



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 worked collaboratively with the majority of cities and all townships to successfully protect important conservation lands since 2003. However, there had not been an opportunity to do so in the cities of West St. Paul and South St. Paul. In 2022, the County was contacted by the McEllistrem family who lived for decades in a house on a large lot in West St. Paul, adjacent to the South St. Paul border and 500 feet from the City St. Paul. The neighborhood generally consists of modest homes on small lots, with limited nearby open space that includes a four-acre traditional city park and three acres of a church-school complex.

Some members of the family were interested in preserving the undeveloped portion of their property as a tribute to their recently deceased parents. The adjoining landowners to the north and east are also interested in protecting portions of their land and undeveloped lots to potentially create a contiguous, eight-acre protected area, which includes excess Minnesota Department of Transportation property adjacent to US Highway 52. City staff from West St. Paul and South St. Paul became involved in the land protection discussions and are excited about this and other opportunities to preserve small, but very important neighborhood open spaces throughout their fully developed communities.

This proposed acquisition meets the Account Criteria by providing an opportunity to protect critical land in a timely manner. This initial proposed acquisition is a 0.5-acre permanent natural area easement (Easement) that would include a number of mature oak trees, which would prevent the future development of two city lots. The urgency is related to acquiring the Easement soon to convince the majority of the siblings to protect the property rather than develop. The adjoining neighbors are keenly observing the outcome of this project before committing to protecting portions of their properties. The budget and description of the County's organizational capacity to acquire the Easement by June 30, 2024, and restore this important property 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.