



**EXECUTIVE SUMMARY: 4/22/2025 DRAFT**

# 2050 VISION PLAN

DAKOTA COUNTY PARKS, GREENWAYS, AND NATURAL SYSTEMS

*Nature Protected, Community Reflected, All Are Connected*

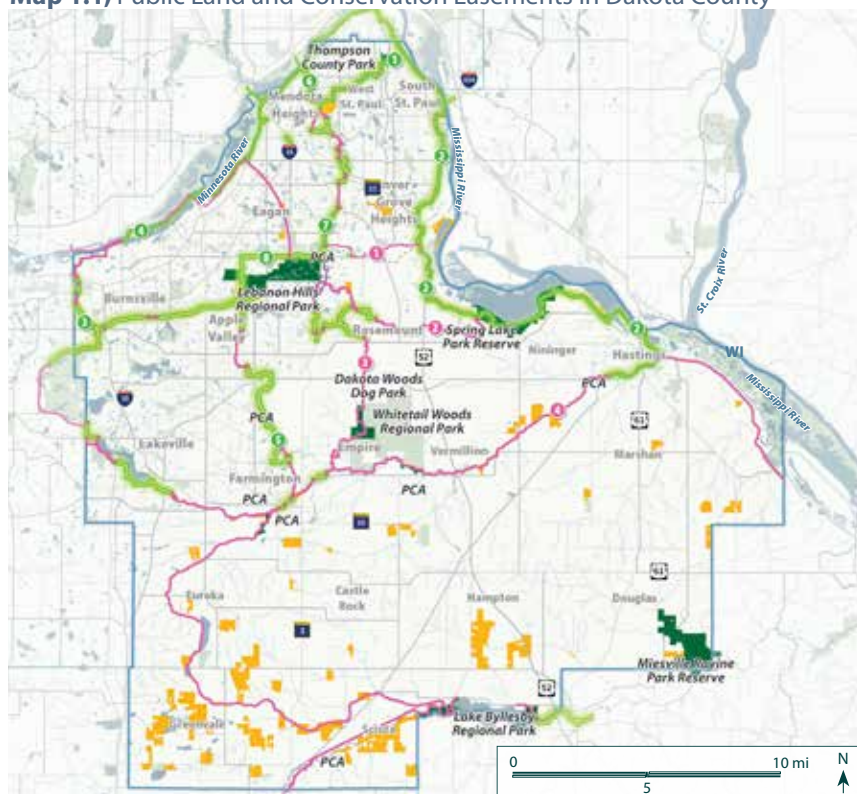
# INTRODUCTION

During its 50+ 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 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 great place to live, a healthy environment, and a robust atmosphere for business and jobs. Dakota County parks are a reflection of the overall mission.




















Dakota County is one of ten 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, Public Land and Conservation Easements in Dakota County**



## LEGEND

-  Reserves, Regional Parks, and County Park
-  Conservation Easements
-  Non-County Public Lands
-  Non-County Trails
-  Existing/In Development County Greenways
  -  River to River
  -  Mississippi River
  -  Lake Marion
  -  Minnesota River
  -  North Creek
  -  Big Rivers Regional Trail
  -  Lebanon Hills
  -  Greenway Linking Route
-  2030 Greenway Vision
  -  Veterans Memorial Greenway
  -  Rosemount Greenway
  -  Vermillion Highlands Greenway
  -  Vermilion River Greenway
-  Greenway Linking Route



# 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. This planning process for the 2050 Vision Plan has also included analysis of Dakota County as well as the outside influences that shape it.

Key findings from community voices, staff observations, analysis of the park system, and broader influences are identified on the

proceeding pages.

**Definition of Underrepresented:** In the context of this plan, underrepresented refers to demographic groups for whom the percentage of members visiting Dakota County regional parks is lower when compared to their percentage in the overall county population.



The percentage of park visitors who are youth, people of color, lower income, and older adults is lower than their percentage in the 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 park’s essential role in supporting physical, mental, and spiritual health



