



2050 VISION PLAN

DAKOTA COUNTY PARKS, GREENWAYS, AND NATURAL SYSTEMS

Nature Protected, Community Reflected, All Are Connected

EXECUTIVE SUMMARY

ADOPTED BY THE DAKOTA COUNTY BOARD OF COMMISSIONERS
JULY 29, 2025



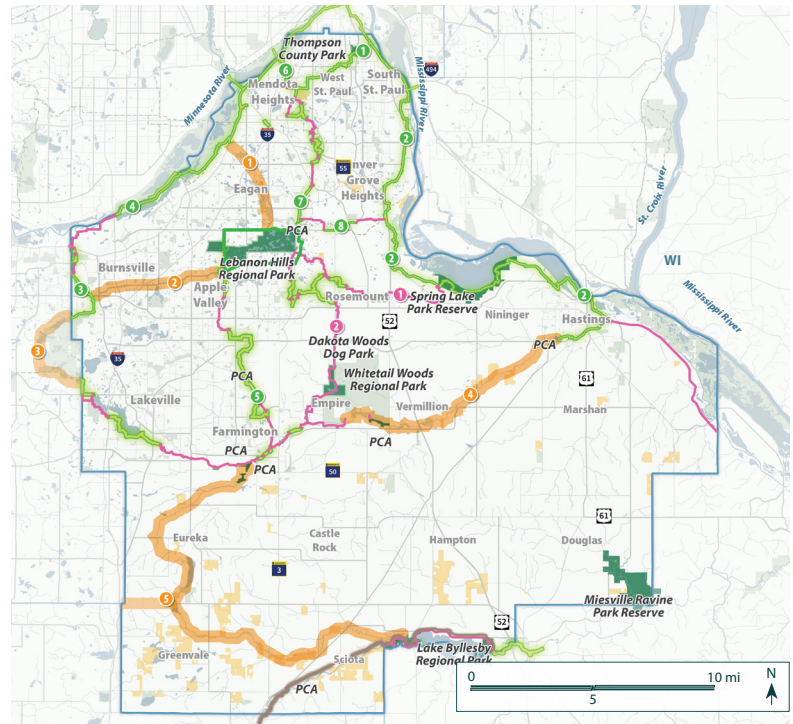
INTRODUCTION

During its over 60-year history, the Dakota County Parks System has played a pivotal role in protecting and stewarding lands, enhancing environmental quality, developing and caring for recreational facilities, and serving residents and visitors through access to the outdoors and nature-based education and recreation. Community members routinely share that the work of Dakota County Parks is fundamental to their quality of life. The system operates in a diverse and dynamic environment, serving a wide range of stakeholders with varying interests. The lands and services of Dakota County Parks are emblems of community desirability as a place where people thrive, a healthy environment, a robust atmosphere for business and jobs, and excellence in public service. Dakota County parks are a reflection of the County's overall strategic plan goals.

Dakota County is one of 10 regional park implementing agencies across the Twin Cities metropolitan area. As a result, the County derives some of its park funding through the State and Metropolitan Council. In return, Dakota County protects, develops, and programs its designated "regional" facilities according to certain parameters established for regional facilities.

This plan looks to the next 25 years, suggesting how community values continue to shape an evolving vision for Dakota County's park system, greenway system, and natural system.

Map 1.1, Existing Parks, Greenways, and Conservation Easements



LEGEND

- Reserves, Regional Parks, and County Park
- Park Conservation Areas (PCA)
- Conservation Easements
- Non-County Public Lands
- Non-County Trails
- Regional Greenway and Trail Search Corridors
 - Lebanon Hills - Minnesota River Greenway Regional Trail
 - Lebanon Hills - Lake Marion Regional Trail
 - Lake Marion - Big Woods Regional Trail
'Coordinate with Scott County'
 - Vermillion River Greenway Regional Trail
 - Elko New Market Blakely-Dayle Kenefick Regional Trail
'Coordinate with Scott County'
- Planned Regional Greenways
 - Rosemount Greenway
 - Vermillion Highlands Greenway
- Greenway Linking Route
- Mill Towns State Trail
- Existing Regional Greenways
 - River to River
 - Mississippi River
 - Lake Marion
 - Minnesota River
 - North Creek
 - Big Rivers Regional Trail
 - Lebanon Hills
 - Veterans Memorial Greenway

