

METROPOLITAN COUNCIL

390 North Robert Street, St. Paul, MN 55101
Phone (651) 602-1000 TDD (651) 291-0904

DATE: April 23, 2012

TO: Metropolitan Parks and Open Space Commission

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

SUBJECT: (2012-xxx) Whitetail Woods Regional Park Master Plan, Dakota County
Metropolitan Parks & Open Space Commission District H: Barbara Schmidt

INTRODUCTION

Dakota County has submitted a master plan for Whitetail Woods Regional Park that updates the current plan adopted in 2005 for Metropolitan Council review and approval.

This 456 acre regional park was acquired from one landowner in 2008 as part of a coordinated acquisition between Dakota County and the MN Dept. of Natural Resources of an 810 acre farm (Butler parcel). The master plan proposes two major development and natural resource restoration phases that total \$26 million.

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

Whitetail Woods Regional Park is located in central Dakota County in Empire Township. Figure 1 illustrates the park's location in a regional context.

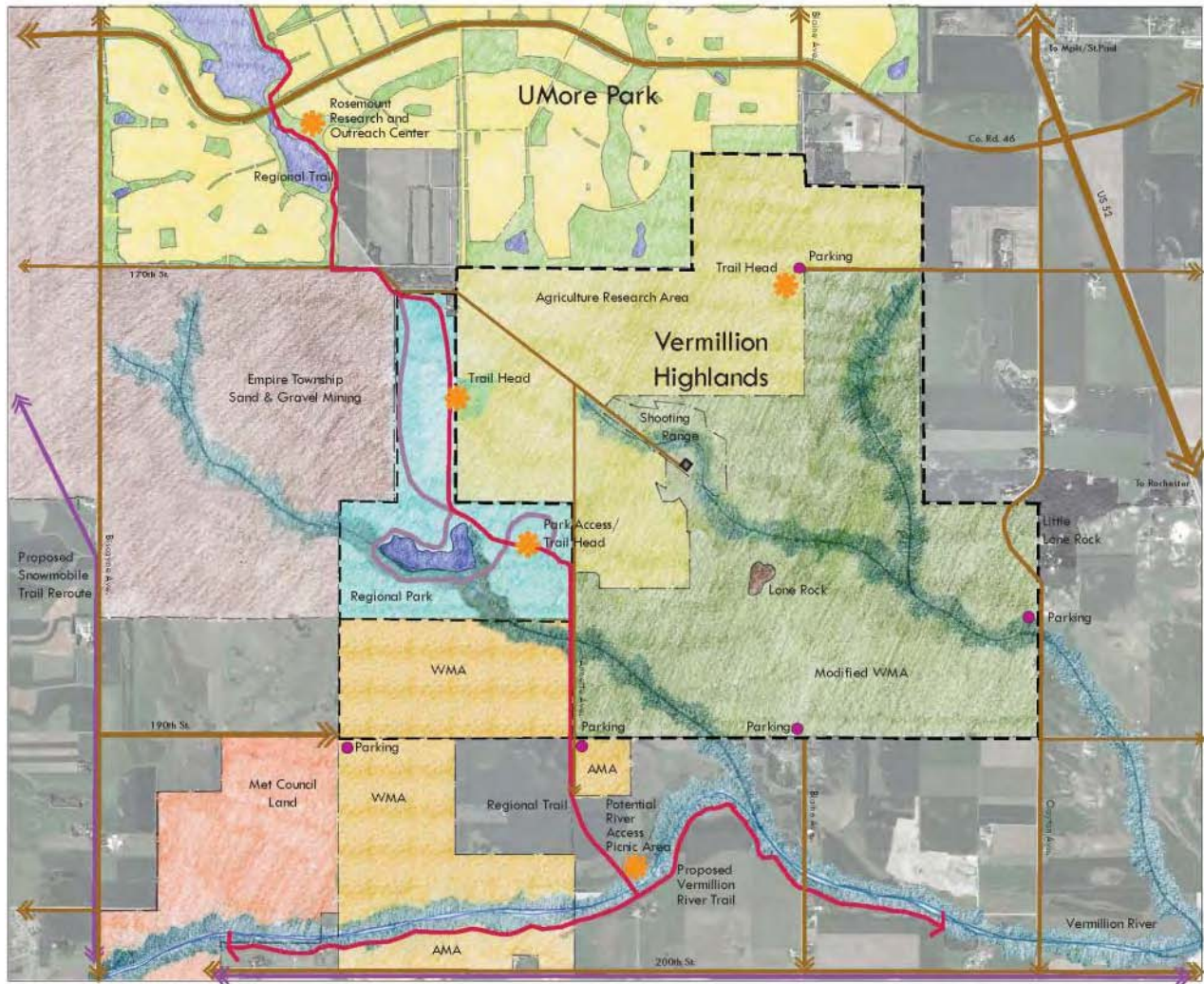
Figure 1: Whitetail Woods Regional Park Location



