

SECTION II

VISION AND PUBLIC VALUES STATEMENT

OVERVIEW

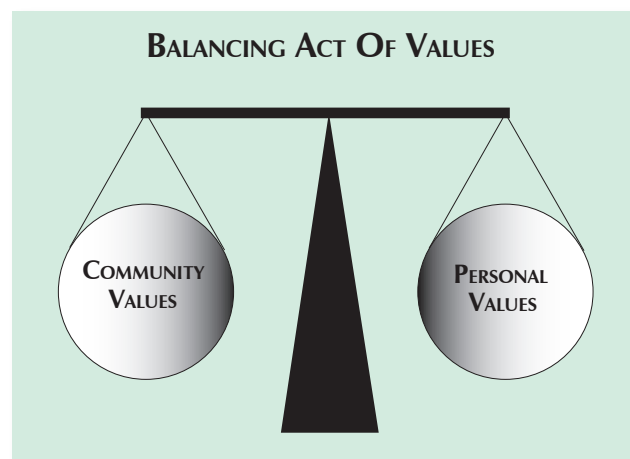
The undertaking of this planning process was based on the presumption that a regional trail through the study area would be of high regional and local value. Conversely, establishing this type of trail corridor through any given area poses both direct and indirect impacts to private properties. It also affects personal values related to residents' perceptions of their community and the quality of life they desire and perceive to exist. Depending on one's perspective, developing a regional trail within the study area may or may not be considered to be of high public value.

To ensure that the perspectives of all interested individuals and stakeholders were considered, Washington County Parks undertook an extensive and inclusive public process. This section defines the findings of that process and how that shaped the vision for the trail corridor and conclusions of the master plan.

PUBLIC PROCESS – BALANCING COMMUNITY AND PERSONAL VALUES

As defined in Section I, recent discussions about a regional trail through the study area goes back to at least 2000, and much further back if the DNR's trail corridor study in the 1970s is considered. Through the passage of time, the issue continues to bring out individual passions both for and against.

Recognizing the challenges of gaining consensus, Washington County Parks and the Technical Advisory Committee (TAC) placed a great deal of emphasis on being flexible and finding a reasonable and responsible balance between community and personal values. The latter of which referring to issues such as direct impact on personal property, perceived loss of privacy, quality of life, and so forth. The following graphic box illustrates this balancing act.



The overarching objective of the public process was to plan for the common good and serve the interests of the broader, regional community within the context of respecting the concerns of individual stakeholders. It is within this spirit that the forthcoming vision and community value statement is presented.

VISION STATEMENT

The vision for the master plan is to establish a regional trail corridor through the study area that offers high recreational value, which is defined as being:

- Visually appealing (i.e., provide scenic values) and located in a pleasant, natural open space or corridor
- Contiguous with limited interruptions and impediments to travel
- Of an acceptable grade (within the context of the setting)
- Safe to use for a family or those with limited skills

The plan also centers around three key principles:

- Providing continuity and linkages between public parks and private open spaces throughout the study area
- Allowing reasonable flexibility on final trail routes and plan implementation strategies as it relates to the public and private parks and natural areas encountered in the study area
- Providing adequate choices for trail users to self-select the trail segments that suit their desires (in terms of level of difficulty, scenery, recreational value, and destinations)

COMMUNITY VALUE OF THE REGIONAL TRAIL

The community value statement defines the benefits that a regional trail would bring to a regional constituency relative to any potential impacts across a number of variables – ranging from safety and crime to property values and loss of privacy. In this context, regional constituency refers to those residing in or traveling to the area for recreational pursuits.

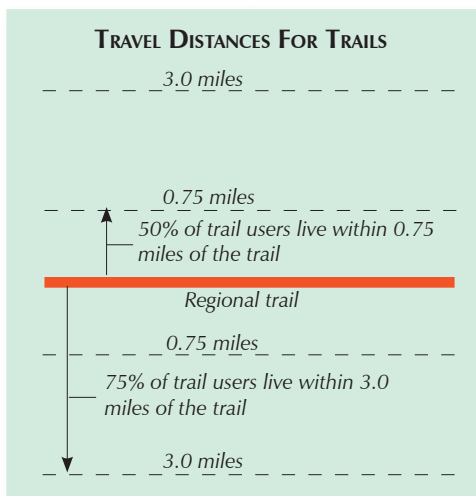
Taken as a whole, the community value statement defines whether or not the perceived benefits of the trail outweigh perceived impacts to justify its development. The following statement summarizes these findings.

