based on early community feedback and technical findings a set of goals and a potential vision for the future park reserve emerged. (A future development master plan process will confirm a vision and goals and determine specific recreational amenities, their location and needed infrastructure for the park.

#### Goals

- Preserve scenic character, historic landscapes and offer scenic viewing of river valley.
- Enhance native plant communities and expand core wildlife habitat areas.
- Protect opportunity for destination hiking trails, river access, canoeing and kayaking, and bike trail connections.
- Protect cultural resources and Native American history of site.
- Protect and enhance opportunities for nature and culture exploration.
- Partnership with Ney Environmental Learning Center in Le Sueur County.
- Create opportunity to improve water quality of Minnesota River.
- Create possibilities for economic growth in Blakeley – “Little Lanesboro” concept.

#### Vision

This vision looks ahead after decades of acquisition and stewardship efforts have set the stage for a new master plan and development of the site.

*Blakeley Bluffs is a regional destination for river-bluff hiking, canoeing and kayaking. The park reserve is known for its high quality scenery and habitat, and trail network that forms a unique water and bluff grand-round adventure trail through the Minnesota River Valley landscape. Restoration of the park reserves' landscape to a corridor of forests, woodlands, prairies and wetlands has created a quality natural environment where natural and cultural resource exploration, camping and biking opportunities compliment the grand-round trail offering the best outdoor recreation setting in the region.*

### 4. Development Concept

The acquisition plan focuses on what lands should be acquired for the park and consequently does not contain a development concept plan. Instead, it contains a set of goals and the vision statement listed above that will be used to create a development master plan after sufficient land has been acquired to create a usable park.

## **5. Conflicts**

Two topics were covered under this section of the plan.

1. The process of acquiring land for the park. Scott County would not actively seek to purchase land but would respond to opportunities to purchase land that arise and when funding is available. Consistent and updated communication by Scott County with residents and property owners would occur regarding acquisition activities.
2. Scott County and Blakely Township coordination to evaluate the transition of maintaining township roads in the park to Scott County when the park becomes open for public use.

## **6. Public Services**

The only public services currently in the park boundary are township roads. As noted above, the transition of maintaining those roads from Blakely Township to Scott County would occur under a coordinated approach. No regional wastewater system service is proposed for this part of the region.

## **7. Operations**

Scott County Board of Commissioners is the governing and policy board with jurisdictional and operational authority for regional parks and trails owned by Scott County. In December 2010, the Scott County Board and Three Rivers Park District entered into a partnership agreement to collaborate on operating regional parks and trail facilities in Scott County that were owned by Scott County and by Three Rivers Park District (Murphy-Hanrehan Park Reserve, Cleary Lake Regional Park and the Landing Special Recreation Feature).

Maintenance of the park reserve will be overseen by the Scott County Parks and Trails Department and carried out through the partnership arrangement, with activities being completed by Scott County's Highway and Facilities Departments and Three Rivers Park District.

There are no estimated annual operations and maintenance costs included in this acquisition master plan since the development of the park—determined through a development master plan is needed to determine those costs. The plan does state that while an increase in operational funding will be necessary in the future as the master plan is implemented, near term acquisitions and projects are expected to be operated within the existing budget and the efficiencies gained through the partnership agreement.

## **8. Citizen Participation**

The Blakely Bluffs Park Reserve acquisition master plan was prepared simultaneously with master plans for Cedar Lake Farm Regional Park, Doyle-Kennefick Regional Park Scott West Regional Trail and Spring Lake Regional Trail. A 40-member volunteer citizen planning team called the Community Design Team (CDT) worked with planning consultants to prepare all of the plans.

The CDT met monthly from July 2010 to March 2011 to evaluate park and trail system needs, identify unique features of each site and refine design concepts. They also helped facilitate small group discussions at public workshops and person to person conversations. Four public workshops on all the sites were held in August 2010. Four open house sessions were held in February 2011 to review preferred park and trail site concepts. A total of 186 persons attended the open houses with 50 attending the session on Blakely Bluffs.

The Scott County Parks Advisory Commission met in four workshop settings to provide guidance on preparing the master plans. Finally the Scott County Board members participated in all of the open houses and workshops described above, plus met twice in workshop settings to consider the master plans and provide direction to staff.

A summary of findings specifically regarding Blakely Bluffs Park Reserve follows:

### *Initial community feedback*

#### *Opportunities with Blakeley Bluffs Park Reserve:*

- Historic landscape preservation and interpretation
- Scenic views, overlooks, observation towers
- Trails and trail connectivity - preserve opportunities and partner with DNR and local groups
- Regional hiking destination; water and bluff loop
- River access for canoeing, kayaking, wildlife observation
- Camping
- Picnicking
- Habitat conservation
- Restoration of drained wetlands
- History of early Blakeley (during settlement period) of interest
- Indigenous peoples use of area; concerns about cultural resource protection.
- Little Lanesboro concept for hamlet of Blakeley a possible local economic benefit
- Maximize adjacency to other public lands for partnerships and land conservation

#### *Concerns or Challenges associated with Blakeley Bluffs Park Reserve:*

- Road maintenance and ownership
- Hunting on adjacent public lands (trespass, noise, recreation disruption)
- Hunting in park reserve (noise, recreation disruption)
- Dedication to natural lands stewardship (for historic landscapes)
- County land acquisition policy
- Timeline for acquisition
- Security and stewardship of park lands after acquisition in the interim (before park is developed)
- Recreational types and amenities appropriate for setting and site

This direct resident feedback was discussed at length by the CDT and Parks Advisory Commission and shared with the County Board and along with the other planning inputs was re-visited at different points along the planning process and was a major element guiding the preparation of the preliminary master plan concept and implementation plan.

