

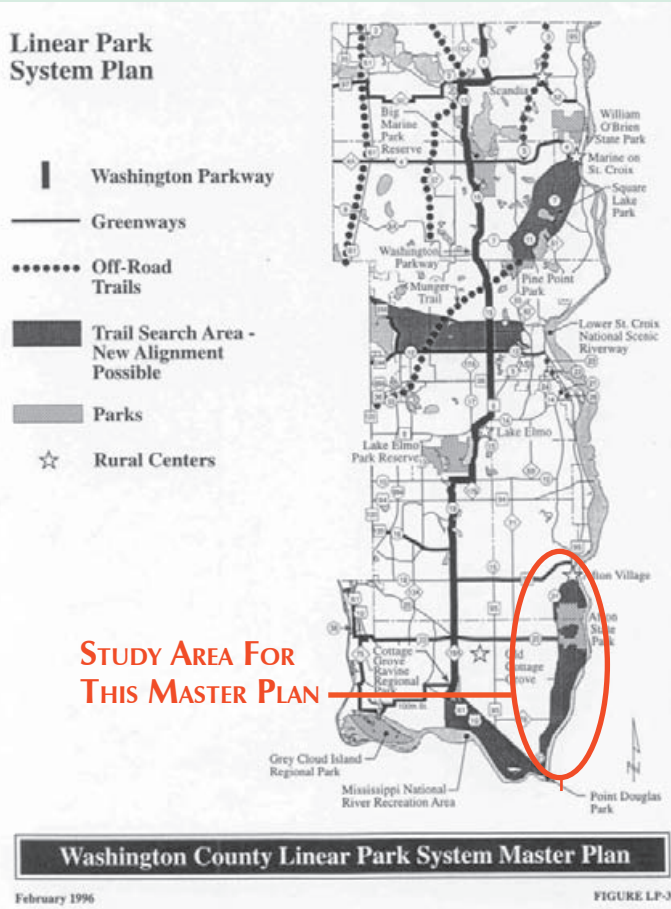
# SECTION I PLANNING CONTEXT / GENERAL BACKGROUND

## PROJECT SCOPE

The project focused on preparing a comprehensive master plan for the St. Croix Valley Regional Trail. The study area extended from Point Douglas Park on the south to the City of Afton on the north, as illustrated in the following graphic box.