COMMUNITY VALUE STATEMENT

With respect to the overall benefits, research indicates that trails offer a very high degree of community value by providing the type of recreational amenity that the majority of the population would actually use and like to have available near their home. As defined in the table on the next page, recreational trends indicate that trail activities are the highest ranked recreational pursuits in this metropolitan region, far outpacing most other forms of recreation.

In addition, the improved safety for pedestrians and bicyclists as they travel along the proposed trail corridor is a value that some would argue is more important than that of the recreational experience. The community value statement is strengthened by evidence that suggests that potential down sides, like crime, trespassing, and littering, generally do not manifest themselves to any great degree.

In terms of actual users of trails, recent research by the Metropolitan Council indicates that majority of trail users live within three miles of the trail, as the graphic box to the left illustrates. The table on the next page provides an overview of the other key research that affected the TAC's perspective on the community values associated with a regional trail within the study area.



COMMUNITY VALUES FROM TRAILS

VARIABLE	DISCUSSION
DEMAND FOR TRAILS	<p>From a regional perspective, trails are the highest ranked recreational activity. Survey results conclude:</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Walking, especially within the neighborhood, is the #1 ranked recreational activity, with 85% of respondents <u>being interested</u> in this activity.* • Walking in natural areas and large parks is the #2 ranked recreational activity, with 78% of respondents <u>being interested</u> in this activity.* • Leading activity for Minnesota adults is walking/hiking outdoors, with 54% <u>actually participating</u> annually. <p><i>Source: Recreational trends survey conducted by the University of Minnesota Survey Research Center on behalf of the Metropolitan Council* and 2004 Outdoor Recreation Participation Survey (MNDNR)**</i></p>
USE OF TRAILS	<p>The following summarizes the dynamics of trail use of the Gateway Trail based on regional trail use surveys:</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • 80% of trail users are adult. • Median age of trail users is 40-44, although youth use is growing. • 80% of trail users live within the county or city where the trail is located. • Proximity of the trail to one's place of residence is very important to discovering it. • Visiting new areas was not all that important to trail users. • 95% use the trail for recreation, 4% for commuting, and 1% for getting to retail stores. • Walking is the most popular use (39%), biking second (31%), and jogging third (18%). • Use of the trail has increased dramatically in the last sixteen years. <p><i>Source: Metropolitan Council – Twin Cities Regional Trail Visitor Study (1999).</i></p>
IMPACT OF TRAILS ON ADJACENT PROPERTIES	<p>The following summarizes the results of a survey related to a new trail retrofitted into an area:</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Usage – 75% of adjacent property owners use the trail (many of which were against the trail being developed). • Problems – over 95% of the adjacent property owners reported no problems with the trail (such as loitering, litter, and trespassing). • Economic impacts – vast majority reported that they believed that the trail would have no negative impact on their property values, with many believing that it could even increase values. • Values – 75% say living near the trail offers distinct advantages, such as ease of access, convenience, exercise, and so forth. <p><i>Source: Lake Wobegon Regional Trail, Stearns County.</i></p>
POLICING AND CRIME	<p>Review of policing issues associated with trails within Washington and Ramsey County yields the following:</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Incidents of crime associated with trails is so low that local police do not keep track of it separately. • The contention that trail users routinely commit crimes to adjacent properties is not supported by crime statistics and evidence. • Biggest area of concern with crime is at parking lots, where occasionally theft from the cars of trail users occurs (Note: Theft from cars in parking lots is not unique to trails, but occurs at parks, shopping centers, and other areas where the opportunity for a quick getaway exists). <p><i>Source: Washington and Ramsey County Sheriffs Department.</i></p>
EXISTING USE	<p>Public input and direct observations during the planning process yields the following insights:</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Clear evidence suggests that St. Croix Trail is already being heavily used by bicyclists (this was commonly acknowledged at all public meetings and observed directly by the planning team). • Virtually all of those that walk or bike the area have a concern about personal safety – especially as it relates to children walking along the roads without trails. • Drivers routinely complain that walkers and bikers are in the way on the roads within the study area.
SAFETY OF DEVELOPED TRAILS	<p>Discussions with local cities that have retrofitted trails into similar settings yields the following with respect to safety for the trail user:</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Actual and perceived pedestrian safety is improved when off-street trails are added along busy roads simply because people are no longer walking along the shoulder of the road where traffic speeds can be up to 55 MPH and shoulder widths are often very narrow. • The incidence of conflict between pedestrians and vehicles at driveway crossings has not been found to be a major issue, with few reported occurrences of accidents (Note, however, that both the driver and the trail user have a responsibility to watch out for each other similar to any crosswalk or sidewalk system common in many cities). • Adhering to accepted design standards and practices for trails, including driveway crossings, is important to maintaining a safe pedestrian environment.