FINDINGS

Recent decades have been a time of growth and increasing depth for Dakota County’s park system, much of it shaped by visionary and thoughtful planning. The planning process for the 2050 Vision Plan has also included analysis of Dakota County as well as the outside influences that shape it.

-  **The percentage of park visitors who are youth, people of color, lower income, and older adults is lower than their percentage of County population**
-  **Dakota County park visitors expect more accessible facilities**
-  **Visitation of Dakota County Parks is lower than metro area average based on population**
-  **A growing County population will expect additional parks and greenways**
-  **Programming is limited compared to other metro area park systems**
-  **Awareness has grown about parks’ essential role in supporting physical, mental, and spiritual health**

A more detailed summary of engagement efforts and analysis reports can be found in the Appendices

-  **Dakota County is viewed as a leader in providing nature-based recreation and education**
-  **The changing climate threatens natural systems and recreational opportunities**
-  **Urbanization impacts remaining natural areas, habitat, and water quality**
-  **Securing consistent and sustainable funding is a growing challenge**
-  **As the system ages and grows, capital reinvestment and operations demands will also naturally grow**

Data Sources:

- 2024 Engagement Online Survey
- 2024 Engagement
- 2024 Tribal Engagement Meetings
- 2021 Met Council Regional Parks and Trails Visitor Study
- 2022 US Census ACE Estimates
- 2022 Minnesota State Demographic Center, Long-Term Population Projections for Minnesota, 2020
- 2023 Dakota County Adult Health Survey
- Metropolitan Council Local Forecasts to 2050
- 2020 Dakota County Parks Awareness and Promotion Plan: Report of Community Engagement Findings
- July 2023 Met Council Annual Use Estimates

VISION FRAMEWORK

The Dakota County 2050 Parks, Greenways, and Natural Systems Vision Plan serves as a forward-looking guide to the protection, enhancement, and development of the county's cherished outdoor spaces. The Vision Framework sets a foundation for ensuring that lands, facilities, operations, and visitor services meet the needs of the County's growing and diverse population now and in the

future. By clearly articulating long-term goals and the actionable strategies required to achieve them, Dakota County is preparing for a future that includes environmental stewardship, recreational opportunities, and the well-being of its residents and visitors. The full plan document articulates strategies associated with each goal.

