

SECTION IV

LOCAL TRAIL OPPORTUNITIES

OVERVIEW

Section IV –Regional Trail Master Plan defines the proposed alignment for the regional trail through the study area. As also defined in that section, numerous other potential trail routes were considered during the planning process. In many cases, these routes traversed across the countryside following natural features or logical routes seemingly well suited for a trail corridor. Although most are no longer being considered as part of the regional trail, these and perhaps other potential trail routes may have merit for consideration at the local level. This section considers these opportunities in greater detail.

SENSITIVITY TO LOCAL PLANNING ISSUES

As defined in other sections, the master plan represents a balance between the larger values of the community and the personal values of the many stakeholders. In this context, community refers to the regional population that the trail is intended to serve.

In finding this balance, every attempt was made to be sensitive to local perspectives. Most important of these was respecting the notion that planning trails that extensively involved private property was best considered a local planning issue in both the City of Afton and Denmark Township. To the greatest extent possible, the regional trail master plan has made a good-faith effort to accommodate these concerns, with the vast majority of the regional trail staying within public rights-of-way, parks, and natural areas.

At the same time, the planning process uncovered some viable local trail planning opportunities worth highlighting. Presumably, by considering these at the local level and integrating those that have merit into local land use decisions, the value of the regional trail to the local communities can be enhanced.

THE POTENTIAL OF BECOMING A TRULY REMARKABLE SYSTEM

On its own, the regional trail holds the promise of being a compelling regional recreational asset. Every expectation would be that it will be very successful in tying together the many public and private parks and open spaces in the study area, as well as being a destination unto itself.

Integrated with local land use plans, the regional trail has the potential of becoming part of a truly remarkable system of neighborhoods, rural preserves, parks, open spaces, and trail corridors. Although the regional trail is a key component of this broader context, the degree to which this vision is ultimately realized rests with the land use decisions made by the City of Afton and Denmark Township.

It is not the intent of this master plan to prescribe how Afton and Denmark Township should plan for the future. Instead, it is to simply define the opportunities that exist today as discovered during the planning process for the regional trail. By presenting these findings, Washington County Parks hopes to add some insights and value to future local land use planning decisions that more fully integrate the regional trail (and other parks and open spaces) into the fabric of the local community infrastructure.



There are many opportunities for setting aside land for greenways and local trail corridors in Afton and Denmark Township.

LOCAL TRAIL OPPORTUNITIES

As of the date of this master plan, the merit and value of any particular local trail corridor identified as part of the regional trail planning process has not been formally considered by Afton or Denmark Township. Currently, both have policies that preclude condemning private land for trail development. Given this, the forthcoming recommendations are limited to defining local trail opportunities that would be consistent with the regional trail master plan. Any and all judgements on the merit of these opportunities rests with the local units of government.

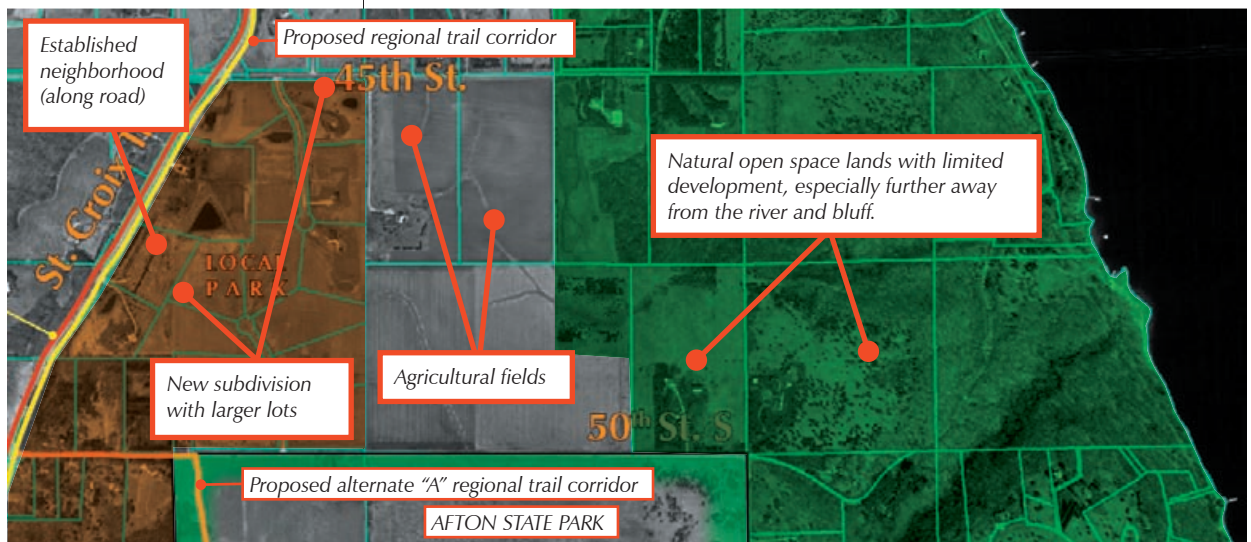
INCREASING PACE OF RESIDENTIAL DEVELOPMENT

