



January 25, 2024

Becca Nash, Director
Legislative-Citizen Commission on Minnesota Resources
Centennial Office Building 1st Floor
658 Cedar Street
St. Paul, MN 55155

Dear Becca,

Dakota County is requesting funds from the Emerging Issues Account administered by the Legislative-Citizen Commission on Minnesota Resources.

The County has been working with the Vermillion River Watershed Joint Powers Organization to protect and improve the Vermillion River for decades. In 2008, the LCCMR recommended \$400,000 to the County to develop a comprehensive Vermillion River Corridor Plan and to protect and restore land along the river. The Corridor Plan, completed in 2010, is still cited in ongoing conservation work. A 192-acre conservation easement was acquired in the headwaters of the South Branch of the Vermillion River and restoration of the diverse, high-quality wet and mesic prairie through a series of Conservation Partner Legacy grants to the Dakota County Agricultural Society has continued.

In 2023, the Dakota County Community Development Agency (CDA), in cooperation with the County, acquired a 9.9-acre property in the southwestern portion of the City of Hastings (City) to facilitate future transportation improvements at the intersection of County Road 46 and Pleasant Avenue, for future residential development, to protect the Vermillion River, and to protect a corridor for the future Vermillion River Regional Greenway (Greenway). The CDA is now working with the City to replat the property and desires to sell the non-development area by April. The County desires to acquire 4.9 acres of the property as a new County Park Conservation Area, which would include 600 feet of Vermillion River shoreline, wooded floodplain and formerly cultivated land. A 1,050-foot long Greenway trail would be located on the edge of the floodplain and is designed to utilize a future tunnel beneath Pleasant Avenue as a desired safety feature.

This proposed acquisition meets the Account Criteria by providing an opportunity to acquire critical land in a timely manner. The proposed acquisition would extend the existing Greenway to the west, ensure that the natural resources are improved and managed, and demonstrate an entrepreneurial model of land protection. The Budget and description of the County's organizational capacity to acquire this property by June 30, 2024, are attached.

Thank you for your consideration.

Sincerely,

A handwritten signature in black ink that reads "Niki Geisler".

Niki Geisler, Parks Director

Dakota County Parks

Dakota County's Organizational Capacity

In 1997, Dakota County received funding from the Legislative Commission on Minnesota Resources to develop the **Farmland and Natural Areas Protection Plan** (Plan). The resulting Plan was adopted by the Dakota County Board of Commissioners in 2001 and was the catalyst for the state's first successful county bonding referendum in 2022 which generated \$20 million to begin Plan implementation.

Since that time, Dakota County has acquired a total of 128 permanent conservation easements totaling 9,779 acres; assisted other public entities such as the DNR and cities to protect 22 areas totaling 2,242 acres; and acquired seven new County Park Conservation Areas totaling 229 acres. From the inception, all natural area easements require a Natural Resource Management Plan (NRMP) with initial implementation/restoration required since 2013. All easements are monitored annually.

In 2020, the Dakota County Board of Commissioners approved the **Land Conservation Plan for Dakota County** to refine and prioritize future conservation efforts. Land protection priorities are based on the combination of natural features, connectivity, hydrology, and land ownership with renewed emphasis on water. The resulting 24 Preliminary Conservation Focus Areas total 74,863 acres, of which 32,521 acres are protected and 42,342 acres are not protected. These preliminary CFAs provide the framework for landowner outreach, collaborative landscape conservation and future public investments.

In 2017, the Dakota County Board of Commissioners adopted the Natural Resource Management System Plan which included goals and priorities for restoring and managing natural resources in the County's parks, greenway and for private property permanently protected by conservation easements. Since the plan was adopted, the County's Natural Resource team (seven staff) have restored and now maintain over 2,100 acres of prairie, forest, woodlands and wetlands.

In 2021, the County received \$560,000 of Environment and Natural Resource Trust Funds to assist with reintroduction of bison on 150 acres of restored prairie in Spring Lake Park Reserve. The County reintroduced eight bison in 2023 and the herd has grown to 14 and is doing very well. Research continues to document their impact on the prairie community.

In 2023, Dakota County reorganized its land conservation efforts. All landowner outreach and grant management is coordinated within the Parks Department. New protection projects are developed, reviewed and approved based on established criteria. Once a project has been approved, it becomes the responsibility of the newly established Real Estate Office (seven staff) to determine the value, negotiate, obtain all approvals, close, and monitor. Preliminary and final NRMPs are developed and implemented through Park's Natural Resources staff and contractors.