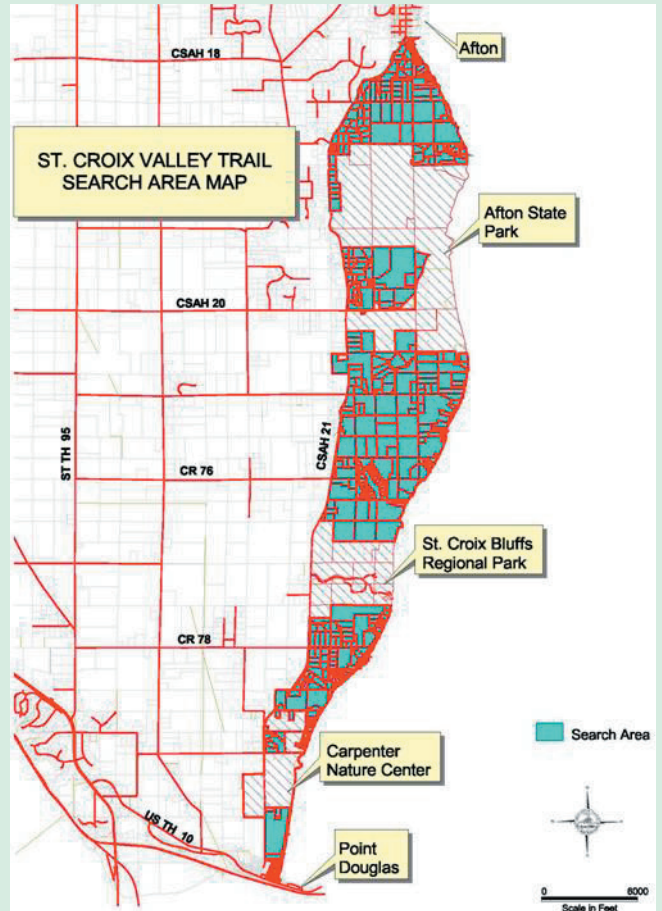
### STUDY AREA MAP AND OVERVIEW

#### STUDY AREA – WASHINGTON COUNTY CONTEXT



**STUDY AREA FOR THIS MASTER PLAN**

#### STUDY AREA – DETAIL AREA



The regional trail serves as a destination unto itself as well as a means to connect a number of major parks and open spaces within the study area, as the map illustrates.

As the map illustrates, the study area for this master plan is in the far southeast corner of Washington County directly adjacent to the St. Croix River. A regional trail in this area is a major component of the regional parks and trail system in Washington County.

## HISTORY AND RATIONALE FOR THE ST. CROIX VALLEY TRAIL

The history of planning for a trail in the study area goes back several decades to the 1970s, when the MNDNR considered the prospect of following the old rail grade along the St. Croix River. That proposal was ultimately not adopted due to local opposition and land ownership issues. Today, much of the old rail grade is privately owned.

In more contemporary times, a study area for the regional trail was established in 1996 as part of Washington County's *Linear Park System Master Plan*. In doing so, the desire for a regional trail was reestablished as part of a larger overall plan for the county. A key distinction in that plan was allowing greater flexibility as to the trail's ultimate location within the study area.

In 2000, the Metropolitan Council passed a resolution urging Washington County to reevaluate the feasibility of a trail and to propose an alignment near the St. Croix River that links public parks and natural areas together. The following box highlights key milestones in the planning process between 1996 and 2001, which set the stage for this master planning process in 2004-2005.

### PROJECT MILESTONES AND TIMELINE

February, 1996	The <u>Washington County Linear Park System Master Plan</u> was created. It identified a trail search area between County Road 21 and the St. Croix River from downtown Afton to Prescott and Hastings.
March 27 <sup>th</sup> , 2000	The <u>Metropolitan Council passed a resolution</u> urging Washington County to reevaluate the feasibility of a trail and propose an alignment or alternative alignments near the St. Croix River that links public parks and natural areas through a planning process that balances the perspectives of adjacent landowners, local governments, trail user organizations and the general public.
May 12 <sup>th</sup> , 2000	Letters were sent to the City of Afton and Denmark Township to make them aware of the Metropolitan Council's resolution, and requested them to comment on this planned study and asked if the communities would support such a plan. Both communities advised the Washington County Parks Division that they would support such a plan.
June 6 <sup>th</sup> , 2000	The <u>Washington County Board of Commissioners</u> authorized the parks division to proceed in the trail planning process.
October 10 <sup>th</sup> , 2000	Representatives of the National Park Service, Minnesota DNR, Washington County, City of Afton, Denmark Township, Afton State Park, Trust for Public Land, and Minnesota Trails Council met to discuss the initial feasibility of planning for a trail to connect the natural resource 'nodes' (parks / nature center) contained in this area. Feedback from this group confirmed that there was support for this trail concept. It was decided, however, that plans would not proceed without local support.
December, 2000	Both the City of Afton and Denmark Township passed resolutions urging the Washington County Parks Division, in cooperation with the City of Afton, Denmark Township, their residents and property owners, the Minnesota Department of Natural Resources and the National Park Service to pursue the development of a trail master plan which should focus on the area along the St. Croix River Corridor between Afton, Prescott and Hastings which is identified as the "search area" in Washington County's Linear Park master plan.
January 26 <sup>th</sup> , 2001	The Washington County Parks Division applied for a <u>Metro Greenways Planning Grant</u> to conduct a Natural Resources Inventory of the trail study area in Denmark Township, in preparation for trail/greenway corridor planning. A similar study is already being completed in the City of Afton.
January 30 <sup>th</sup> , 2001 & March 27 <sup>th</sup> , 2001	Meetings were held with the same group as on October 10 <sup>th</sup> to provide an update on the planning process, and to set dates to solicit preliminary comments from local citizens.
April 24 <sup>th</sup> , 2001	A public open house will be held at 6:30pm at the Afton City Hall, to discuss the St. Croix Valley Wildlife and Recreation Corridor planning process and to solicit comments from local citizens.

