



January 25, 2024

Becca Nash, Director  
Legislative-Citizen Commission on Minnesota Resources  
Centennial Office Building 1<sup>st</sup> 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 developing the 27-mile long, multi-purpose Mississippi River Regional Greenway (Greenway) between St. Paul and Hastings for decades. Construction of the remaining two-mile long section in the City of Rosemount will begin in 2024. Although significant portions of the greenway are located on publicly owned land, there are numerous sections on or adjacent to private land. The County continues to work with these private landowners to protect and improve the natural resources and recreational experience of the corridor.

Harry and Patti Benjamin own and live on 44 acres of property in Nininger Township along the border with the City of Hastings. They have been working with the County to prevent future residential development by selling a 31.7-acre permanent natural area conservation easement (Easement) to the County. The proposed Easement, which is adjacent to 1,000 feet of the Greenway, includes eight acres of woodland, including 320 feet of Mississippi River bluff land; four acres of previously restored prairie; and 19 acres of previously cultivated land. A Natural Resource Management Plan has been jointly prepared, and the owners have agreed to commit at least ten percent of the cost to begin initial restoration.

This proposed acquisition meets the Account Criteria by providing an opportunity to acquire/protect critical land in a timely manner. The proposed Easement acquisition would permanently protect ecologically important land, complement and enhance the multiple purposes of the Greenway and ensure that the natural resources are improved and managed. 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

Enc.

**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.