POPULATION TRENDS AFFECTING THE REGION

One of the more important trends affecting the region is that the population in the metropolitan area is expected to continue to grow substantially over the next 20 and 50 years. As the following table illustrates, the population in Washington County is expected to be near the top in terms of percentage increase in population over that time period.

POPULATION TRENDS

Population forecasts stratified by regional park agency jurisdiction. (Source: Metropolitan Council System Analysis of the Regional Recreation Open Space System)

County/City	Preliminary Population estimates			Total increase from 2000		% increase from 2000	
	2000	2020	2050	2020	2050	2020	2050
Dakota County	351,240	456,160	579,436	104,920	228,196	30%	65%
Suburban Henn County	646,550	737,480	837,189	90,930	190,639	14%	29%
Washington County	203,120	288,670	377,082	85,550	173,962	42%	86%
Anoka County	295,910	350,410	440,575	54,500	144,665	18%	49%
Scott County	81,990	137,910	187,452	55,920	105,462	68%	129%
Carver County	66,160	104,420	145,144	38,260	78,984	58%	119%
Suburban Ramsey Co.	231,020	243,340	263,916	12,320	32,896	5%	14%
St. Paul	274,500	294,000	301,723	19,500	27,223	7%	10%
Minneapolis	370,000	388,000	392,656	18,000	22,656	5%	6%
Bloomington	88,500	91,000	92,978	2,500	4,478	3%	5%
Total	2,608,990	3,091,390	3,618,151	482,400	1,009,162	18%	39%

Note: Suburban Hennepin County does not include Bloomington or Minneapolis
 Note: Suburban Ramsey County does not include St. Paul

Undoubtedly, this population growth trend will increase pressure for developing regional trails to service an expanding population with a wide range of outdoor recreation pursuits and service expectations.

LOCAL VALUES (PUBLIC INPUT)

The public process for the regional trail has been extensive over the years, with the most recent activities going back to 2002 with the preparation of the natural resources inventory entitled *Maintaining and Enhancing Environmental Quality in Denmark Township*. Other discussions between Washington County, Denmark Township, City of Afton, and Carpenter Nature Center go back to 2000.

The public process directly associated with this master plan began in June of 2004 with the bringing together of the Technical Advisory Committee. The process was structured to allow all interested parties ample opportunity to participate. In addition, formal meetings with the Washington County Parks Commission and Board of Commissioners were also held, each of which being open to the public. Likewise, formal meetings with the City of Afton and Denmark Township were also held. The table on the next page provides a complete list of public meetings held during the process.



The public meetings were all well attended in Afton and Denmark Township.

PUBLIC MEETING SCHEDULE

TAC – five meetings during course of the project, including a field review.