As the forthcoming aerial mapping illustrates, the pace of development within the study area is beginning to accelerate, with new residential developments occurring or being planned in recent years throughout the study area. Realistically, this will continue along with regional population growth as projected by the Metropolitan Council.

Although land uses and the level of development are changing, the opportunity still exists to comprehensively integrate trails into land use plans for Afton and Denmark Township. But this prospect is, in many ways, fleeting. With each new development, the chance to integrate trails and open spaces with new forms of development is reduced, with fewer and fewer options being available each year for local governments to consider.

CITY OF AFTON LOCAL TRAIL OPPORTUNITIES

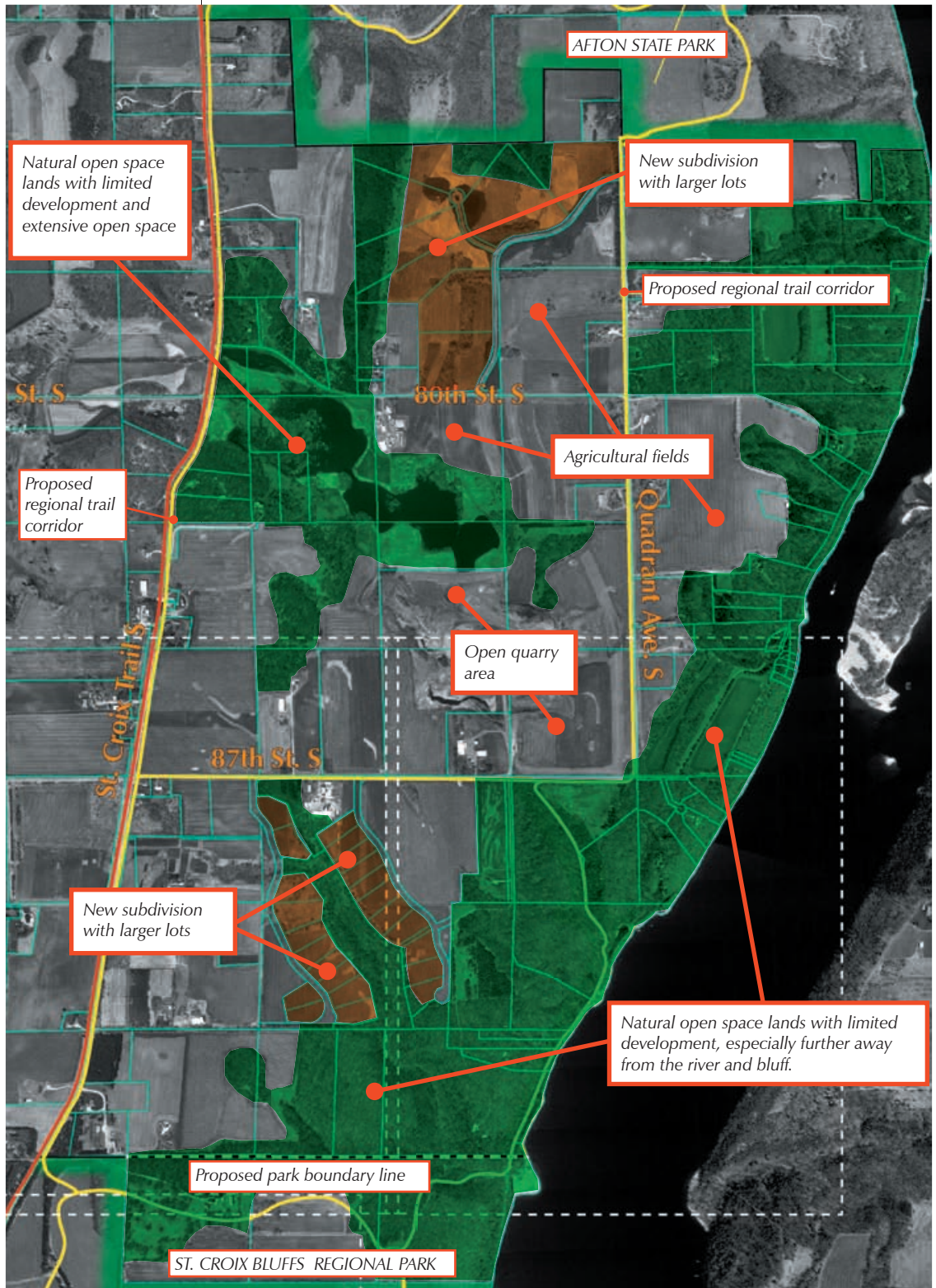
Within the context of the regional trail master plan, local trail opportunities in the Afton area relate primarily to the area between 45th and 50th Streets, as the following aerial map illustrates.



