

Three Minnesotas

As Minnesota continues to undergo shifts in land use patterns, large quantities of open space are being consumed to make way for new subdivisions, shopping centers, roads, vacation homes, and other trappings of an affluent society. Unfortunately with all of this new development, Minnesota is at risk of losing one of its most valuable resources, our rural landscape. This new development is forging into Minnesota's remaining forests, prairies and wetlands, turning productive farmland and forests into residential subdivisions and separating Minnesotans from the outdoors by consuming our wealth of open space.

Steps need to be taken to insure that Minnesota's outstate urban areas have at least the same type of recreational opportunities that make the Twin Cities Metro Area such a desirable place to live. This project identifies the amount of recreational lands that are needed in the fastest growing areas of the State and highlights locations for park development.

Land prices are rapidly rising throughout Minnesota especially in high quality natural areas, and time is running out to create large regional parks and open spaces in the new outstate urban complexes. Development of this park system is fundamental to the immediate and long-term viability of Minnesota. If land acquisition is delayed, adequate development of this park system may become prohibitively expensive.

Twin Cities Metropolitan Area – Increasing Population

In 1967, the Minnesota legislature created the Metropolitan Council manage growth in the seven county metropolitan area. Counties within the Met Council's jurisdiction are: Anoka, Carver, Dakota, Hennepin, Ramsey, Scott, and Washington. These seven counties define the metropolitan area, and within this area there are large core cities, small towns, suburbs, exurbs, agricultural areas, diverse development types, and a spectacular park system.¹

When the Council was created it already had a world-renowned park system within its jurisdiction thanks to the early efforts of visionaries like Horace Cleveland, Charles Loring, Theodore Wirth, Fredrick Law Olmsted, and others. These early parks, although wonderful, were determined to be insufficient for the future needs of the metro. Starting in 1974 the Council worked to acquire and develop new parks and trails for the growing population.² In 1974 the Council published a guideline of 25 acres of regional recreation open space per 1,000 people as the goal for acquisition needs.³ While this 25-acre per thousand is no longer a formal guideline, it served the Council well in gauging acquisition needs and setting a target for the development of the open space system. Through the Council's efforts the park system grew to currently include 52,000 acres, 47 regional parks and park reserves, six special recreation features, such as the zoo and conservatory at Como Park, 22 regional trails (170 miles currently open to the public, and

¹ See 2030 Regional Park Policy Plan, Metropolitan Council, June 29, 2005.

² 2030 Regional Park Policy Plan, Metropolitan Council, June 29, 2005. Executive Summary.

³ *Technical Appendices 2030 Regional Parks Policy Plan*, Metropolitan Council, April 2005. Appendix D: Recreation needs analysis.

30.5 million visitors annually (2003 estimate).⁴ The Council has indicated that it will work to expand the Metropolitan Park System to 69,716 acres by 2030.⁵

Several factors set the metropolitan area apart from the new outstate urban complexes that will develop over the next decades such as; the metropolitan area has extensive infrastructure in place, growth is planned and controlled by the Metropolitan Council for the region, and the rate of population change in the developing outstate urban areas exceeds rate of growth in the metro.

Existing infrastructure of the metro has been evolving for well over a century. This infrastructure not only includes the grey infrastructure of roads, rail, sewers, buildings, etc., but also the green infrastructure of parks, lakes, trail, corridors, etc. This infrastructure can support diverse land uses such as the high-density residential and mixed-use Loring Park area. Loring Park is a perfect example of how different sectors can coexist in a confined geographic location when the proper infrastructure is in place. Because of the wealth of parks and trails, the connectivity afforded by grid pattern roads and transit, the jobs provided by industrial, retail, commercial, medical, educational, restaurants, etc., and the services that come with all that is present, the area is a thriving destination to live, work, and visit.

The metro area is also developing into greenfields in cities such as Woodbury and Anoka, where much of the grey infrastructure has to be built. All such development is undertaken in accord with the local government's comprehensive plan that has to be approved by the Metropolitan Council. Such planning allows for the preservation of green spaces and for the adequate development of regional recreational areas.

Agricultural Areas / Remote Forests – Population Decrease

The state demographer predicts that in the coming decades several outstate counties will experience population declines including: Koochiching, Kittson, Marshall, Norman, Wilkin, Traverse, Big Stone, Lac Qui Parle, Yellow Medicine, Pipestone, Murray, Martin, and Faribault.⁶ Because of the increasing industrialization of agriculture, the loss of small family farms, and many other factors there is less demand for



⁴ *Supra* note 2. Executive Summary.

⁵ *Id* at iv.

⁶ See Minnesota State Demographer Population Projections 2000-2030.

labor and fewer economic opportunities in these areas. This drives migration toward population centers, where there are employment and educational opportunities. As the population in these areas ages it is not replacing its numbers.

There is less need for region-wide recreation planning and preservation of open space as development pressures in these areas are light when compared with the metro and outstate commuter/amenity areas.

Commuter/Amenity Areas – Rapid Population Increase

These are the fastest growing areas, currently and through 2030, according to the Minnesota Demographer’s Projections,⁷ they also generally lack comprehensive plans. While these areas currently contain valuable amenities such as lakes, rivers, large open spaces, and ecological diversity, such amenities are threatened with degradation. Because of the lack of early stage planning, and the historically rural nature of these areas, they are deficient in urban infrastructure when compared with the Metro.

Outstate urbanizing areas are experiencing population increases that exert development pressure due to the current preference for low-density amenity-based development. This type of development is characterized by a population widely dispersed at low densities linked to work, education, entertainment, and shopping areas by a high-speed network of roads.

Because of the high rate of population growth and the higher rate of land consumption these areas are in imminent danger of losing the very same recreational opportunities that make them such attractive places to live. This rate of population growth can be explained by; retirees/baby boomers desiring to live at the “lake,” affordable land for development, increasing ability to work from home, the ease by which land is developed with relatively little restriction/regulation, and family flight to areas that are seen as safer than the “city.”

The rate of growth and the lack of current regional recreation open space is quickly threatening to consume the open space amenity and the associated recreational opportunities. Land prices will continue to increase and open space consumption will not abate, making this the opportune time to plan, and build, Regional Recreation Park Systems in these areas.



⁷ See *id.*