

Minneapolis, Minnesota

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Minneapolis Waters:
Life of the City



Lake Harriet

Source: Photopixels.com

"In all my life, I never saw or dreamed of so beautiful a sight as the rolling prairies. Nothing can equal the surpassing beauty of the rounded swells and the sunny hollows, the brilliant green of the grass, the number less varieties and splendid hues of multitudes of flowers. I gazed in admiration too strong for words." (Ellen Bigelow, 1835, in Sullivan, p.14)

The Minneapolis Park system has been held up as a paragon of design innovation, community involvement and administrative efficacy by users and professionals alike. In a land of 10,000 waters, Minneapolis is bejewelled with a ring of streams, rivers and over 20 lakes, including lakes Brownie, Calhoun, Cedar, Diamond, Harriet, Hiawatha, Mother, Nokomis, Sweeney, Twin, Wirth and host of smaller "puddles". Although presently faced with budget shortfalls, Minneapolis parks and open spaces continue to enjoy ongoing public support and heavy use by residents and visitors alike.

Conceived in the early 1880s by a forward-thinking board of trade, the Minneapolis park system was established by legislative mandate in 1883. The Minneapolis Parks and Recreation Board (MPRB) system retains much of its original character, including an independently elected park board, as well as the authority to levy taxes. As Alexander Garvin notes, "...Minneapolis park officials [have] more autonomy and accountability than their peers in every other big city in the country."

The first board hired Horace W.S. Cleveland, a landscape architect and protégé of city planner Frederick Law Olmsted, whose work included New York's Prospect Park and Chicago's South Park Commission. Cleveland designed a linear open space system for Minneapolis organized around natural hydrological systems (rivers, streams, lakes). Cleveland's signature work survives nearly intact, including the Grand Rounds, a 53-mile parkway comprising bicycle and pedestrian trails, links most of the major lakes, the Mississippi River and residential and business neighborhoods.

Since then, the board has been remarkably stable due in good measure to the long tenures of its park superintendents, including the first park leader, Theodore Wirth, who remained with the MPRB for 29 years.



Manhole Cover by Kate Burke

Source: Manhole.ca

Minneapolis Parks and Recreation Board received a 4-star rating in 2000 from Trust for Public Lands and was described as the "closest to park nirvana."

STATISTICS

City Population: 382,618

City Area: 35,156 acres

Density Level: 10.2

Park Acreage: 6,400

Park acreage per 1000 residents: 16

Park Governing Bodies:

Minneapolis Parks and Recreation Board Citizen Advisory Committee

Expenditure per person: \$176

Source:

Minneapolis Parks and Recreation Board (MPRB) <http://www.minneapolis-parks.org/home.asp> and Alexander Garvin and Gayle Berens *Urban Parks and Open Spaces* (1997)

Context

When the first Europeans arrived in Minneapolis, they settled near the Mississippi River at St. Anthony Falls. The city was poised at the confluence of three major rivers--the Minnesota, Mississippi and St. Croix--and at the intersection of the Big Woods (a mixed hardwood forest that once occupied much of Wisconsin and eastern Minnesota) tallgrass prairie and oak savannah biomes.

W.S. Cleveland conceived of the Minneapolis park system master plan against this background. Water bodies, existing and created, lay at the heart of his design vision. Indeed, most of the lakes that comprise the Chain of Lakes on the Grand Rounds Parkway are dredged. Only Lake Harriet is completely natural. The other lakes were deepened or reshaped or created anew from marshlands. However, while many cities were busy filling wetlands to expand buildable lands, Minneapolis preserved over 1,000 acres of lakes and parkways. Water levels in the lakes are maintained through a complex system of pipes, pumps and channels from the Mississippi.

In response to the need for environmental advocacy, the MPRB assumed a proactive stance to address a variety of issues. Early on in the midst of conflict over the construction of major freeways in the Twin Cities metropolitan area in the 1960s, the MPRB adopted a radical policy of "No net loss of parkland", whose impact guaranteed every citizen the ability to reach a park within six blocks of their residence.

Currently the board is taking additional steps to enhance parks: restricting building heights around area lakes; converting lawn turf to native plants and grasses to reduce maintenance and pesticide use and enhance native species; creating artificial wetlands to contend with stormwater; addressing auto traffic, the single major pollutant of city lakes.



Source: MPRB

Board Structure and Governance

The MPRB consists of nine elected commissioners and an appointed superintendent. It is a semi-autonomous board. Six of the nine commissioners are elected from geographically defined parks districts. The other three are elected at large. Commissioners are elected every four years, on the same schedule as the Mayor and City Council Members. The board oversees the maintenance and operations of Minneapolis parks and recreation facilities and hires the superintendent, who is the chief supervisor of the department staff.