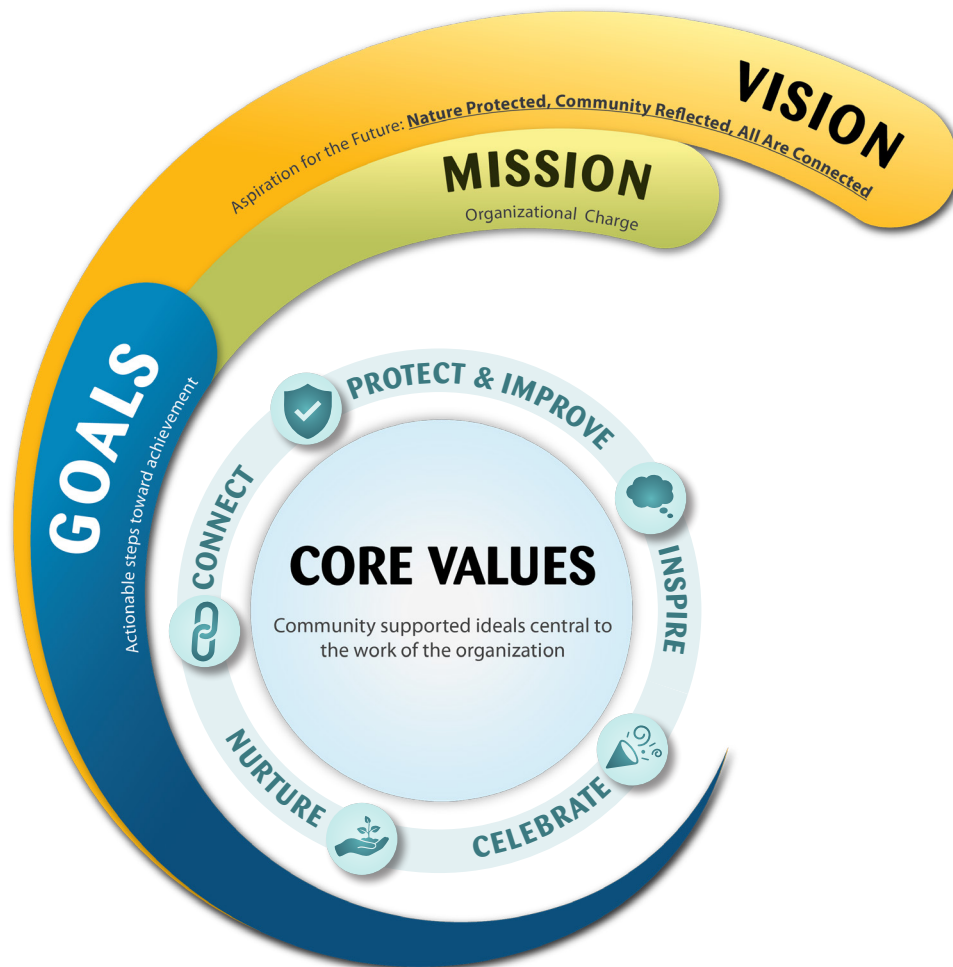


Exhibit 2.2, Vision Framework

CORE VALUES

In alignment with Dakota County's core values of Integrity, People, Service, and Innovation, this plan's core values are:

To Connect...

people to each other and the natural world, fostering a sense of belonging for all.

through engaging and inclusive outdoor experiences.

To Nurture...

and heal the vital relationship between people and nature.

To Protect and Improve...

natural spaces, ensuring a resilient and healthy environment for future generations.

To Celebrate...

our vibrant and richly diverse communities.

To Inspire...

wellbeing, wonder, adventure, and learning

VISION

Vision Statement

Nature Protected, Community Reflected, All Are Connected

MISSION

Mission Statement

To enrich lives by providing high-quality recreation and education opportunities in harmony with natural resource preservation and stewardship.

Goal A

Nurture the reciprocal relationship between people and nature.

Goal B

Cultivate belonging by engaging and serving the community, with an emphasis on those who are under-represented in the outdoors.

Goal C

Provide safe and positive core services, amenities, and experiences.

Goal D

Create dynamic spaces with unique and memorable experiences.

Goal E

Expand environmental stewardship through outdoor programs, learning, and volunteerism.

Goal F

Offer opportunities to improve physical, mental, and spiritual health.

Goal G

Strengthen partnerships with Tribal Nations and Indigenous communities for the protection of lands and traditions.

Goal H

Locate new park units close to people or to protect natural areas and recreational assets.

Goal I

Lead and support ecological stewardship and climate resilience.

Goal J

Protect, improve, and manage the natural resources of Dakota County.

Goal K

Elevate cultural richness through arts, historic preservation, interpretation, and storytelling within the park system.

Goal L

Seek and sustain values-based and mission-driven partnerships.

Goal M

Care for the system through sustainable and innovative funding.

Goal N

Invest in a thriving parks workforce that represents the communities served.

Goal O

Support local and sustainable economic development.