The park is bordered by UMore Park, owned by the University of Minnesota to the north. The Vermillion Highlands Modified Wildlife Management Area managed cooperatively between the University of Minnesota and the MN Dept. of Natural Resources is east of the park. The Vermillion Wildlife and Aquatic Management Areas managed by the MN Dept. of Natural Resources is south of the park. Sand and gravel mining and agricultural uses occur on private lands bordering the park on the west. The Metropolitan Council's Empire Wastewater Treatment Plant is to the southwest of the park.

Figure 2 illustrates the park's location in context with the neighboring land uses.

Figure 2: Whitetail Woods Regional Park and adjacent land uses



The master plan also identifies two areas for park expansion to be studied further:

- 1) A 500 foot wide strip of land on the west side of the park to provide buffer to the mining area and more space for recreational facility development.
- 2) A five acre residential property in the northeast corner of the park that is surrounded by other public lands.

In addition to these properties, an easement for park road and trail on the Vermillion Highlands modified wildlife management area is needed. No estimated acquisition costs are included at this time, since more study/analysis is needed and the acquisitions may not occur for many years. These parcels are shown in Figure 3.

Figure 3: Potential park expansion areas to be studied further and park road/trail easement area for Whitetail Woods Regional Park



2) Stewardship Plan

Since the site was acquired as a regional park in 2008, the County has leased 130 acres of it for agricultural uses and did minimal natural resource management in the park.

The regional park was previously used for conventional farming and hunting purposes. Only one structure—a deteriorated storage building is in the park. The master plan notes states that the structure could contain materials that may require special clean-up activities. The clean-up of the structure and related debris is proposed to occur prior to opening the park up for public use.

3) Demand Forecast

To determine the demand and scale of recreation facilities that could be developed in the park, the updated master plan contains an analysis of demographic data for Dakota County, references to past Metropolitan Council updates to the Regional Parks Policy Plan in 2001, and an on-line survey regarding the park that was conducted from October 29 to December 13, 2010. Since the respondents were not randomly they do not represent all Dakota County residents. However, they do help inform the preferred outdoor recreation facilities and programming for the park.

The findings of this analysis are:

- In the coming decades Dakota County park visitors are going to be older and more ethnically and racially diverse. By 2030 the County's population is expected to grow 160,000 with much of that growth in the new park's service area of Lakeville, Farmington and Rosemount. The number of persons in Dakota County over age 60 is expected to triple between 2005 and 2035.
- The estimated annual visits to Whitetail Woods Regional Park after it is fully developed is 500,000. That is based on the forecasted population growth in the park's service area and in context of visits to currently developed/open regional parks in Dakota County.
- The recreation activities/facilities that would entice the respondents of the on-line survey to visit the park are:
 - 59.2% selected non-motorized recreation such as biking, hiking, canoeing, snowshoeing and cross-country skiing.
 - 52.2% selected viewing nature activities such as birding, wildlife watching and photography.
 - 40.8% selected recreation equipment rentals for canoeing, snowshoeing and cross-country skiing.
 - 33.4% listed other activities including geo-caching, an off-leash dog area, and radio controlled model airplane flying. But, it should be noted that Dakota County was working with the model airplane group on finding a new location elsewhere in the County for this activity since another model airplane field had recently been closed.