Public participation in park construction and planning is mandated by local ordinance. Residents take an active role in construction and planning projects under the aegis of Citizen Advisory Committees. Committee recommendations are forwarded to the Park Board's Planning Committee for public hearings.

Park Structures

The Minneapolis Park and Recreation Board is responsible for several major areas of oversight which include:

- Maintaining and developing the Minneapolis park system.
- Enacting ordinances governing the use of neighborhood and regional parks, parkways, beaches, lakes, and special use facilities such as pools, ice arenas and municipal golf courses.
- Providing recreational opportunities
- Caring for street trees
- Policing of park properties

Facility Typologies

The MPRB maintains and preserves a variety of environmental, recreation and community/cultural sites. They are characterized by multimodal linkages and firm foundations in both the natural and cultural landscape. They include a variety of small and large sites, from skateparks to off-leash dog areas, from schools to interpretative centers. They include:

a. Connective corridors

Grand Rounds, Cedar Lake Trail, Chain of Lakes, West River Parkway, East River Parkway, Godfrey Parkway, St. Anthony Parkway, 5th Avenue, Lake Nokomis, Minnehaha Creek, Memorial Parkway, Wirth Parkway, Main Street, North Mississippi

b. Anchors

Cedar Lake, Lake Calhoun, Lake Calhoun Parkway, Lake Harriet, Lake Nokomis, Lake of the Isles, Theodore Wirth Park

c. Historic Sites

Ard Godfrey House, Father Hennepin Bluff, First Bridge Park, Fort Snelling, Historic Main Street, Longfellow House, Princess Depot, Stevens House, Stone Arch Bridge

d. Neighborhood Parks

Armitage Park, Audubon Park, Bassett's Creek, Beards Plaisance, Beltrami Park, Bethune Park, Bohanon Park, Boom Island, Bossen Park, Bottineau Park, Brackett Park, Brownie Lake, Bryant Square Park, Bryn Mawr Park, Calhoun 32nd Beach, Calhoun North Beach, Calhoun Thomas Beach, Cavell Park, Cedar Point Beach, Cedar South Beach, Central Gym Park, East River Flats Park, Edgewater Park, Edward C. Solomon Park, Elliot Park, Farview Park, Farwell Park, Father Hennepin Bluff, First Bridge Park, Folwell Park, Franklin Steele Square, Fuller Park, Gateway Park, Keewaydin Park, Kenny Park, Kenwood Park, Linden Hills Park, Logan Park, Longfellow Park, Loring Park, Lyndale Park, Lynnhurst Park, Marshall Terrace Park, Martin Luther King Park, Matthews Park, McRae Park, Mill Ruins Park, Minneapolis Riverfront District, Minnehaha Park, Morris Park, Murphy Square, Nicollet Island Park, Nokomis Beach, North Commons Park, North Commons Water Park, North Mississippi Park, Northeast Park, Painter Park, Pearl Park, Peavey Park, Van Cleve Park, Victory Park, Wabun, Waite Park, Washburn Fair Oaks Park, Webber Pool, Whittier Park, Willard Park, Windom Park, Windom South Park, Wirth Beach

e. Gardens

Eloise Butler Wildflower Garden and Bird Sanctuary, Longfellow Gardens, Loring Park Garden of the Seasons, Lyndale Park Gardens, Minneapolis Sculpture Garden, Nokomis Naturescape Gardens, Peace (Rock) Garden, Perennial Trial Garden, Pergola Garden, Quaking Bog, Rose Garden

f. Recreational and Community Centers

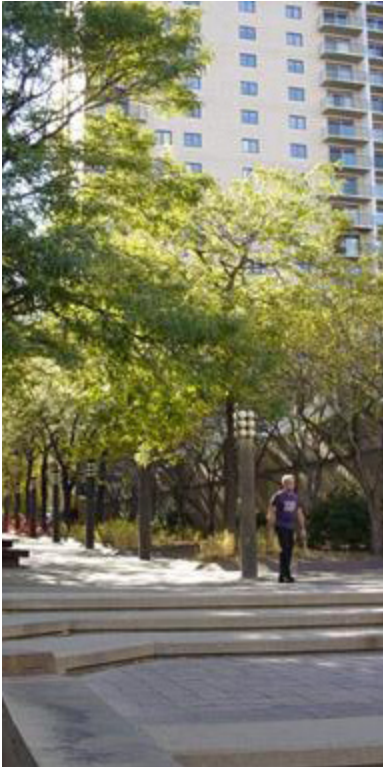
49 neighborhood recreation centers



Stormwater management project at Lake Harriet

Source: Kestrel Group

For every public dollar spent on parks, there are \$10 dollars in private expenditures



Source: MPRB

Funding Mechanisms and Public Support

Minneapolis parks and open spaces have historically enjoyed substantive citizen support. From its inception, the Minneapolis Park and Recreation Board has been buoyed by strong residential advocacy for open space. Garvin argues that historically the relative cultural, economic and ethnic homogeneity of Minneapolis contributed to political consensus. In addition to beautifying and strengthening neighborhoods, Minneapolitans have embraced the notion that parklands increase property values and contribute to increased tax base. Indeed the City considers their parks to be a substantive asset, one which also stimulates private reinvestment. Minneapolis parks attract over 5.5 million visitors annually, attesting to the economic significance of open and recreational spaces.