Dakota County is viewed as a leader in providing nature-based recreation



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



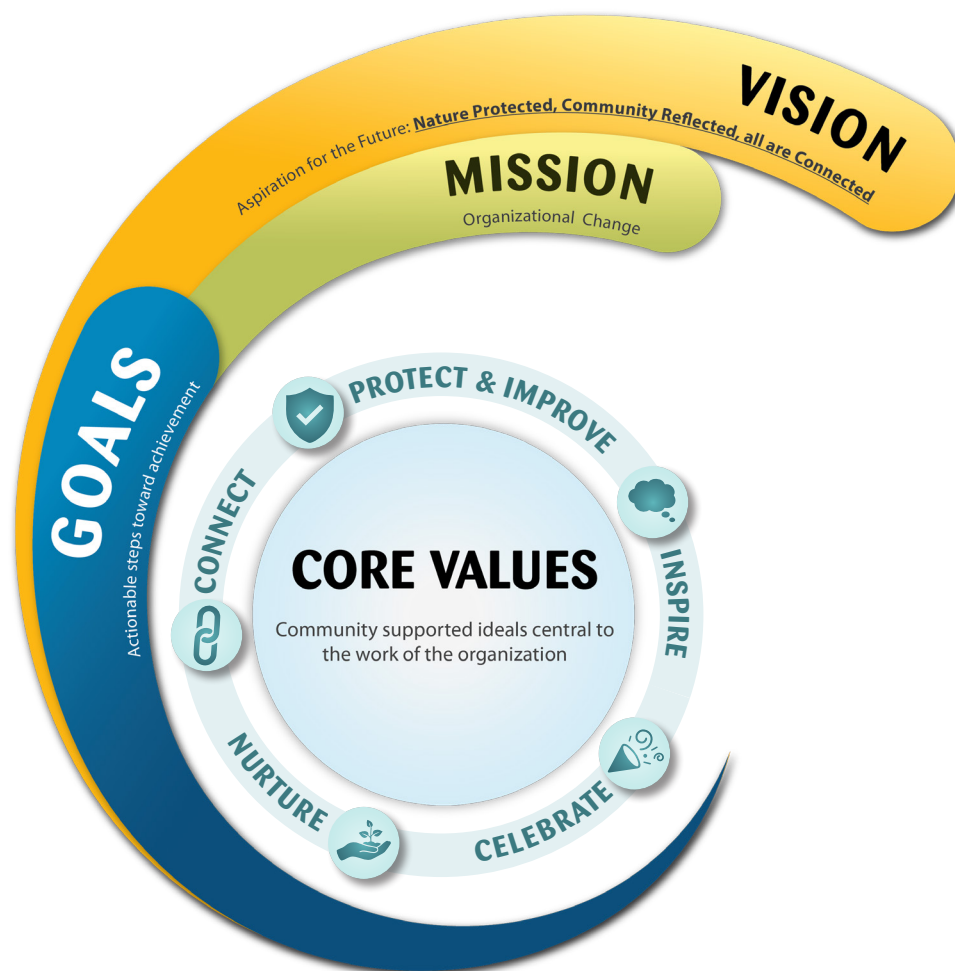
Dakota County park facilities are aging and have growing deferred maintenance demands

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

# 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

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

## CORE VALUES

### To Connect...

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

### To Protect & Improve...

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

### To Inspire...

wellbeing, wonder, adventure, and learning through engaging and inclusive outdoor experiences.

### To Nurture...

and heal the vital relationship between people and nature.

### To Celebrate...

our vibrant and richly diverse communities.

## VISION

### Vision Statement

"Nature Protected, Community Reflected, All Are Connected"

## MISSION

### Mission Statement (working draft)

"Strengthen the vital relationship between people and nature and enhance wellbeing by restoring healthy natural systems, creating meaningful outdoor experiences, and building connected communities in a nature-based setting."

#### Goal 1

Nurture the reciprocal relationship between people and nature.

#### Goal 2

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

#### Goal 3

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

#### Goal 4

Create dynamic spaces with unique and memorable experiences.

#### Goal 5

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

#### Goal 6

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

#### Goal 7

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

#### Goal 8

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

#### Goal 9

Lead and support on ecological stewardship and climate resilience.

#### Goal 10

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

#### Goal 11

Seek values-based and mission-driven partnerships.

#### Goal 12

Care for the system through sustainable and innovative funding.

#### Goal 13

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

#### Goal 14

Support local and sustainable economic development.

#### Goal 15

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

## GOALS

# PARKS, GREENWAYS & 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

To guide this expansion, Dakota County has identified greenway search corridors where future greenways are planned or envisioned. These search corridors are selected based on a combination of factors, including existing gaps in the greenway network, community needs, environmental significance, and opportunities for land acquisition or partnership with local communities.

In 2010, Dakota County created a program called the Greenway Collaborative as a model for building greenways with partners. The Greenway Collaborative program is intended to be expanded

to include greater County support for local trail loops and nature based recreation linked with city parks.