4) Development Concept

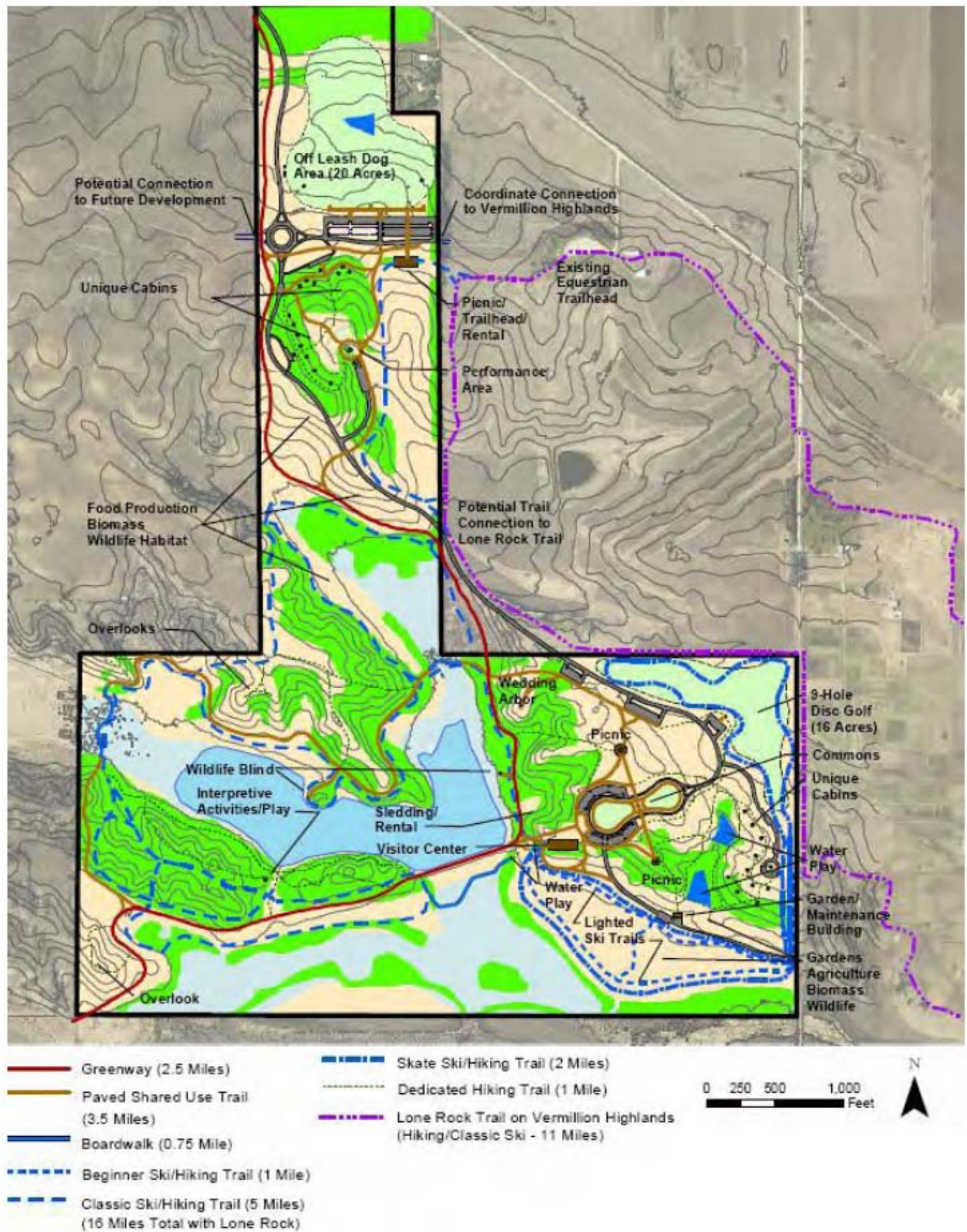
The estimated costs to develop the park with recreation and support facilities and do natural resource restoration work is \$26 million spread over many years. Following are the cost estimates for Phase 1 and Phase 2 copied directly from the master plan.

Phase One Cost Estimates		
Description	Quantity	Total Cost
Design related:		
Schematic Design - Site refined layout development, etc.		\$40,000
Construction documents		\$320,000
Hydrologic focus - water budgeting,		\$50,000
Vehicular related:		
Gravel park road	8500 lf @ \$80	\$680,000
Paved parking extra for 100 person shelter and general use	40 car @ \$3000	\$120,000
Paved parking extra for 100 person shelter and general use	20 car @ \$2500	\$50,000
Facilities (not buildings):		
Paved walking loop trail around Wetland (10-12')	10,600 lf @ \$60	\$636,000
Boardwalk for paved loop trail	1100 lf @ \$450	\$495,000
Classic ski/hiking trail	17,000 lf @ \$15	\$255,000
Lighted classic ski trail	17,000 lf @ \$15	\$255,000
Trail connections to parking lot	lump sum	\$30,000
Sledding hill with minimal lights	lump sum	\$30,000
Picnic grounds	lump sum	\$75,000
Multi-purpose graded field	lump sum	\$50,000
Adventure playground	lump sum	\$100,000
Hiking trail		-
Lighted hiking trail		-
Dam maintenance	lump sum	\$50,000
Electrical supply		\$50,000
Buildings/Structures Related:		
Public water supply		\$30,000
Picnic shelter/rest rooms capacity 100		\$725,000
Restroom building		-
Winter warming hut (trailer)		\$15,000
Initial signs		\$10,000
Park Commons Initial Development		
"Water/garden/food/native/wilder" features		-
Natural Resources-Related		
Conifer stand management	25 acres @ \$5,000	\$125,000
NW Overlook prairie/grassland management	30 acres @ \$4,000	\$120,000
Cedar management	6 acres @ \$3,000	\$18,000
Agriculture to prairie grassland	40 acres @ \$1,200	\$48,000
Sub total		\$4,377,000
Contingency	20%	\$875,400
Phase One Whitetail Woods Total		\$5,252,400

