St. Cloud’s parks, open space areas, and environmental features represent the recreational and natural resources of the City’s historic landscape, including athletic facilities, wooded areas, wetlands, and shorelands. The City’s more than 1,500 acres of parkland and natural areas provide passive and active recreation as well as opportunities to connect with nature. This chapter of the Comprehensive Plan describes the various facilities throughout the City and offers strategies to ensure they remain well-utilized and prized community assets.

**Goal**

Support a network of recreational facilities and natural areas that meet the needs of area residents and protect local ecosystems.

**Objectives**

- Ensure new and existing parks provide active and passive recreational opportunities that meet the needs of the St. Cloud community.
- Prioritize the maintenance and improvement of existing parks and recreational facilities.
- Ensure the City has the financial capacity to acquire and maintain new park sites.
- Provide safe, non-motorized access to local and regional park facilities.
- Increase use of and access to the Mississippi River.
- Develop policies to protect the Mississippi Riverfront and regional watersheds in areas not designated under the Wild & Scenic Rivers Program.
- Continue to apply a higher level of scrutiny and mitigation requirements for development within Environmentally Sensitive Areas.

9

**Parks, Recreation & Environmental Features**
The Economic Value of Parks

The City’s park system provides a valuable service to the greater St. Cloud community, which can be measured in terms of its impact on the local economy. As the City continues to improve undeveloped parkland and make upgrades and improvements to existing assets, according to the Trust for Public Land, there are numerous benchmarks with which to measure the total economic value of the St. Cloud park system.

Property Value

Homes that are in close proximity to parks have been shown to have higher property values. This, in turn, can generate additional tax revenue for the City.

Tourism Value

St. Cloud includes several parks and facilities that attract residents throughout the greater region. Visitors that come to St. Cloud for a park facility may also visit local shops and restaurants, increasing sales tax revenue.

Direct Use

Direct use value involves the willingness of a park visitor to pay to participate in activities and enjoy facilities such as team sports, bicycling, walking, and picnicking. Because these facilities are offered for free or at discounted rates, the direct use is a measure of how much the public has saved if it were to use a private facility of similar caliber.

Health Value

Park access has been shown to increase levels of physical activity. Active lifestyles are associated with lower levels of heart disease, diabetes, and other medical conditions, which can result in lower medical costs. In addition, the natural vegetation within parks improves local air quality, creating a healthier urban environment.

Community Connections

In addition to places that provide recreational opportunities, local parks provide community connections. Parks can define a community, allowing for community cohesion and a place to hold events and connect with fellow community members.

Stormwater & Floodplain Management

Parks generally include large areas of pervious, natural surface. As such, they serve dual role as an effective stormwater and floodplain management tool and areas for public open space and trail alignments.

User Fees

User fees are the most easily quantifiable revenue stream. The 2014 Annual Report indicated the department received $425,100 in user fees and charges.

St. Cloud Parks & Recreation Department

The St. Cloud Parks and Recreation Department operates and maintains 95 parks, open space areas, and trail corridors. Neighborhood and mini parks serve nearby residents while regional and community parks provide recreational amenities that cater to the entire St. Cloud community and region at large. In addition, the department is responsible for the operation and upkeep of Clemens and Munsinger Gardens.

The Park and Recreation Department provides both maintenance to existing parks, gardens, and facilities, as well as programming and activities at those locations. The department’s Forestry Division is responsible for pruning, inventorying, and the general maintenance of public trees on all parkland and City rights-of-way, including identification and removal of diseased trees.

Parkland Needs

The City measures its parkland needs in terms of acres per person, with a goal of 10 acres of accessible parkland per 1,000 persons. As of 2014, the city contains 1322.3 acres of designated parkland with just over 1,006 acres of undeveloped and natural areas and 516 acres of fully developed parkland (not including parks and recreational facilities associated with local schools and educational institutions). This provides for approximately 37 acres of accessible parkland per 1,000 persons, which falls below the target level of service (given an estimated 2014 population of 66,658). When including undeveloped and natural areas under City ownership, St. Cloud has more than 20.8 acres per person. While some unique opportunities may present themselves (such as the Friedrich Park project), the availability of existing parkland under the control of St. Cloud indicates that the City should prioritize the improvement of existing facilities over future park expansion.

In addition, the City should conduct a park facility needs assessment to determine the amount of existing useful park space and park use frequency to prioritize park funding allocation and guide reinvestment decisions. This assessment should also include a review and analysis of recreational programming and facilities. Once complete, the park facility needs assessment will guide decision making and can support the City Strategic Plan to focus future programming and park improvements directed at youth and older adults within the St. Cloud community.

Tiered Approach

The City generally classifies parks into three different service categories: mini parks, neighborhood parks, and regional parks. This hierarchy of parks provides an idea as to the size of different parks, but there is no clear distinction in policy for the specific categories.

