

Draft Riverfront Enhancement Action Plan

Planning Commission comments

October 15, 2020

Thank you for the opportunity to comment on the Draft Riverfront Enhancement Action Plan (“Draft”). We are excited to see these recommendations for Northfield’s riverfront. The parks, riverfront, and the Cannon River itself are under-utilized and every plan Northfield has developed includes some reference to improving, leveraging, and enhancing the Cannon River. Completing the Mill Towns State Trail, linking our parks, and intentionally developing our riverfront are together a wonderful goal and one which we hope to happen, and wish to help happen.

The Planning Commission is charged with developing and amending Northfield’s Comprehensive Plan, determining whether projects comply with the Comprehensive Plan, and, more generally, considering how Northfield’s development pattern is consistent with City goals.

We thus read the Draft in the context of the 2008 Comprehensive Plan as well as more recently adopted policies such as the Strategic Plan, Climate Action Plan, Complete Streets policy, and Pedestrian, Bike, and Trail Plan update.

The intent of the Planning Commission’s feedback is to:

- **Ensure the Draft is consistent with the Comprehensive Plan and other policies** with particular attention to recent emphasis on climate, equity, and connectivity which are so tied to how we plan, regulate, and build our city.
- **Consider Plan implementation** including learning from past plans which have languished and not been included in city capital planning and budgeting.

We find that this draft Plan could advance numerous City goals if implemented. It is also an ambitious (which we mean as a compliment) and expensive plan; careful consideration of how this plan can be incorporated into the work of the City as a whole is needed to move it forward and help it succeed. With those goals in mind, the Planning Commission provides this review and feedback.

I. COMPLIANCE WITH THE COMPREHENSIVE PLAN AND OTHER POLICIES

A. The Draft could advance long established plans and goals for the Cannon Riverfront parks and the river itself.

The Cannon River and the riverfront have figured strongly in all Northfield’s high-level planning as a defining feature of the City with multiple opportunities to build on this asset. *Considered in isolation*, the Draft picks up on many of these earlier themes of economic development, gateways into the City, recreation, conservation, and improving park spaces.

The Draft is presented as a series of short, graphics-heavy, flyers which are exciting and enticing, but do not yet constitute a coherent plan. What is presented as the “Action Plan” is more accurately described as promotional information to for a more complete plan as suggested by each portion containing the (as yet incomplete) guidance “For a complete list of recommendations, please refer to the Links and Related Documents provided below.” Absent at least some of this additional information, we are cautious in our enthusiasm. More important, we are concerned that the Action Plan may not yet be complete enough to achieve its, and the City’s, goals.

B. The Draft does not connect make key connections to Northfield’s other planning and development efforts.

We also looked at the Draft in the context of the built environment and other planning priorities. There are three areas where we question whether the Draft is in agreement with the City’s planning and strategic priorities: physical access to the riverfront, climate action, and equity.

1. Physical Access to the Riverfront

a. Access and the Comp Plan

Parks only work—and this Action Plan will only succeed—when people can get to the parks. Given the harsh reality of Highways 3 and 19, the Draft must include better ideas to improve physical access to the parks and river by people walking, rolling, and biking. The Draft includes information about parking at each site, but does not adequately consider how people walking, rolling and biking will reach the river and the parks safely and comfortably. By describing how people with cars can access the parks (they will drive and use the described parking spaces) but describing how other can access the parks, the Draft fails to implement a variety of City goals and policies.

The Comprehensive Plan called for the city to “Work with the State transportation department to implement traffic calming techniques and pedestrian friendly crossings on Hwy 3 and Hwy 19.”¹ In addition, the City has adopted policies calling for safe, convenient access to these parks for people of all ages and abilities, whether they bike, walk, or roll to get there. Minimal improvements have been made at intersections.²

We urge the REAC and the City to describe in the next iteration of the Draft how people will reach the proposed parks, including describing

- traffic calming

¹ 2008 Comprehensive Plan, Community Identity, CI 5.4

² Pedestrian signals including the RRFB at 3rd Street and “beg buttons” at all signalized intersections help people walking, but not people biking. The bike sensor at 2nd Street is another minimal improvement for confident cyclists.

- bike and walk crossings to make the highway location less dangerous and daunting.

b. Intersection with the Pedestrian, Bike and Trail Plan and Complete Streets Policy

Building out the bike and walk network is beyond the scope of this Draft, but the Draft must describe how the riverfront will be connected to other improvements for people biking and walking. Bike lanes on the bridge are needed, but are almost useless without planning and building safe, [low-stress connections](#) to them. The parks simply do not function unless people can get to them. The final Plan should commit the City (with dates) to completing the bike and trail plan, and note how it will link people to these parks.

c. Transit access

One opportunity and Strategic Plan priority³ neglected by this Draft is accessibility by transit. Highway 3 is an obstacle for people walking, rolling and biking, but it has the advantage of being the vehicle spine of the City and ripe for transit improvements. The restoration of the historic Depot and plans for making it a transit hub make integrating transit into this Draft even more appropriate.

d. Access and Ames Park

The initial focus on Ames Park should make physical access to this park by people walking, biking, and rolling the top priority.

The tag line “Village Green on the Water” suggests a future park which is approachable from all sides with connections through the green space much as Bridge Square, Way Park and Central Park function now. Yet the location at the Highway 3 and Highway 19/5th Street intersection cannot function this way and almost guarantees the current park is underutilized because of the multiple lanes of fast traffic; turn lanes; emergency vehicle access; Post Consumer Brands truck, train, and worker traffic; train tracks; and vehicle-oriented drive-through business traffic.