Phase Two (Park Completion) Estimates		
Description	Quantity	Cost
Consulting related:		
Design and survey		\$1,904,136
Hydrologic focus - water budgeting		\$150,000
Vehicular related:		
Pave gravel park road	8,500 lf @ \$40 300 cars @	\$340,000
Paved parking for additional 300 cars	\$3,000	\$900,000
Paved road to east cabins	1,000 lf @ \$120	\$120,000
One-way paved road to pine cabins	350 lf @ \$60	\$21,000
Paved road to maintenance facility	850 lf @ \$120	\$102,000
Gravel service road from maintenance to Annette Ave.	950 lf @ \$80	\$76,000
Additional trails		
Hiking/snowshoe trails	5,280 lf @ \$10	\$52,800
Additional paved trails	10,600 @ \$60	\$636,000
Interpretive signs and features	lump sum	\$150,000
Buildings/structures related:		
Additional public water supply	lump sum	\$90,000
Additional electrical	lump sum	\$150,000
Year-round furnished cabins in the pines	13 @ \$150,000	\$1,950,000
Year-round furnished east cabins	10 @ \$75,000	\$750,000
Cabin restroom facilities	3 @ 200,000	\$600,000
Visitor center	lump sum	\$5,000,000
Intimate ceremony shelter/restroom and arbor	lump sum	\$250,000
Additional small picnic shelters	3 @ \$30,000	\$90,000
Picnic shelter/rest rooms capacity 300	lump sum	\$1,000,000
Performance area restroom building	lump sum	\$200,000
Performance structure	lump sum	\$300,000
Maintenance building and grounds	lump sum	\$1,000,000
Wildlife blinds	2 @ \$20,000	\$40,000
Park commons further development		
"Water/garden/food/native/wilder" features	lump sum	\$1,500,000
Disc golf (site development)	lump sum	\$150,000
Natural Resources Related		
Priority TBD	lump sum	\$250,000
Sub total		\$15,867,800
Contingency	20%	\$3,173,560
Phase Two Whitetail Woods Total		\$20,945,496

The estimate assumes an annual inflation rate between 3 and 5 percent. To place these costs estimates in context, Figure 4 is a plan/map illustrating the locations of the facilities listed in the cost estimate. It also shows the park's development in relation to an 11 mile existing Lone Rock equestrian trail and trailhead east of the park in the Vermillion Highlands modified wildlife management area.

Figure 4: Development Plan for Whitetail Woods Regional Park



The following sketches provide more details in a format that provides more details for each section of the park.

Figure 5: Gateway section of Whitetail Woods Regional Park Development includes off-leash dog park, entry road, parking and trail head



Figure 6: Camper cabin, performance and group use area in Whitetail Woods Regional Park



Figure 7: Small ceremony space and large picnic area in Whitetail Woods Regional Park