GOALS

PARKS, GREENWAYS, AND LAND CONSERVATION



The Dakota County system has three basic categories of land holdings: conservation lands, greenways, and parks. Together, these areas form a diverse and well-integrated network that plays a crucial role in preserving the County's natural resources, fostering outdoor recreation, and enhancing overall community well-being.

CONSERVATION FOCUS AREAS

Dakota County's 2020 Land Conservation Plan identifies and prioritizes land protection based on the combination of natural features, connectivity, hydrology, and land ownership with a renewed emphasis on water. Protection of these lands, called Conservation Focus Areas, aims to increase voluntary protection and stewardship of private lands and improve coordination with other land conservation agencies and organizations.

GREENWAY SEARCH CORRIDORS

Dakota County is home to a diverse and growing network of greenways that serve as essential connections between communities, natural landscapes, and recreational destinations. Dakota County intends to build out this system, fill current gaps, and expand into future residential growth areas, ensuring that greenways remain accessible, functional, and ecologically beneficial for generations to come.

In 2010, Dakota County created a program called the Greenway Collaborative as a model for building greenways with partners (local

communities, developers, and stakeholder organizations).

PARK SEARCH AREAS

Park search areas represent a strategic approach to ensuring that residents across the county have equitable access to high-quality nature-based parks, especially where they serve demographic groups who visit parks at a lower rate than expected, compared to the demographics of the County population.