Given the size and complexity of the Park and Recreation Department inventory and service area, it is recommended that the three-tiered parks classification also be used to better identify parkland needs at the local level. For example, a given household should be served by a neighborhood park for general recreation and access to open space. The same household should also have access to regional parks that provide unique amenities such as access to natural areas as well as recreation facilities such as a swimming facility.

Different park service levels should be established for each park type, that when taken together equal the overall target of 10 acres per 1,000 residents. For example, regional parks could be provided at 5 acres per 1,000 residents, while neighborhood parks and mini parks are provided at 1.5 acres and 15 acres per 1,000 residents respectively.
Parkland Service Areas

The service areas shown on the Parks, Open Space, and Environmental Features map figure do not reflect potential barriers to access such as the 1-94 corridor, major highways and arterials, railroads, or changes in topography. When identifying future park sites such barriers should be taken into consideration so as to provide parkland in areas with optimum access. To minimize impacts of pedestrian barriers on park use, the City should also consider installing directional signage to local and regional parks as part of a broader City-wide wayfinding program.

Parkland Dedication

Per the City’s Land Development Code 19.9 A, St. Cloud requires parkland dedications from all residential subdivisions for public use. Parkland dedications are assessed by the Parks and Recreation Department, and required for all residential subdivisions; however, developments can be made exempt from parkland dedications at the department’s discretion, and alternatively, provide cash payment in lieu of dedication.

Barriers

The service areas shown on the Parks, Open Space, and Environmental Features map figure do not reflect potential barriers to access such as the 1-94 corridor, major highways and arterials, railroads, or changes in topography. When identifying future park sites such barriers should be taken into consideration so as to provide parkland in areas with optimum access. To minimize impacts of pedestrian barriers on park use, the City should also consider installing directional signage to local and regional parks as part of a broader City-wide wayfinding program.

Existing and future residential areas as identified in the Land Use Plan that are underserved by existing parks are also highlighted in the map figure. As Park and Recreation Department resources permit, the City should identify and prioritize opportunities to acquire undeveloped lands in underserved areas. Neighborhood parks should be centrally located within residential neighborhoods and ideally within a half-mile walk of all homes.

St. Cloud includes several miles of uninterrupted trails. These trails function as both transportation and recreational resources. Trails also serve as “greenways,” or trail corridors that feature natural areas and open spaces. The City should continue to identify opportunities to support future greenways as defined in the 2001 Greenway Concept. The City should work with the St. Cloud APO as it develops the On-Road Bicycle Plan to ensure on-road facilities are well-connected to both existing and planned trails and greenways.

Staffing & Maintenance Issues

Budgetary constraints within the Parks and Recreation Department have placed limitations on staffing and reduced the department’s ability to improve parkland properties that it has acquired to dedication.

Given the unimproved acreage of parkland within the existing inventory, the City should carefully consider the need for parkland, new facilities, and the maintenance of existing facilities in the given location. Until additional resources can be identified to properly staff the Park and Recreation Department, new park development should be limited to areas where there is a demonstrable need for neighborhood park service as identified in the Parks, Open Space, and Environmental Features map.

Planned Projects

The City’s 2016-2021 Capital Improvements Program lists four funded park projects that will begin construction between 2016 and 2019. In addition to the four projects listed below, the CIP includes several projects that are desired by the community, but lack sufficient funding to be included in the 2016-2021 budget cycle.

• Regional Aquatic Community Center. Initiated in 2007, this project is for the construction of an aquatic center at Whitney Park. The project is slated to begin construction in 2016, and will feature lap lanes and a water slide. It may also include a gym, whirlpool and spray pool facility, dance room, weight room, arts/crafts area, community area, indoor walking track, climbing wall, meeting space, classrooms and community areas. To accommodate increased visitation to the facility, the City should consider modifying Northway Drive and Stockinger Drive to improve pedestrian safety, which may include traffic calming measures, curb extensions, raised crosswalks, and/or HAWK signals.

• Whitney Park Continued Improvements. This project will be performed in concert with the Regional Aquatic Community Center. The City plans to restore and replace aging infrastructure and facilities, as well as improve lighting, trails, and signage.

• Neenah Creek Regional Park. Developed in 2007, the Park Master Plan for Neenah Creek provided the analysis and implementation to turn the area into an important regional park. Construction is slated to commence in 2017 and will include access roads, parking areas, utilities, shelters, trails, athletic fields, and other miscellaneous improvements according to the Neenah Creek Master Plan. As the park develops, the City should improve 40th Street S and Oak Grove Road to provide safe access for non-motorized visitors.