In 2001, Washington County completed the publication entitled *Maintaining and Enhancing Environmental Quality in Denmark Township*, which included a natural resources inventory and stewardship recommendations. That study paved the way for undertaking this master planning process in 2004-2005.



*The scenery of the St. Croix River valley is a compelling setting for a regional trail.*

## INTERFACE WITH PUBLIC AND PRIVATE PARKS AND NATURAL AREAS WITHIN THE STUDY AREA



*Point Douglas Park could become a popular trailhead location given its accessible location.*

## RATIONALE FOR DEVELOPING A REGIONAL TRAIL CORRIDOR

The rationale for developing a trail in the study area has remained relatively consistent for decades: 1) it would provide high recreational value in a very scenic setting and 2) it would tie together numerous state, regional, and private parks and natural areas into a cohesive, interlinked system.

In recent years, increasing development pressures heightened the importance of establishing a trail corridor through the study area while there was still an opportunity to consider alternative alignments. The potential for missing this opportunity as much as any other reason compelled Washington County Parks to complete the master plan in 2005.

Whereas the rationale for the trail remains compelling, local public attitudes toward it remain decidedly mixed (as Section II documents). The final trail alignment reflects how the planning process responded to the varying opinions of residents and property owners (both for and against the trail) while still addressing the needs of a regional constituency.

As noted, linking together parks and natural areas within the study is a major rationale for the regional trail. These include three public parks and one private nature area, as the following defines.

### ST. CROIX BLUFFS REGIONAL PARK

A nearly 700 hundred acre regional park located on bluff land adjacent to the St. Croix River. Extensive hiking, camping, picnicking, and boating opportunities are currently provided in the park. A variety of other unique existing and planned amenities are also provided or envisioned, including the Conference Cottage, beach area, and group use areas. The park also exhibits a broad cross-section of natural systems.

### AFTON STATE PARK

The park is 1,695 acres and was established in 1969 to preserve unique natural features and to provide opportunities for nature-oriented recreation. The park is set in a rolling glacial moraine and bluff land. It is cut by deep ravines which drop 300 feet to the river. The ravines display outcrops of sandstone and the rugged terrain affords spectacular views of the St. Croix River Valley. The park also contains a combination of oak openings and woodlands. The forests combine upland hardwoods with some pine plantations. Remnant prairies are being expanded and oak savannas are being restored through an aggressive resource management program that makes extensive use of volunteers. The park offers numerous amenities, including backpacking campsites, picnic grounds, hiking trails, a bike trail, cross-country skiing, visitor center, and group camps.

### POINT DOUGLAS COUNTY PARK

This is a small, 9.5 acre county park on the shores of the St. Croix River. The primary amenities include a beach and picnic area. The park is also a popular area to observe the river. Once the trail is developed, it will likely become a popular trailhead given its accessible location.

## INTERFACE WITH THE LOWER ST. CROIX RIVER COOPERATIVE MANAGEMENT PLAN

### CARPENTER NATURE CENTER (PRIVATE)

A private, non-profit nature preserve and environmental education facility established in 1981 under an endowment from the Thomas E. and Edna D. Carpenter Foundation. The site encompasses 720 acres in Minnesota and Wisconsin, with several miles of self-guided and wheelchair accessible trails. The interpretive center offers several hands-on educational exhibits and serves as a classroom for programs. Carpenter Nature Center has an appointed board that oversees all activities and developments. A regional trail easement through the property would require Board approval.

The Lower St. Croix River National Scenic Riverway, which extends 52 miles from St. Croix Falls/Taylor's Falls to Point Douglas Park, is jointly managed by the National Park Service, Minnesota Department of Natural Resources, and Wisconsin Department of Natural Resources. The *Lower St. Croix River Cooperative Management Plan and Environmental Impact Statement* provides general direction for managing the area for the next 15 to 20 years.