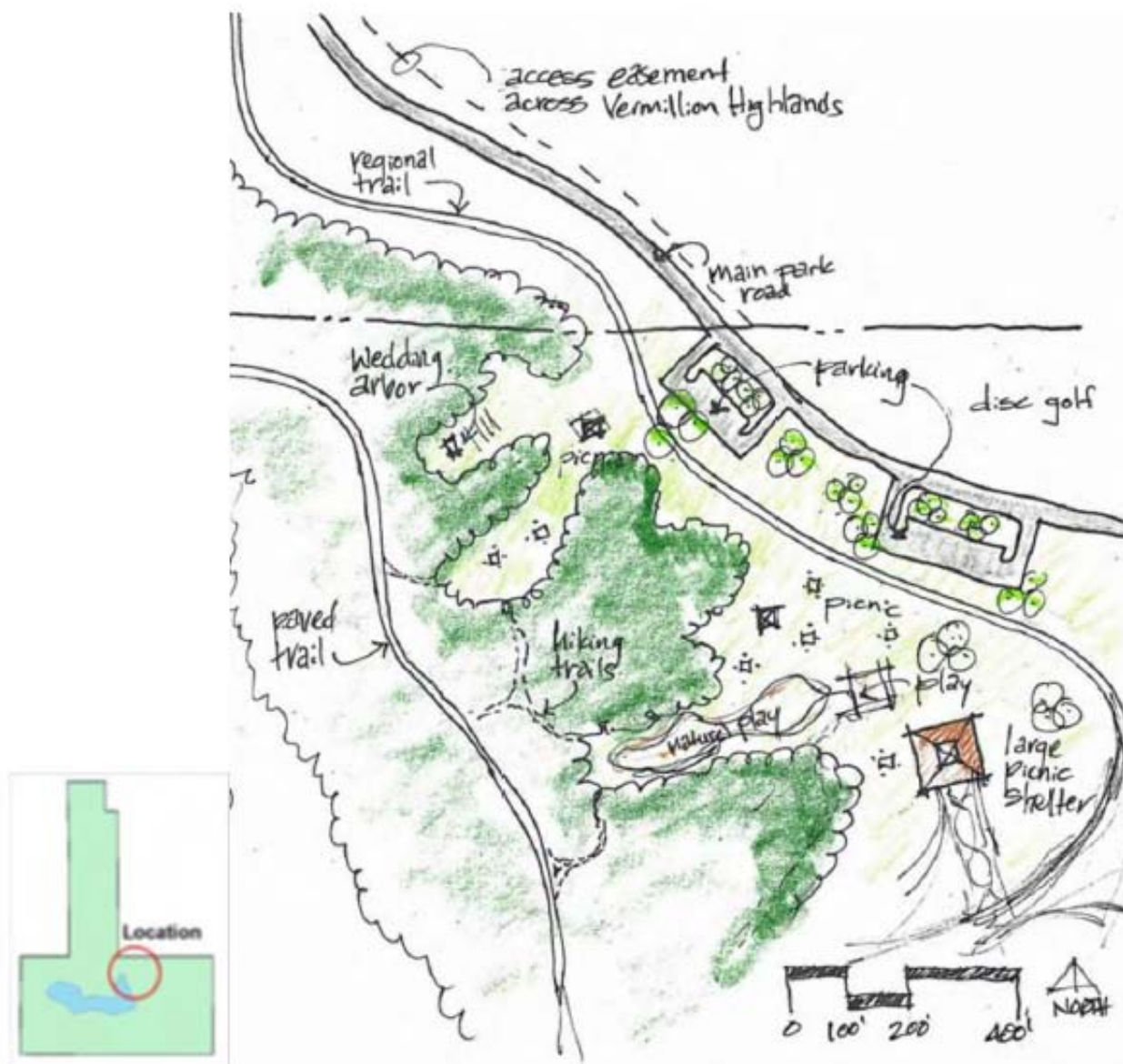


Figure 8: Disc golf area in Whitetail Woods Regional Park

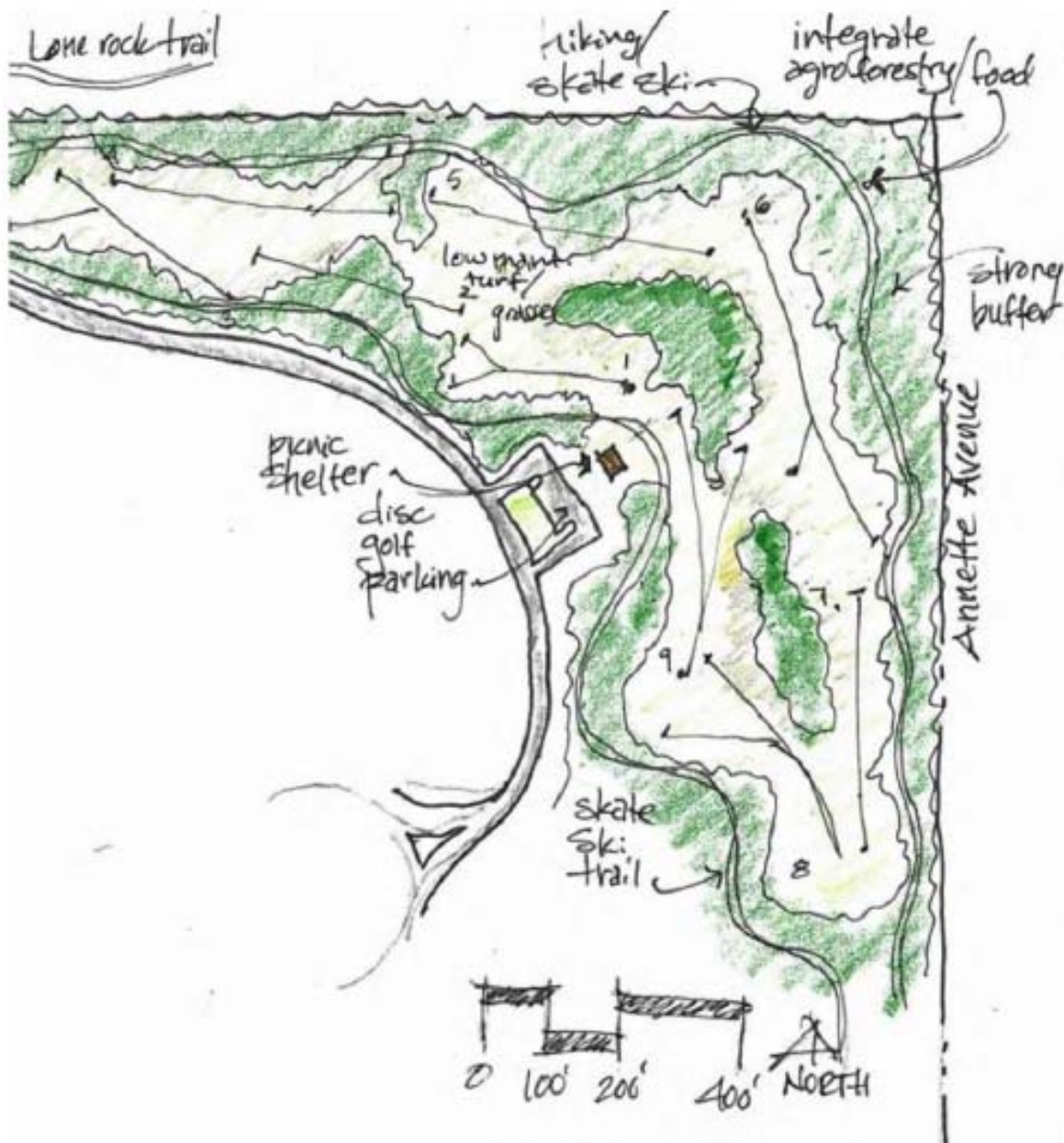


Figure 9: East cabins, water play and picnic and community garden area in Whitetail Woods Regional Park