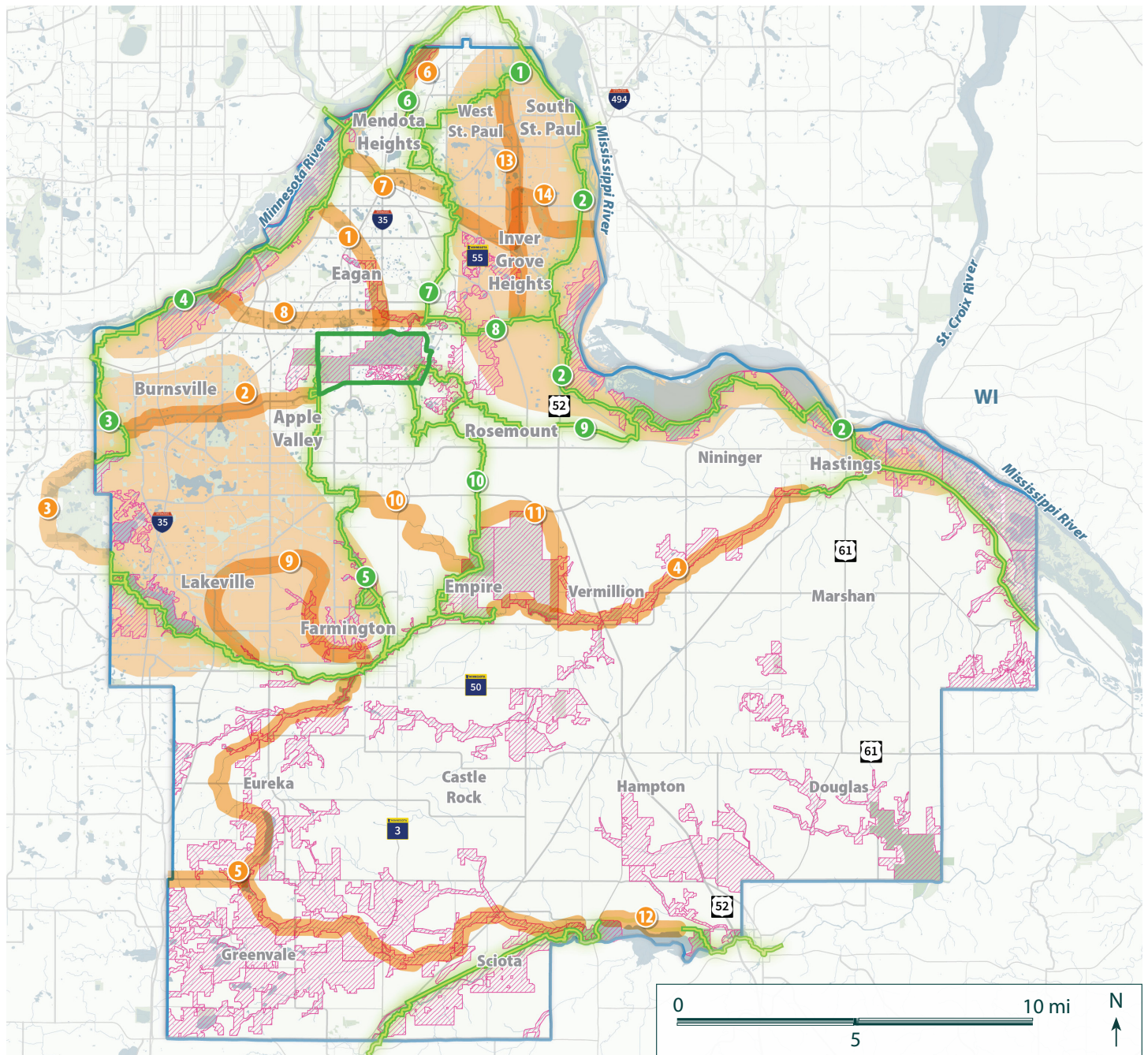
COUNTY PARK CONSERVATION AREAS

County Park Conservation Areas (CPCA) are a tool for land protection using fee title ownership by Dakota County. The focus is on natural quality such as watercourses, wetlands, groundwater recharge areas, rare species, and high-quality habitat (or potential restoration thereof) that are preserved for environmental benefits and natural resource-based recreation.

PRIVATELY OWNED RECREATION AREAS

In addition to the park candidate sites identified, Dakota County will consider preserving land previously owned/operated by private or public entities that may no longer be in active use but that provide significant community recreation or natural resources value by transforming them into protected public open space.

Map 3.4, 2050 Vision Map



LEGEND

Existing and Planned Regional Greenways

- 1 River to River
- 2 Mississippi River
- 3 Lake Marion
- 4 Minnesota River
- 5 North Creek
- 6 Big Rivers Regional Trail
- 7 Lebanon Hills
- 8 Veterans Memorial Greenway
- 9 Rosemount Greenway

- 10 Vermillion Highlands Greenway
- Regional Greenway and Trail Search Corridors

- 1 Lebanon Hills - Minnesota River Greenway Regional Trail
- 2 Lebanon Hills Lake - Marion Regional Trail
- 3 Lake Marion - Big Woods Regional Trail
'Coordinate with Scott County'
- 4 Vermillion River Greenway Regional Trail
- 5 Elko New Market Blakely-Dayle Kennefick Regional Trail
'Coordinate with Scott County'
- 6 Lilydale - St. Paul
- 7 Soo Line

- 8 Highline Trail
- 9 Farmington - Lakeville
- 10 Empire Greenway - Mining Lakes
- 11 Vermillion Highlands - Vermillion River
- 12 Lake Byllesby Greenway
- 13 Highway 52 Trail
- 14 Lebanon Greenway - Mississippi River

- Greenway Linking Route
- Preliminary Conservation Focus Areas
- New Park Search Areas

CORE SERVICES AND AMENITIES

Goal C highlights the importance of core provisions in fostering safety and comfort in parks. Establishing a foundation of facilities that provide essential visitor support and the most sought-after activities helps visitors know what to expect and look for. For some visitors, particularly first-time or infrequent visitors, large natural areas can be disorienting. The goal is to allow all visitors to enjoy the full park experience with the comfort of knowing that they are supported along the way.

Three tiers of activities can be expected in most parks:

1. Base activities and facilities that can be expected in all parks.
2. Activities that have broad popularity and can be expected in many parks.
3. Activities that can be expected in some parks to provide unique experiences.

