

NORTHFIELD'S CANNON RIVER REGIONAL PARK EXPERIENCE

PROCESS SUMMARY OF NORTHFIELD RIVERFRONT ENHANCEMENT ADVISORY COMMITTEE (REAC)

The Northfield Riverfront Enhancement Advisory Committee (REAC or Committee) was formed at the direction of the Northfield City Council by resolution 2018-115 in November 2018. The resolution established an expectation that the Committee's work would include preparation of a Riverfront Enhancement Action Plan that includes the following:

- Prioritization to align with the strategic plan.
- Concept plans for strategic park improvements.
- Identified short term and long-term projects and funding sources.
- Preservation and conservation of the riverfront.
- Identification of stormwater management project priorities.
- Strategies for increased active use of the riverfront.
- Opportunities for business expansion on the corridor.

The Committee began meeting on a monthly basis in January 2019. Early meetings were used to review the enabling resolution, background materials, rules of decorum and conduct, determine meeting dates and times and establish a project schedule with milestones.

The City of Northfield received a technical assistance grant from the National Park Service. In March 2019, staff from the National Park Service's Rivers, Trails and Conservation Assistance Program (NPS-RTCA) began working with the Committee to help guide and facilitate the process of evaluating and making recommendations to the Northfield City Council. The Committee partnered with the NPS-RTCA to map out and discuss how the Action Plan should be organized geographically, ultimately deciding on a plan of five river districts organized as Scenic River North, Urban North, Urban Historic, Urban South, and Scenic River South. These river districts helped identify areas with similar characteristics, recognizing the types of improvements to consider would differ depending on the context. They also helped the committee develop actionable steps and goals focused on the REAC charter from the City Council to, "Enhance the assets of the Cannon River."

During the months of April – June 2019, a comprehensive review of all available proposals and plans for Northfield from the previous 30 years was completed, a total of 22 plans. All of the improvement ideas found during the comprehensive review that were site specific were tagged onto maps. All the improvement ideas that were policy or program-

based were placed on a list. With this information available, the Committee started a multi-meeting process of brainstorming other specific ideas that could help enhance the riverfront corridor. The guiding framework for organizing ideas was based on the current Comprehensive Plan for Northfield, adopted in 2008.

The months of July – October 2019 were used for REAC members and city staff to evaluate the adopted, river related goals and objectives of the 2008 Comprehensive Plan and other City plans, and then brainstorm site-specific actions that could be taken to implement them. The Northfield Parks, Open Space and Trail System Plan, also adopted in 2008, and the "City of Northfield Pedestrian, Bike and Trail System Final Report" of March 2019 were also reviewed for current City riverfront related policies. Comprehensive Plan chapters used in this process included Economic Development, Parks & Recreation, Land Use, Transportation, Community Identity, Environmental Resources, Sewer & Water Resources, Housing, and Community Facilities. The process of cataloguing information resulted in identifying 182 unique action ideas.

Alternative scenarios for the future of for the Ames Mill Dam were contemplated and recognized past initiatives to evaluate potential redesign of that feature. In order to increase understanding of a future riverfront in downtown Northfield- either with or without a dam- a State of Minnesota Dam Safety Engineer and a Dam Removal and River Ecology expert presented to the Committee in the fall. They discussed ecological considerations and answered questions from committee members. The City also met with officials to explore the potential of a FEMA Hazard Mitigation Advance Assistance Grant to evaluate flood and other infrastructure related considerations.

That fall City staff also complete a review of all 182 action ideas generated by the committee to help determine whether ideas had been implemented, were in the process of being implemented, or were no longer feasible. A review by NPS-RTCA staff resulted in the transfer of some action ideas onto a separate list that was focused on park improvements within the city parks of Ames, Babcock, Riverside and Sechler. Through Committee review, the final list of action ideas was shortened to 123.

In December 2019 a park planning workshop meeting involving REAC members and Northfield Park Board members was facilitated by NPS-RTCA staff. The outcome of this

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meeting was a series of four alternative, rough concept plans for each park (five for Babcock Park). From January to April 2020, these plans were digitized and presented back to REAC members. The NPS-RTCA staff facilitated discussions in which consensus was sought to narrow down the alternatives to one preferred concept for each park. During this time, the City also hired a team of consultants to augment the initiative and assist with community stakeholder listening sessions, developing ideas into concept diagrams, organizing information and developing the proposed Action Plan documents. Consultants met with representatives of the City, community organizations, and other citizens to gather information on community ideas about the future of the riverfront. They took that information into consideration along with the park improvement ideas resulting from earlier workshops and prepared more refined, illustrative concept plans for Ames, Babcock, Riverside and Sechler Parks. The NPS, meanwhile, continued to work with the Committee to sort through action ideas from the list of 123 and to rank them as a low, medium, or high priority. The ranking effort resulted in 123 action ideas being grouped into 23 with low scores, 85 with medium scores, and 15 with high scores. At the Committee's request, in April 2020 the NPS-RTCA staff provided a list of its own recommendations to the committee for riverfront enhancement actions.

The committee moved into final phases of their work in the summer of 2020. They used June – July 2020 to establish consensus on action ideas and items to target in the next three to five years and reviewed and provided feedback on draft park concepts. The format for the Committee's final Action Plan was considered and determined to be pursued as a series of brief pamphlet style documents that rely heavily on visual concepts complimented by narratives. The draft Action Plan was produced and reviewed by the Committee in September.

A public comment period was then initiated to receive feedback on the draft documents by October 15, 2020. The draft was posted on the City's Riverfront Enhancement Action Plan web page, promoted, circulated and discussed by several community boards at public meetings. The City received over 40 written comments from residents, local organizations, boards and committees. Those comments informed final refinements and will remain with project documentation and made available to decision makers. Following receipt of the refined Action Plan, the Riverfront Committee met in November to formalize forwarding the Plan to the City Council and to conclude their work.