## 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.

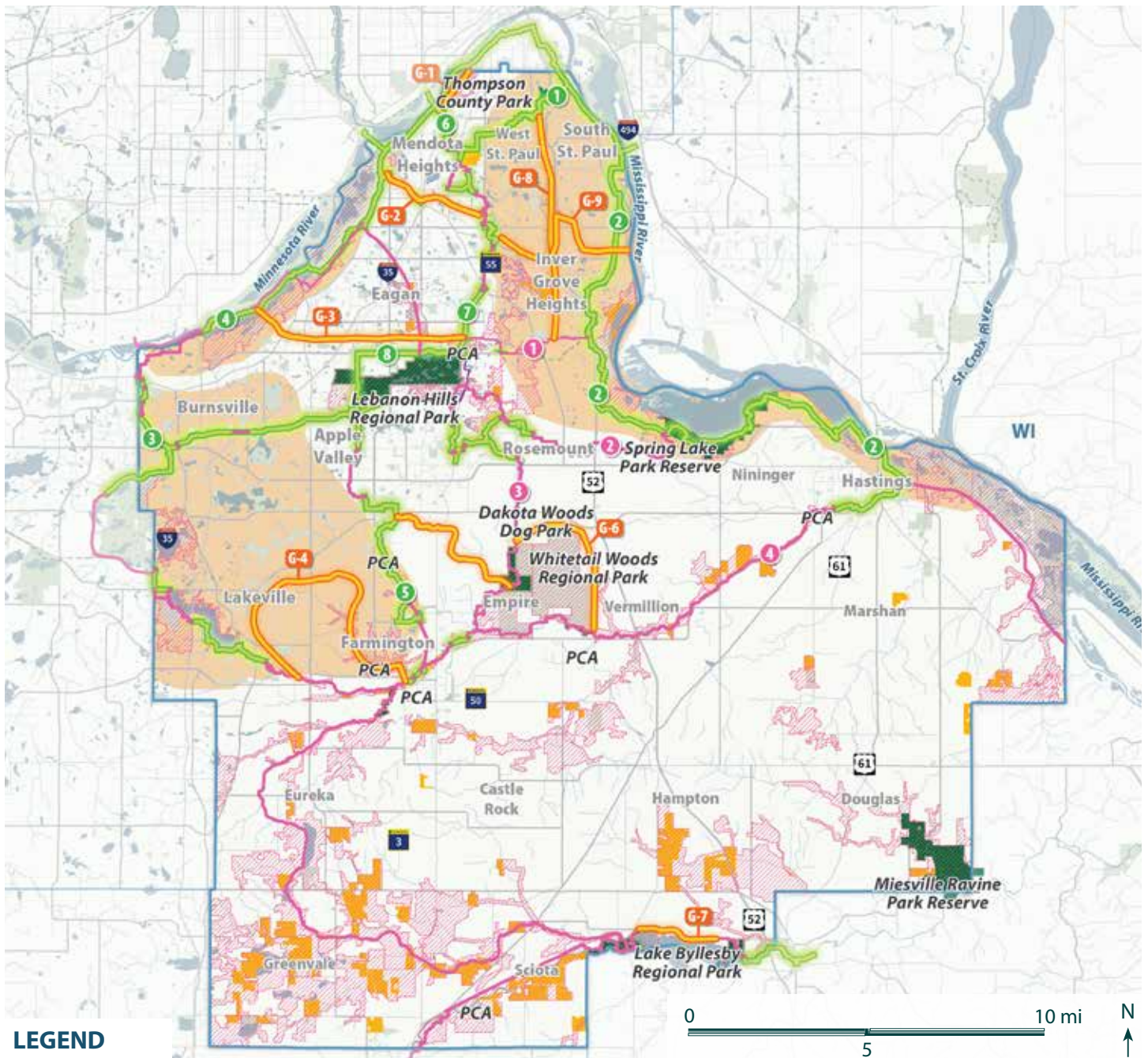
### County Park Conservation Areas (CPC's, Dakota County owned)

County Park Conservation Areas are a tool for land protection using fee title ownership by Dakota County. The focus is on natural quality preserved for environmental benefits and/or natural resource-based recreation.

### Privately Owned Recreation Areas

Dakota County will consider preserving land previously owned/operated by private or public entities that may no longer be in active use, but provides significant community recreation or natural resources value, by transforming it into protected public open space.





**Map, Public Land and Conservation Easements in Dakota County**

## CORE SERVICES AND AMENITIES

Goal 3 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.

### 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 most parks
3. Signature activities intended to unique park qualities and provide unique experiences

## SIGNATURE FACILITIES

Many activities and facilities will occur less frequently within Dakota County Parks but contribute greatly to a park 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

Greenways may also support signature activities in select areas outside of the base activities. Some

of these popular amenities are considered core for parks and some could be classified as signature.

## 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 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 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 & Programs** (innovative)

**State Grants & Programs** (innovative)

**Bond Measures** (innovative)

**Sponsor Recognition** (innovative)

**Philanthropic Donations** (innovative)

**Program & User Fees** (sustainable)

**Public/Private Corporate Partnerships** (innovative)

**Revenue-Generating Activities** (Sustainable)

## 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.

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. 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 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 & Diversify Revenue

### Increase Operational Efficiency & Cost Recovery

### Enhance Infrastructure Investment & 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.