SIGNATURE FACILITIES

Many activities and facilities will occur less frequently within Dakota County parks and along greenways but contribute greatly to a park's or place's overall identity. Strategically locating these unique amenities across the system, paired with core services, creates a consistently supportive park environment that also offers a variety of experiences.

Signature Experiences

If an activity is not indicated as base, or appropriate for all, many, or some parks and greenways, it can be considered as a signature activity for that park and greenway classification as part of the unit's long-range plan.

ACCESSIBILITY

Embracing accessibility and universal design are an important way for Dakota County to set expectations that make visitors confident and comfortable in core services. Universal design strives to move beyond "separate but equal" access to make all places and facilities functional for everyone. While the goal is to strive for universal design across the system, this standard is especially critical for the core services and amenities. Inviting all people to integrally use the essential visitor support functions in every area sends a strong message about belonging and equity. This section of the full plan provides initiatives and guidelines to maximize accessibility across the system.





IMPLEMENTATION

The Dakota County Parks, Greenways, and Natural Areas 2050 Vision Plan lays out a bold and transformative path for the future of the County's outdoor spaces. To bring this vision to life, a well-structured implementation strategy is essential; one that balances ambition with feasibility, leverages available resources, and fosters strong partnerships.

FUNDING TOOLS

Dakota County has historically and continues to apply a broad range of funding tools to its system of parks, greenways and natural areas. A key next step will be exploring financially sustainable options for revenue and funding. The following list offers a snapshot of general funding sources that are either relatively standard (sustainable) or require unique actions (innovative) with more detail offered in the full plan.

Regional Funding (sustainable)

County Levy (sustainable)

Federal Grants and Programs (innovative)

State Grants and Programs (innovative)

Bond Measures (innovative)

Sponsor Recognition (innovative)

Philanthropic Donations (innovative)

Program and User Fees (sustainable)

Public/Private Corporate Partnerships (innovative)

Revenue-Generating Activities (Sustainable)

Special Park District (innovative)

PHILANTHROPIC PARTNERSHIP

The partnership with a philanthropic organization could enhance funding, engagement, and long-term sustainability. Agencies with philanthropic partners can experience benefits through private donations, grants, and sponsorships while fostering community involvement and stewardship.

A critical early decision in partnering with a philanthropic partner is determining the extent of direct engagement by Dakota County. Some agencies find success through direct formation and hands-on operational leadership while others take an arms-length approach to the relationship with a not-for-profit specifically organized to support the mission of the park agency. The earlier may demand special legislative authority.

COST RECOVERY

In recent years, park agencies across the United States have been rethinking their cost recovery models to prioritize equity and access. Traditionally, these models were designed to maximize revenue generation through user fees, partnerships, and sponsorships. However, as communities recognize the vital role parks play in community well-being, agencies are shifting to models that ensure access for all.

The transformation of cost recovery models to prioritize equity and access represents a fundamental shift in how park services are valued. Rather than over-emphasis on revenue-generating entities, parks are increasingly recognized as vital public assets that should be accessible to everyone. As this shift continues, the challenge will be balancing financial sustainability with the goal of ensuring that no one is excluded from the benefits of parks due to cost.

REVENUE GENERATING ACTIVITIES

Even in evolving approaches to cost recovery, revenue generating activities remain an important subset of services. They are intended to generate at least as much revenue as the cost to provide them. They serve to buffer challenging financial times, bolster operating efficiency, and enhance visitor experience. Most importantly, they diversify revenue streams to support the broader mission and vision. Revenue generating activities can:

Generate and Diversify Revenue

Increase Operational Efficiency and Cost Recovery

Enhance Infrastructure Investment and Asset Optimization

Enhance Marketing, Branding, and Community Connections

Leveraging innovative revenue streams, strategic investments, and efficient operations through revenue generating activities can deepen a healthy balance between community service, conservation, and fiscal responsibility.