Under the plan, management directives common to all alternative uses and management plans include coordination of:

- Public and private uses
- American Indian treaty rights
- Land use management
- Riverway stewardship
- Natural resources management
- Hunting, fishing, and trapping management
- Interpretive and education
- Recreational use and development

The last bullet point relates most directly to the regional trail. Under the cooperative plan, managers would work to promote uses and behaviors that ensure high quality and safe experiences for all users. With regard to trails, existing uses would continue on designated trails of varying types within the riverway. Other than existing state regulations pertaining to trail uses, no additional regulations would be imposed unless they are needed for safety or resource protection.

The riverway managing partners are to work in partnership with user groups, communities, local agencies, and others in development of a comprehensive regional trail network in the study area, as well as links to other areas outside the river corridor. Trail development is to be coordinated with state plans, county comprehensive plans, and other pertinent plans.

Abandoned railroad rights-of-way, if and when available, can be pursued for conversion to trails consistent with the National Rails to Trails Act. Also, when roads along the river are improved, the addition of bicycle lanes is encouraged.

The regional trail master plan as presented here is consistent with the principles and intent of the Lower St. Croix River Management Plan. In early 2005, corespondence with the National Park Service and Minnesota Department of Natural Resources occurred to inform them of the master planning process. As implementation occurs, Washington County Parks will continue to work cooperatively with other managing partners to ensure that actual trail development remains consistent with the larger river corridor management objectives.

## NATURAL DESIGNATION ROUTE \_\_\_\_\_

St. Croix Trail (County Road 21) is designated as a *Natural Preservation Route*. Based on current and anticipated traffic volumes, the route falls under a Type III Route designation, which includes the following design parameters:

- 12 foot drive lanes
- 4 foot shoulders if the roadway is *not* a popular bicycle route
- 6 foot shoulders if the roadway is a popular bicycle route]

Given the popularity of biking along this roadway, Washington County would most likely provide six foot shoulders when the roadway is upgraded. Note also that any and all improvements to St. Croix Trail would have to adhere to any other applicable Washington County transportation engineering standards.

## WILLING SELLER PLANNING CONTEXT \_\_\_\_\_

Washington County, City of Afton, and Denmark Township each take a willing seller approach to land acquisition for parks, trails and greenways. The net affect of this common position is that it can not be assumed that all property owners will be open to selling their properties for a trail corridor any time soon, if at all. Even in the context of setting aside an easement as part of future land development that did not affect current property owners or land uses, many of the attendees at the public meetings that owned property in the study area remained skeptical.

As a result, the regional trail alignment proposed under this master plan minimized the extent to which private property would have to be acquired. The only exceptions to this are the “River Loop” trail north of St. Croix Bluffs, the alignment following Trout Brook on the north end of Afton Alps, and the old rail grade alignment south of Carpenter Nature Center. Even in these cases, alternative alignments are provided under the master plan for the first two of the three alignments.

In these cases where the trail does traverse across private property, acquisition under a willing seller context will require market rate assessment of land values and other assurances to protect the property owner’s interests. This may include providing physical barriers (i.e., fencing, heavy vegetation, grade separations) between the trail and private developments.

## LAND USE OR OTHER CONFLICTS \_\_\_\_\_

Aside from the private property-related issues as defined above, no other conflicts with other land uses or proposed projects are envisioned. As defined in Section III, Afton State Park and Carpenter Nature Center will have to review and adopt the regional trail master plan as part of their own master plans prior to implementation occurring. This process may result in some modifications to the trail’s alignment, along with other potential provisions and use agreements.

The timing of the trail’s development may also be affected by the timing of roadway upgrades in the future. This is especially the case with St. Croix Trail, where any future plans for upgrading the road may impact the location of the trail within the right-of-way. The same holds true of the Quadrant Avenue and 87<sup>th</sup> Street trail routes, where the trail is situated in the rights-of-way. In all of these cases, the trail could be constructed irrespective of roadway improvements. The key point is that by combining it with roadway upgrades, alignment refinements and cost savings could potentially be realized.

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