As the aerial mapping illustrates, some land in this area has already been subdivided into larger lot properties. Although this is occurring, a substantial amount of privately-owned agricultural land and natural open space still remains. Based on field evaluation, the greatest prospect for integrating local trail corridors is in the middle section of this land area. (On the west side, the new subdivision precludes the future integration of local trails. On the east side, the properties along the river bluff and old rail grade are well established, with little prospect or desire for retrofitting trails in this area.) Notably, the land owners in this area are uniformly opposed to trails across their properties. Whether this perspective will change in the future is uncertain. Nonetheless, the City of Afton is encouraged to consider local trails through this area as land use changes occur.

DENMARK TOWNSHIP LOCAL TRAIL OPPORTUNITIES

Within the context of the regional trail master plan, local trail opportunities in Denmark Township relate primarily to the area between Afton State Park and St. Croix Bluffs Regional Park to the south, as the following aerial map illustrates.



LOCAL TRAIL PLANNING IN THE CONTEXT OF COMPREHENSIVE LAND USE PLANNING

As the aerial mapping illustrates, new subdivisions are becoming more predominant in the last few years. Nonetheless, a substantial amount of privately-owned agricultural land and natural open space still remains, which makes the prospects for developing a local trail system to augment and interconnect with the regional trail encouraging. As the aerial photo also illustrates, the prospects for integrating these trails with preserved natural open space corridors is also encouraging.

Although the land owners in Denmark Township have their own uncertainties about trails, and some are indeed against them, there seems to be an openness to continuing the debate at the local level. In this context, Denmark Township is encouraged to diligently consider how and to what extent local trails and open spaces should factor into future land use decisions.

At the local level, trails are only one part of a larger comprehensive planning context that includes private land development, rural preserves, parks, greenways, and other elements of the public infrastructure. As defined in the publication *Maintaining and Enhancing Environmental Quality in Denmark Township*, there are a number of innovative strategies and policy approaches that can be used to foster preservation and protection of natural areas, which are commonly referred to as greenway or green infrastructure.

At the local level, the same strategies used to preserve open space also have application for setting aside land for trail corridors. The following provides an overview of these and other strategies that may prove useful for local trail planning. The degree to which any of these have merit would be at the discretion of the City of Afton and Denmark Township.

STRATEGIES FOR PRESERVING OPEN SPACE

The standard land use controls adopted by Afton and Denmark Township provide much of the regulatory strength behind their management of development. Although these controls have their value, they also have inherent limitations, one of which is the limited flexibility to comprehensively integrate greenways and trails into development plans.

Consistent with the aforementioned publication, a number of alternative strategies and tools to preserve open space and set aside land for greenways and trail corridors are available to local units of governments. These include, but are not necessarily limited to, the following:

- **Park Dedications:** Relates to the common practice of developers setting aside land for parks and trails in conformance with park dedication policies set forth by a local city or township.
- **Direct Purchase/Fee Simple Acquisition:** Relates to purchasing the property when the parcel meets the long-term preservation objectives of the community and the parcel can be integrated into the larger parks, open space, and trail system. Priority is typically given to larger parcels. With limited fiscal resources, direct purchase is typically considered only after other protection methods have proven to be unsuccessful.
- **Conservation Easement:** Restricts development of land while permitting the landowner to retain ownership of the property. It is filed in the public records of the property and binds current and future property owners. The landowner may sell or donate the easement to a conservation organization, but it is not required. Where the easement is donated to a charitable organization, a tax benefit may occur to the property owner.
- **Overlay Zoning:** Refers to a type of resource protection zoning that is superimposed over traditional zoning to protect defined natural resource areas while still allowing the underlying use in an appropriate form. A flood plain zoning district is an example of this.