• Beaver Island Trail Extension: 60th Street S to City boundary. The ongoing Beaver Island Trail project is a riverfront trail along the west side of the Mississippi River. The Phase VIII portion of the project includes constructing a new segment of the Beaver Island Trail along railroad corridor, road right-of-way, and other alignments at the southern end of the City. As a regional trail, the City should coordinate with St. Augusta and MnDOT to provide safe access to the trail from residential areas west of I-94.

• St. Cloud/Lake Wobegon Trail Planning Study. A planning study was completed in January 2014 identifying several alternative routes to connect the existing Lake Wobegon Trail in Waite Park to the Mississippi River and Beaver Island Trail. This project is currently in the process of selecting one of the route alternatives and development of site designs. This trail was included in the Stearns County Rails with Trails Feasibility Study, as the alternative routes include potential rails to trails segments.

As the park develops, the City should improve 40th Street S and Oak Grove Road to provide safe access for non-motorized visitors.

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**Key Sites**

**Heritage Park**
Heritage Park is a 92-acre park located at the corner of 2nd Street S and Trunk Highway 15. The park’s location adjacent to a regional commercial district and major transportation corridors limits its accessibility and use by the community. The City has been approached on several occasions by private parties interested in developing the site. Potential development could include a mix of retail, residential, and cultural uses that complement one another and leverage the natural features of the park, utilizing the park’s water feature as a defining setting. This strategy could serve as a potential “win-win,” allowing the development of valuable commercial frontage on 2nd Street S that enhances the site’s existing uses. The City should assess the long-term viability of Heritage Park and undertake a cost-benefit analysis to understand the financial implications of selling the park, purchasing additional parkland, and the overall effect changing the land use would have on the community’s quality of life and access to open space areas.

**Selke Field**
Selke Field is a 17-acre open space area that is framed by a prominent granite wall. Named after former SCSU president George Selke, the field is home to the SCSU softball team and local athletic teams. The granite wall was built in 1934 as WPA project and is the former home of the SCSU football team. Despite its storied history, the facility does not adequately meet the needs of SCSU. Should the University convey the land to the City or a private entity, future land use should preserve the existing park, or alternatively, consist of low-density residential uses that are consistent with the surrounding neighborhood.

**Hardrive Property**
The Hardrive Property is a former industrial parcel located adjacent to River Bluffs Regional Park. Should the City acquire the property, it has the potential to expand the footprint of the Mississippi Bluffs Regional Park, however, the site is a brownfield with an industrial legacy. Given the remediation required to make the Hardrive site a serviceable park, the City should only acquire the site if awarded grant funding for brownfield remediation. Further, if the site is fully remediated, it should remain a natural open space to reduce added costs of more highly programmed parkland.

**Friedrich Park**
Located at the eastern terminus of University Drive, George Friedrich Park is a 50-acre former park site that which was closed to the public in the 1930s. Conveyed from SCSU to the City in late 2015, the City is requesting $6 million in bonding dollars to expand the park through land acquisition, improve the site with additional amenities, and reopen the park. Given the significant size and unique set of natural features at the site, the City should engage residents and partner agencies in developing a master plan for the site to ensure it meets the needs of the community and includes appropriate activities to fill existing recreational service gaps. Future park improvements should leverage the site’s unique features including several quarry ponds, granite outcroppings, and extensive tree canopy.

**Donovan Lake Regional Park**
Regional parkland is limited in areas east of Highway 10 and is most noticeably absent within the Minden Township area where residential development has been expanding in recent years. As residential development occurs within the eastern portion of the Secondary Growth Area, the City should seek to establish a regional park in areas adjacent Donovan Lake. The lake is a unique amenity within Minden Township that could be leveraged as a community destination for residents living east of Highway 10.

**Sand Prairie Wildlife Management Area**
The Sand Prairie Wildlife Management Area is a 700-acre parcel of land owned by the State of Minnesota. It is located just outside of the City of St. Cloud between Highway 10 and the St. Cloud Regional Airport. Sand Prairie is situated in the glacial flood plain of the Mississippi River. It is characterized by well-drained sandy soils with a high water table define the type of native vegetation that grows here. Hawk to wet remnant prairie, dry prairie, and aspen are occurring here.

Sand Prairie is designated as an Environmental Education Area. Numerous local schools, college students, and educators routinely visit and study the Sand Prairie ecosystem. Wildlife Management Area (WMA) offers excellent opportunities for wildlife viewing, nature study, and hiking. In addition, the large expanse of the Sand Prairie WMA provides more remote areas that offer solitude and discovery for those willing to explore.
Mississippi Riverfront

The Mississippi Riverfront is a unique and desirable amenity and there is community demand for increased parkland, programming, and access along the Riverfront. The riverfront has the potential to be leveraged for economic development, as the river's natural beauty and location can draw new residents and regional visitors to new development.