Consider an event in Ames Park. There will not be sufficient parking on site to allow many people to drive to the park (which is great!). As a result, park goers will need to reach the park by transit, on foot or bike, or by car with remote parking. The Draft must include additional planning for how people will walk, roll, and bike from downtown, from across the highway, and from other locations along the river. Other policies have highlighted that integrating the river into downtown is important.⁴

³ Diversity, Equity, Inclusion “Increased transit options for all”

⁴Comprehensive Plan, Economic Development Objective 3: Expanding and revitalizing the Cannon River corridor will be a pivotal part of the strategy to maintain the historic character that is Northfield” and Strategy 3.3:

e. Mill Towns State Trail and East Cannon River Trail

The Draft could be the spark to move this already decades-long project further to completion and include the MTST (and the ECRT connection) as a focus of the entire project area. The Draft at this time, however, only notes the importance of the regional trail system⁵ and merely includes the MTST/ECRT as “existing multi-use trail” on park maps without addressing current obstacles.⁶

2. Climate, flooding, and the dam

The Riverwalk (and downtown), Ames Park, Riverside Park, Sechler Park, and the ECRT are all subject to flooding on an increasingly frequent basis. We are concerned about the lack of consideration of frequent flooding in these parks as a core aspect of planning and question whether the Draft has got ahead of itself regarding the dam.

We applaud the emphasis of developing a rational, fact-based proposal for removing the privately-owned dam or leaving it in place and thus acting on the Climate Action Plan recommendation.⁷ The wording of this requirement, however, highlights the preliminary nature of the Draft document as an invitation to plan: the dam “MUST be addressed in the plan and at a minimum must include an option of removal/reconstruction.” We would add that the decision to remove the dam (or not) is logically, as well as programmatically, prior to all other planning. Absent this key decision, planning for flood events, recreational opportunities, trails, and park facilities is premature.

3. Equity and representation

The City has adopted a Racial Equity Action Plan which commits the City to using an Equity Lens in its budgeting and decision-making. Generally, the City will involve a cross-section of its residents in decision-making to design and implement City policies and infrastructure in a way that make them “accessible and accessed by all community members.”⁸ We are concerned that the Draft does not yet contain such intentional planning for equity and fair representation.

In addition to racial equity, we also flag other stakeholders who should be included in planning. For example, the Draft shows connections to various private lands, such as the Carleton Arboretum and should state how those stakeholders have been involved

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- “Link existing pedestrian improvements, including walks and trails, with similar improvements”
 - Encouraging “A development pattern that emphasizes pedestrian scale, minimizes building setbacks, ensures the public’s health and safety by protecting the floodplain”

⁵ “Trails provide accessibility and continuity, in addition to being exciting elements themselves. There is broad agreement about the importance of completing and improving the trail system.”

⁶ Connections must be planned between to link the MTST segment behind River Park Mall and dead ending at 5th Street to bridge bike lanes; improving the large, blind cul de sac at Peggy Prowe bridge/Sechler Park entrance; and unpleasant, narrow road and trackside trail in Sechler Park.

⁷ Resilience Strategy 2

⁸ Racial Equity Action Plan – Adopted July 21, 2020

in the Plan, and how. We also note youth and lower income residents do not appear in these plans.

II. IMPLEMENTATION

We have already identified that the Draft is more of an intention to plan, rather than an action plan. Questions about implementation seem premature as a result, but we see these issues as potential obstacles to success.

A. How is this project regional?

The Draft's five "Key Actions" starts with applying to be a Regional Park in less than a year. For a project which is entirely within the Northfield city limits with unnamed partners, this action appears premature.

B. Chronology

We have noted above that studying and deciding about the dam; intentionally building equity into planning, and physical access issues need attention before other planning can realistically take place.

In addition, the distinctions between "Immediate Actions" and more long-term steps are questionable. For example, bike lanes on bridges and wayfinding are indeed immediate actions which are relatively low cost and can be completed in a single budget and construction season. "Complete the Mill Towns State Trail" is also identified as an immediate action which is unlikely under real world budgeting and right of way acquisition. However, the Draft could and should sketch some immediate first steps for this multi-year, multi-jurisdiction project.

C. How will success be measured?

The Draft is both an economic development tool and a parks plan. What goals have been set and what metrics will be used to determine if the return on the substantial public investment is "worth it"? Do we have data for the status quo?

D. Funding, risk, and follow-through

The 2008 Parks, Open Space and Trail System Plan included plans for each park, substantial policy recommendations, and an itemized breakdown of the millions of dollars the park system would require. Few of the recommendations of that plan have been carried out and the capital planning/budgeting was never attempted. The 2019 update to the Bike, Pedestrian and Trail plan includes recommendations to complete that plan which have not been pursued. How will the Draft build the important budgeting and capital planning into the final plan?

Northfield is still struggling to develop sustainable funding for its park system. Sales taxes have been considered for funding capital projects, but beyond that initiative, how will capital costs (initial development and later phases) and increased operations be funded? Grant funding is usually one-time for capital projects, not operations – how can these parks be maintained over time without adversely affecting other parks in the system?

Becoming a regional park amplifies this question. Other regional parks levy substantial fees for park activities such as dog park passes, park programming, and facility rental. How has REAC considered these revenue streams and how do they affect our strategic priority for racial equity? Will the regional partners identified contribute to the capital and operations costs or will Northfield bear all the risk?

III. CONCLUSIONS

The Planning Commission applauds the work of the Riverfront Enhancement Advisory Committee. In order to help ensure that the work of the Committee leads to the riverfront enhancement that the City wants and needs, we hope the Committee will edit and/or supplement the current draft to address the issues above.

We especially recommend that in the course of revising the current draft, the REAC implement an inclusive and equitable planning approach.