



Land and Water Legacy Program

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Photo: Lake Edith

Overview

Washington County partners with landowners and organizations to purchase land or interests in land to keep them in their natural condition. The county began land protection efforts with the launch of its Purchase of Development Rights Program in 2000, after receiving a grant from the State of Minnesota to preserve corridors of green space in the county. After passage of a \$20 million voter-approved bond referendum in 2006, for the preservation of water quality, woodlands and other natural areas, the program was rebranded the Washington County Land and Water Legacy Program (LWLP).

- The county and partners completed 40 projects on almost 1,200 acres in the first 20 years
- For every \$1 invested by the County in these land acquisitions, approximately \$2 are invested by partners
- \$24 million in partnership funds and \$12 million in County taxpayer funds have been invested in protecting the highest quality water

Eligibility

Voter referendum language requires funds be used for the following purposes:

- Improve water quality of rivers, lakes, and streams
- Protect drinking water sources
- Purchase parkland, including trail corridors
- Preserve wetlands and woodlands; or
- Protect land along water bodies from development.

Washington County gives priority to projects that best meet the referendum requirements:

- County parkland, including recreational trails
- Lands adjacent to waterways, recreational trails, parks, and other public facilities
- Lands adjacent to already protected lands
- Lands serving multiple public purposes and allowing public access; and
- Projects that leverage additional dollars from other sources.

The 2006 voter referendum, county surveys, and the Metropolitan Council Residential Survey are the residential voice in protecting the highest priority lands. The Objectives include:

- Promote climate resiliency
- Prevent further extinctions of pollinators and other creatures
- Provide habitat for game and non-game, including threatened, endangered, and special concern animals
- Maintain biological diversity
- Preserve native plant communities and lands containing populations of rare plants, rare animals, and/or animal aggregations mapped by the County Biological Survey
- Connect natural habitats
- Protect the increasingly few clean lakes in Minnesota and the metro area
- Contribute to groundwater recharge and improved water quality; and/or
- Protect environmentally sensitive areas from development.

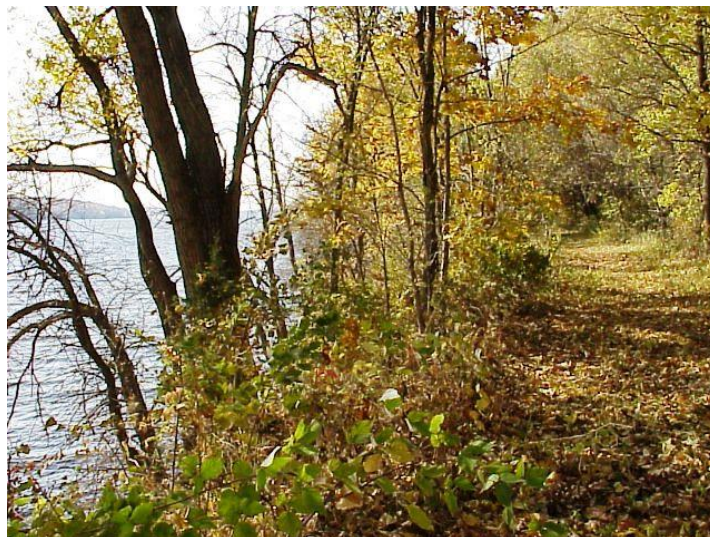


Photo: St. Croix River

Data and Mapping

The County works with the Washington Conservation District to develop the LWLP's primary Priority Land Protection Areas map, often referred to as the "[Top Ten High Priorities Map.](#)" These ten areas and areas along the St. Croix and Mississippi rivers are the focal points for protection in the County. The findings which incorporate data from several different sources show the greatest opportunities to address the objectives of the 2006 referendum.

The county uses the maps to:

- Identify and display high priority areas for land protection that create a functioning interconnected system of natural areas
- Determine areas for landowner outreach
- Evaluate applications for funding

Key Findings

The key LWLP data findings:

- More than 45,000 acres, or 16.7 % of the county's total land area, ranks high and very high for conservation purposes
- Of the highest priority lands, 10,581 or 3.9% ranks very high
- 34,538 or 12.8% ranks high

The maps are generated by an analytical model that replicated the current on-the-ground conditions. The underlying dataset for all the analysis is the Minnesota Land Cover Classification System (MLCCS). The MLCCS is an inventory and map of the land cover and the quality of the natural features based on the type of vegetation and amount of impervious surface on the ground. It categorizes land in terms of land cover, rather than the traditional land use categories. The MLCCS integrates cultural features, non-native vegetation, and natural and semi-natural vegetation into a comprehensive classification system. Additional data sets are also layered into the maps. To be used in the modeling, a data set must have countywide coverage, be current, and be accurate at the parcel level.

Project Selection

The above priorities and data analysis of a parcel's natural features facilitate project selection.

- Maps are created
- Land assessment and ranking occurs on each project to further assure data validity
- Appraisals, surveys, and Phase I and II environmental assessments are developed
- County staff seek partnership for funding and/or state grants are written
- The Washington County Board of Commissioners determines final approvals and levels of investment

Determining eligibility for purchase in fee, or conservation easement includes the following:

- Located in the Top Ten High Priority Areas or St. Croix River or Mississippi River corridors
- Located in a planned future parkland area
- Requested by a City or Township seeking partnership and a local match
- Adjacent to a water body

2040 Comprehensive Plan Alignment

The work of the Land and Water Legacy Program is embedded in the fabric of the Washington County Comprehensive Plan and aligns with its land protection planning in the following ways:

- **Goal:** Protect, enhance, and provide access to natural resources – land, water, and open space – through conservation and stewardship.
- **Policy:** Prioritize investment in the protection and management of high-quality open space.
- **Policy:** Preserve, conserve, and restore natural resources by implementing sustainable practices that promote biodiversity and healthy ecosystems.



Photo: wetland