## **9. Public Awareness**

The plan notes that Scott County uses a variety of media to promote its regional parks and trail system including the Scott County SCENE (newspaper), press releases to local media, brochures, newsletters, direct mailings, internet linkages, collaboration with publishers of region-wide parks and trails information (e.g. Metropolitan Council and Cyclopath.org) plus advertisements in recreation and tourism publications.

Scott County recently partnered with Carver County to develop a website “GoScottGo.org” which includes a clearinghouse of recreational activities, programs and facilities in Scott County. Plus, the partnership with Three Rivers Park District could provide an increased role in marketing all regional park and trail facilities in Scott County.

## **10. Accessibility**

The master plan describes Scott County’s efforts to provide activities, access and resources to the regional park system for all persons. Park facilities are designed to meet or exceed Americans with Disabilities Act guidelines. The plan states that given the terrain throughout much of Blakely Bluffs Park Reserve and the likelihood of much of the hiking opportunities to be physically challenging, the development master plan

should include opportunities for trail segments that are accessible through input from organizations and programs that connect individuals with disabilities to programs that facilitate their use of standard park and trail amenities.

## 10. Natural Resources

The master plan includes an extensive inventory of the natural resource features in the park. A summary of the major land cover types in the park is shown in Table 2:

**Table 2: Major Land Cover Types within Blakely Bluffs Park Reserve**

Land Cover Type	Approximate Acres
Developed areas	92
Cropland and other planted areas	843
Forests and Woodlands	1,127
Grasslands and similar	127
Other	4

The plan cites sections of the MN Dept. of Natural Resources Scott County Biological Survey published in 1998 which said, "...While the Minnesota River Valley is generally rich in sites of biodiversity significance and native plant communities, the Blakely Bluffs area is contains among the most diverse and intact portions of Scott County. "

The natural resource restoration and management costs are summarized on a per acre basis in Table 3 below. No total costs are provided because additional field work is required. A refined management plan including costs will be prepared as land is acquired.

**Table 3: Estimated Natural Resource Restoration and Management Costs.**

Restoration/Enhancement Activity	Initial Unit Cost	Management Unit Cost
Cropland to Prairie or Wetland	\$1,000/ac	\$500/ac/yr
Forest/Woodland Enhancement (brushing and limited seeding)	\$1,000/ac	\$250/acre/yr
Old Field/Pasture to Prairie	\$2,000/ac	\$500/ac/yr
Degraded Wetland to Enhanced Wetland	\$2,000/ac	\$500/ac/yr
Ravine Stabilization	\$50-\$500/lf	\$2-10/lf/yr

## **REVIEW BY OTHER COUNCIL DIVISIONS:**

### **Environmental Services** (Kyle Colvin)

The park reserve search area is located outside the long-term wastewater system service area. The Metropolitan Council has no existing regional wastewater systems within the search area nor does it plan such systems in the future. The proposed park reserve does not pose an adverse impact on the regional wastewater system.

### **Environmental Services** (Jim Larsen)

The plan is complete. Comments were submitted that noted mapping errors that were subsequently corrected.

### **Metropolitan Council Transportation** (Ann Braden)

I have no comments.

## **CONCLUSIONS:**

1. In conformance with the *Updated 2030 Regional Parks Policy Plan*, the Blakely Bluffs Park Reserve Acquisition Master Plan (Referral No. 50019-1) provides details on land proposed to be acquired for the park and estimated acquisition costs. The master plan amendment is complete and consistent with the requirements for master plans in the *Updated 2030 Parks Policy Plan*.
2. The plan proposes a park of 2,440 acres in size. The estimated cost of acquisition is \$14.85 million based on the 2012 tax assessed values of the land. This does not include related costs to acquire the land (appraisals, property tax equivalency payments and stewardship costs). Acquisition will occur from willing sellers. These costs are eligible for Metropolitan Council Regional Park Capital Improvement Program (CIP) consideration if the master plan is approved by the Metropolitan Council. However, Council approval of the master plan does not obligate future funding from the Regional Parks CIP to finance those costs. Plan approval only allows Scott County to seek funding for acquisition of land in the plan through the Regional Parks CIP.

## **RECOMMENDATION:**

That the Metropolitan Council approve the Blakely Bluffs Park Reserve Acquisition Master Plan (Referral No. 50019-1).