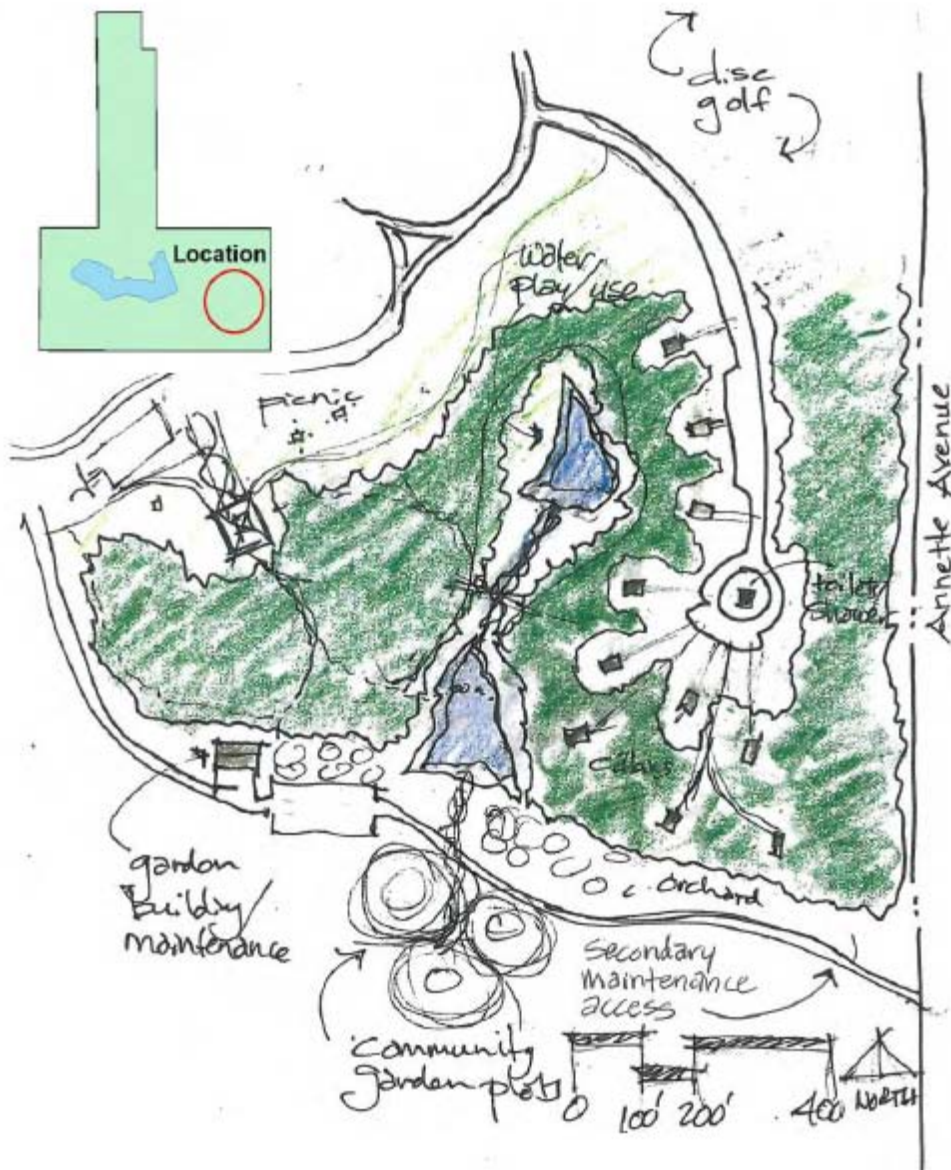


Figure 10: Community Commons and Visitor Center Area for Whitetail Woods Regional Park



5) Conflicts

The park's master plan describes the following potential conflicts and ways to resolve them.

Adjacent hunting uses

Dakota County, MN Dept. of Natural Resources and the University of Minnesota worked together to resolve conflicts. In this instance the park master plan proposes an internal park road system instead of upgrading Annette Avenue to reduce conflicts with hunting, wildlife management and agricultural research in the Vermillion Highlands modified wildlife management area, and the Vermillion River aquatic and wildlife management areas.

And Dakota County has worked with the MN Dept. of Natural Resources (DNR) in exploring the best routes for trail connections to the park through DNR land-holdings.

Adjacent shooting range

While there is no danger of stray bullets from the shooting range at Vermillion Highlands modified wildlife management area entering the park, noise from the range may need to be managed through modified programming at the range and the regional park.

Adjacent future mining

Sand and gravel mining on land west of the park will occur over many decades. As mining approaches the park, issues may arise related to views, traffic, dust, noise and runoff. Some of the issues may be mitigated with a physical barrier, such as a planted berm. Once the mining is completed, opportunities exist for sensitive development incorporating water features and trails that connect to the regional park. Dakota County will proactively work with mine permitting to ensure that any potential conflicts are successfully addressed, and that post-mining development helps restore the area's natural systems and enhance community connections with the park.

6) Public Services

The park is outside the Metropolitan Urban Service Area for wastewater treatment. The master plan notes the options for providing septic systems or constructed wetlands to treat sewage generated in the park. Drinking water would be provided by wells. There is no public transportation service available at this time.

7) Operations

The master plan does not include an estimated annual cost for operating and maintaining the park. But, it does describe the current annual operations and maintenance costs for Dakota County parks and open space (regional and non-regional units) which is financed with \$927,000 of State appropriations and park user fees, plus \$2.5 million of County property taxes.

The plan states that the County has an operational set aside account to finance new operational needs related to park system growth. Based on system priorities this account may be tapped to initially finance operations and maintenance of Whitetail Woods Regional Park.

The master plan also notes the coordinated operations/maintenance that will be undertaken by Dakota County Parks, the MN Dept. of Natural Resources and the University of Minnesota on their respective land-holdings that complements each of the other two entities. This will maximize the benefits derived from each entities efforts to operate/maintain all the land-holdings.

8) Citizen Participation

The master plan was prepared by a consultant using a Technical Advisory Group for technical review and comments, Focus Groups to provide feedback on specific topics. Three master plan concept alternatives were developed based on research and input from stakeholders and the general public. These were reviewed by the general public, the adjacent landholders (U. of M., DNR, other landowners), plus the Dakota County Parks and Recreation Advisory Committee and the Dakota County Board. The County Board chose a preferred development concept presented in this master plan based on the recommendations provided by others.