- **Purchase or Transfer of Development Rights:** A city, land trust, or other developer purchase the development rights to a property, while the landowner continues to maintain ownership. Once the rights are purchased, the land could only be used for a specified purpose other than development. The land would typically be protected under a subsequent conservation easement or other protection program. Transfer of development rights refers to protecting the natural values of one property by transferring or selling the right to develop that property to other properties within the city under strict guidelines. Both of these approaches ensure that there is no economic harm to the landowner or developer and that the city retains its desired development density.
- **Bonus/Incentive Zoning:** Is similar to transferring development rights except that the landowner or developer rights are used by the developer on the same property rather than purchased by another developer for some other property. This could allow a developer to develop at a higher density than normally allowed if the developer sets aside land in a conservation easement or greenway.
- **Clustering:** Allows developers to cluster development of smaller lots to allow for the provision of conservation easements and greenways.
- **Natural Resource Protection Zones:** Allows the city to impose a buffer along sensitive environmental areas. The buffer width varies depending on the situation, and these can be fixed or flexible.
- **Land Trusts:** Property owners can donate their property or a conservation easement to a conservation program. A number of these programs exist at the local, state, and national level. However, because of participation requirements (particularly with regards to parcel size), land trusts are sometimes of limited use.
- **Deed Restrictions/Mutual Covenants:** Establish legally defined limits on the use of a property. They are put in place by the property owner or land developer and are carried forward by the owner or a legally established association. Typically, they do not endure for more than 30 years unless renewed.
- **Stewardship Program:** Land management practices may be voluntarily undertaken by a landowner to preserve open space. In some instances, a landowner may "register" their property with a conservation organization, thereby entering into a non-binding agreement to follow good land management practices. A landowner may also enter into a management agreement with a conservation organization, specifying how land will be managed.

The publication *Maintaining and Enhancing Environmental Quality in Denmark Township* also highlights other incentive and education programs that are worthy of consideration.

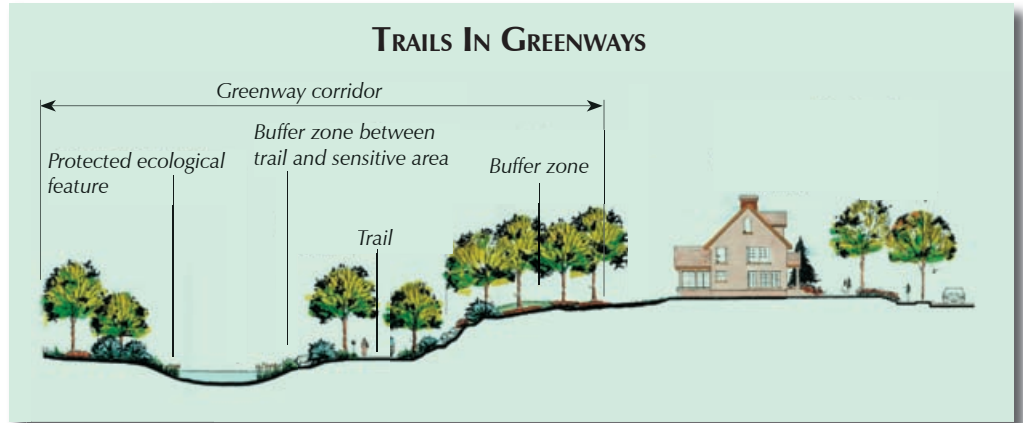
CONSERVATION DEVELOPMENT APPROACH TO LAND DEVELOPMENT

The aforementioned publication also encourages the use of conservation development as a means to set aside land for greenways, trails, and other public values. This alternative approach to traditional development also makes it easier to successfully use the alternative strategies listed above to accomplish these goals.

Importantly, the conservation development approach to land development requires a much more proactive level of collaboration between local units of government and land owners/developers. In spite of these challenges, this approach holds the promise of being able to preserve natural open spaces and provide other public values (including trails) while remaining economically viable to land owners and developers.

BALANCING ECOLOGICAL PROTECTION OF GREENWAYS WITH PUBLIC ACCESS VIA TRAILS

The use of conservation development-like approaches to setting aside land for greenways also provides the corridors for local trail systems, as the following graphic highlights.



However, trails within greenways must be compatible with the ecological protection strategies developed to protect it. Typically, this takes the form of an ecological buffer between trails and sensitive ecological systems, as the previous graphic illustrates. This is considered in greater detail in the publication *Maintaining and Enhancing Environmental Quality in Denmark Township*.

CONCLUSIONS

As previously stated, it is not the intent of this master plan to prescribe how Afton and Denmark Township should plan for future trails at the local level. It is clear that much local discussion remains on this issue. It is equally as clear that the opportunity is great to integrate trails and greenways with future development to, presumably, add to the already high quality of life in the region. Whether or not those values are appreciated and will be realized through thoughtful planning is yet to be seen. Nonetheless, Washington County Parks stands ready to partner with Afton and Denmark Township for the mutual benefit of a common constituency.