All of the following meetings were open to the public:

- 11-9-04 Afton Open House (general review of routing options)
- 11-16-04 Denmark Township Open House (general review of routing options)
- 12-14-04 Denmark Township Open House (preliminary master plan review)
- 12-15-04 Afton Open House (preliminary master plan review)
- 1-20-05 WC Parks Commission (preliminary master plan review)
- 1-25-05 Washington County Board (preliminary master plan review)
- 3-17-05 WC Parks Commission (final master plan review)
- 4-19-05 Afton City Council (final master plan review)
- 5-2-05 Denmark Township Board (final master plan review)
- May 05 Washington County Board (final master plan review and adoption)

FINDINGS FROM THE PUBLIC PROCESS

Public comment at each of the public meetings was extensive, with each meeting well attended. In general, most of the attendees providing written responses were invited through direct mailings based on Washington County property address listings within the study area. The extent to which the general public attended is uncertain since most of the responses came from those on the mailing list. Washington County Parks consolidated all comments received during the process and made those available to the public. All recorded comments are also included in Appendix "A". For planning purposes, the following table summarizes the public comments under common themes.

SUMMARY OF PUBLIC COMMENTS

VARIABLE	KEY SUMMARY COMMENTS
OVERALL CONSENSUS	Overall, support for the trail was very mixed and wide ranging. In many cases, people were adamantly opposed to it, feeling that it was simply not needed. Others had more personal feelings toward not wanting a trail running across their property, irrespective of the fact that it would not occur unless they were willing sellers and that it would likely occur 10 or more years into the future as part of future land development. On the other end of the spectrum, some participants were strongly in favor of the trail, thinking it showed foresight and would be a great amenity to them and others in the future. Overall, there was much more support for keeping the trail in public rights-of-way and other public lands than going cross country. (Trails that traversed across private property were thought better addressed at a local level.) Refer to Appendix "A" for a complete listing of submitted comments during the public process.
PROPERTY ISSUES	Although much effort was made to inform participants that land would only be acquired through a willing seller approach, it was clear that most property owners remained skeptical and preferred that their properties not be shown as a potential route for a trail. Most participants did not appreciate that the trails would likely be developed as part of future subdivision proposals. It was also not appreciated that the whole purpose of the master plan was to establish an optimal route for the regional trail to allow Afton, Denmark Township, and Washington County to coordinate its development as part of local and regional comprehensive planning.
PUBLIC RIGHTS-OF-WAY ISSUES	Whether for or against the trail, most participants agreed that the trail is best kept in the public rights-of-way or public parks to the degree possible. Within this context, many expressed concern that development of the trail would take away from the scenic quality of the St. Croix Trail (County Road 21). Preserving the natural vegetation along these corridors was an especially important concern. Adhering to the guidelines Natural Preservation Route for St. Croix Trail was also strongly supported.
SAFETY	The one thing that participants could universally agree upon is the St. Croix Trail is narrow and not very safe for bicyclists. They also expressed concern that as motorists they might one day injure someone. The way to remedy this was not necessarily agreed upon, with some thinking that adding a separate trail and a shoulder to the road was justified, while others felt that bikers should simply be prohibited.
GRADES	Some participants felt that the grades along St. Croix Trail are simply too steep for most people. Conversely, the road is also very extensively used by bicyclists for that exact reason. Overall, managing trail grades is a substantial and inherent issue in this area.
OLD RAIL GRADE	Property owners along the old rail grade adjacent to the St. Croix River were very opposed to the trail running the length of the corridor from Afton to Point Douglas Park. With over 70 properties along this stretch, it is unreasonable to expect that acquisition would be feasible.

INFLUENCE OF THE PUBLIC PROCESS ON PLANNING OUTCOMES

At a community values level, research indicates that a regional trail through the study area is justified and would undoubtedly be successful. At the same time, local values also have to be accommodated since the trail directly affects local property owners and residents. The master plan presented here is thought to represent a reasonable and responsible balance between these compelling and sometimes competing interests.

By staying within the public realm to the degree possible, the proposed trail alignment poses the least disruption to private property interests while still fulfilling the goals of the project. At the same time, the rationale for traversing through the countryside following local greenways is also compelling given the recreational experience that could be gained. Although none of these routes are part the regional trail master plan, the City of Afton and Denmark Township are encouraged to pursue these possibilities as part of local trail and greenway planning efforts.

IMPRESSIONS FROM THE PUBLIC PROCESS

The following photos provide snapshots of the public process that Washington County Parks undertook for this project.