As illustrated by the North Riverfront catalyst site in Chapter 10: Subarea Plans, the riverfront provides a unique opportunity for reinvestment in the City Core. In accordance with the 2011 St. Cloud Urban Area Mississippi River Corridor Plan, which outlines a regional vision for the riverfront, future riverfront development in St. Cloud should be concentrated on the west bank from approximately St. Cloud Hospital to the SCSU campus. Opportunities exist on the east bank, but the presence of single family neighborhoods in this area will limit the ability for assembly and comprehensive redevelopment.

Currently, the riverfront lacks effective access, with disrupted trail segments and diverse ownership among riverfront properties in or near the downtown, which makes cohesive programming and connectivity difficult. Where possible, new riverfront development should include a public easement that allows for the extension of the Beaver Island Trail as well as the implementation of placemaking strategies that improve public use of the river. In the interim, the City should install wayfinding signage to existing riverfront access points to enhance use of the trail. Partnerships with key property owners such as the St. Cloud HRA should also be used to identify potential opportunities for the installation of scenic viewpoints along the existing Beaver Island Trail.

Wild & Scenic River Program

Following the Mississippi River corridor from the City’s southern boundary to University Drive, the Wild and Scenic River (WSR) designation is a riverfront area specified by the Scenic Rivers Overlay District that is included in the City’s Land Development Code. Developed in accordance with Minnesota State policy, this area protects and preserves the “natural, scenic, historic, scientific, and recreational values” of the Mississippi River. Construction within the Wild and Scenic River Boundary must obtain a permit, ensuring that new development is consistent with state-wide standards and compatible with preservation of natural resources.

In the future, development of the Mississippi Riverfront could potentially lead to conflicts between the Scenic River Boundary and desired uses along the riverfront. As defined in the Land Use Plan, while some isolated occurrences of residential development occur, the majority of the area located within the WSR area is identified as future parks and open space or rural uses. The potential future expansion of the I-94 Business Park area is the most significant conflict with the WSR area, but the use of Low Impact Design and Best Management Practices can be used to ensure that future development does not negatively impact the river corridor.

Similarly, while uses are regulated within the WSR area, more intense and urban uses north of the WSR area could have a significant effect on the river environment downstream. To protect the riverfront while accommodating future development within and near Downtown, the City should work with the Minnesota DNR to develop policies for non-WSR areas that enable greater riverfront development while limiting environmental impacts. This may include establishing appropriate development buffers and heightened stormwater management requirements including required or encouraged use of green infrastructure improvements.

St. Cloud River Walk

The City of St. Cloud understands the unique asset presented by the Mississippi River: Opportunities for increased interaction through a river walk on the City’s west bank are discussed within the St. Cloud Urban Area Mississippi River Corridor Plan, as well as the St. Cloud Placemaking Design Manual. Extending the Beaver Island Trail north from the St. Cloud Convention Center to Hester Park as a river walk provides increased opportunities to create non-motorized travel along the River, develop scenic viewpoints, improve shoreline stability and wildlife habitats, and integrate public art. Mississippi Partners, an organization established to champion implementation of the urban river plan, received funding support from the St. Cloud Rotary Club in late 2015 for grant-writing and marketing efforts to support the project. The City should continue to support the efforts of the Mississippi Partners to plan and implement a future river walk.
 Environmental Sensitive Areas (ESAs)

The majority of St. Cloud’s natural amenities are classified as Environmentally Sensitive Areas (ESA) in the City’s Land Development Code. These areas include floodplains, wetlands, wooded areas, shorelands, and unprogrammed open spaces. ESAs require more rigorous site plan review to protect the City’s natural areas.

As discussed in Chapter 6: Housing and Neighborhoods, the use of low impact design and other conservation design approaches should be strongly encouraged on properties located partially or entirely within an ESA. While the Land Use Plan identifies a desired future land use for all parcels in the City and its planning area, the ESA designation should remain in use to guide future development in a sustainable manner. ESAs should also be used to guide the development of an integrated network of parks and open space areas throughout St. Cloud’s growth areas through the use of conservation easements and parkland dedication.

Wetlands & Shorelands

Wetlands include swamps, marshes, and bogs scattered throughout the City, largely clustered in South and East St. Cloud. Shorelands are concentrated along the Mississippi and Sauk Rivers and include sensitive areas that may have a direct impact on local watersheds. Both wetlands and shorelands are vital to the health of larger watersheds and floodways, trapping floodwaters, reducing pollution, and recharging local groundwater.

Floodplains

St. Cloud includes limited floodplain areas as a result of local watersheds, the most prominent being the Mississippi and Sauk Rivers. Floodplains include any areas of land susceptible to flooding in the event of a 100- or 500-year flood, meaning the chance the area will be flooded in any given year is 1% or 0.2%, respectively. The steep banks along much of the Mississippi River limit the extent of local floodplains.