9) Public Awareness

Dakota County has a Comprehensive Strategic Communications Plan for its park and trail system. The communications plan provides strategic direction for improving the public's awareness of all parks and trails that Dakota County manages.

9) Accessibility

The master plan states that Dakota County is committed to providing activities, access and resources for all park visitors, including people with disabilities and members of special population groups. Dakota County supports equal access for all users to its facilities. Park facilities will be designed to meet or exceed ADA guidelines and will be aligned to accommodate a wide range of user groups. Current County policies strive to keep park, trail and open space facilities affordable for all residents.

10) Natural Resources

The master plan includes an extensive inventory of the natural resource features in the regional park.

The estimated costs to restore and maintain natural areas in the park are included in the development plan section of this memorandum that total \$611,000.

REVIEW BY OTHER COUNCIL DIVISIONS:

Environmental Services (Anna Bessel)

We've completed our review of the Whitetail Woods Regional Park Master Plan. We do not anticipate that the Park will result in any negative impact to our facilities; therefore, we have no objections to the Plan.

Environmental Services (Jim Larsen)

Page 3-2 of the document references the definition of 'till' under the "**Surficial Geology**" section, which to be accurate, needs to be expanded to define till as '(glacially-deposited clay, silt, sand, gravel, and rocks)'. Till is more than just sand, gravel and rocks – it also always contains clay and silt-sized materials.

Page 3-14 text under the "**Intermittent and Perennial Streams/Drainage Ditches**" section and Figure 21 indicate that most of the existing drainage into 'Empire Lake' (formerly identified as Butler Pond in the 2005 Empire Township Mining EIS) originates from intermittent and perennial streams and ditches within the property west of the park – most of which is planned to be mined for sand and gravel over the next 30 years. As mining progresses through the 3600-acre mine site, those natural streams will be replaced with manmade groundwater lakes, stormwater runoff detention ponds, ditches, and swales. The companies performing the mining, with oversight by Empire Township are required however, to maintain existing surface drainage flow to Empire Lake and the downstream Vermillion River both during and following mining operations. It will be incumbent upon the County and the other entities carrying out the monitoring of the wetland complex to insure that water quality and quantity is maintained (by use of the accumulated monitoring data), both during and following the conclusion of adjacent mining, as agreed to in the EIS documents.

The document jumps from page 9-8 to 11-1, apparently skipping Chapter 10 page numbering (its page numbers are incorporated into the first 6 pages of Chapter 11), and the first page of Chapter 11 text actually starts on page 11-7 of the document. This appears to need correction.

Current page 11-7 discusses that consideration is being given to potential acquisition of adjacent lands west of existing park boundaries. While those properties are currently in agricultural production and do not apparently contain significant natural resources, they are currently proposed by the Empire Township Sand and Gravel Mining EIS to be denuded of vegetation and mined to a hard edge in close proximity to the existing boundary. It may not be possible to maintain the overall health of the existing and proposed flora and fauna within the parklands without a sufficient buffer along the western side of the park. Acquisition of such a manageable buffer would help minimize the threat of parkland deterioration due to erosion, isolation/fragmentation, and invasion of non-native species. Council environmental review staff therefore encourages continued consideration of this action.

Metropolitan Council Transportation (Ann Braden)

The plan is complete. I have no comments.

CONCLUSIONS:

1. In conformance with the *Updated 2030 Regional Parks Policy Plan*, the Whitetail Woods Regional Park Master Plan (Referral No. 50024-1) provides details on estimated costs related to the park's development. The master plan is complete and consistent with the requirements for master plans in the *Updated 2030 Regional Parks Policy Plan*.
2. Development of the park as proposed in the master plan is estimated to cost \$25,586,896 under the assumption of annual inflation of 3% to 5%. Natural resource restoration and on-going is estimated to cost \$611,000. These costs, plus the acquisition described in point 2 are eligible for Metropolitan Council Regional Park Capital Improvement Program (CIP) funding consideration if the

master plan amendment is approved by the Metropolitan Council. However, Council approval of the master plan amendment does not obligate future funding from the Regional Parks CIP to finance those costs. Plan approval only allows Dakota County to seek funding for projects in the plan through the Regional Parks CIP.

RECOMMENDATION:

That the Metropolitan Council approve the Whitetail Woods Regional Park Master Plan (Referral No. 50024-1).