The annual operating budget of the MPRB is \$57 million. 69% of the budget is garnered from property taxes, 22% from local government aid, 3% from state grants and 5% in other revenues and transfers. The board spends \$176 per resident on its parks, one of the highest rates of per capita spending on parks in the country.

Currently, under the leadership of Superintendent Jon Gurban, the MPRB is pursuing a five-year, \$10 million capital campaign.



Issues

The Minneapolis Park and Recreation Board has faced a number of economic challenges in recent years, including a severe budget shortfall which forced a budget moratorium on any new construction. Like many organizations recovering from the economic setbacks following September 11, 2001, the MPRB has sought alternative funding to supplement lost revenues from property taxes.

Proposals to allow vendors in city parks has also fostered mistrust among citizen activist groups wary of the delicate balance between private interests and public needs.



Despite advances in restoration work, MPRB struggles to find a happy medium in terms of park users. Auto congestion plagues streets around many of the lakes in the Chain of Lakes area and contributes to high levels of pollutants, in addition to phosphorus. Cars remain a contentious issue. In addition, the board has met with some resistance as they convert grass lawns to native grasses and plants. Of late, the parks have also suffered tree loss due to Dutch elm disease as well as increased crime in certain parks.



Source: MPRB

Finally, the increasing diversity of users presents incredible opportunities for exploring new forms and methods to provide and maintain green, open space and other recreational engagement. At the same time, the needs of diverse users has placed “an enormous strain” on the park system in terms of meeting varying needs and expectations.

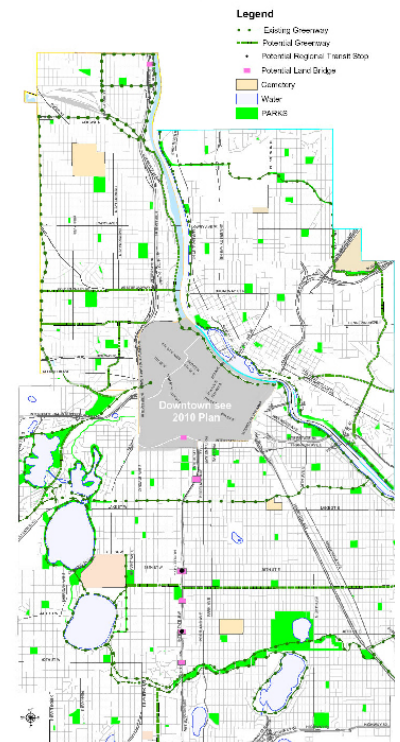
Lessons Learned

Minneapolis parks and open spaces are notable for being rooted in the natural topography and hydrology of the region. The forethought of park founders ensured coherent and linked spaces that provide opportunities for multiple users, while at the same time offering aesthetic and ecological functionality. The linkages, which occur at both a small and large scale are both logical and accessible.

The structure of the semi-autonomous elected board itself enhances the ability of the organization to be innovative and at the same time ensures accountability to citizen expectations. The park structure also allows for citizen involvement in design and construction of sites. Indeed citizen groups have instigated the purchase and restoration of several sites that the park board deemed unfeasible, including the very popular Cedar Lake Trail and the Midtown Greenway.

Park policy is guided by the original master plans, as well as the cogent set of programmatic goals that focus on environment, recreation and community. In addition, Peter Harnik praises the quality, lucidity and frankness of MPRB annual reports. Public accountability plays a role in guaranteeing recognition of volunteer and organization contributions in this publication, as well as open discussions of problems faced by the board.

Finally, despite recent economic setbacks, the stability of the MPRB is underscored by a consistent and coherent planning process, a citizen-elected board, strong community partners, a citizenry that values parks and open spaces, and an emphasis on ecology and community.



Open Space and Connectors
Source: MPRB

Returning to the River

Like many cities throughout the United States, historically Minneapolis turned its back on the Mississippi River. The banks were lined with industries from timber mills to grain elevators, each of which contributed to the pollution of the river.

As the city re-orientes toward the Mississippi, attempts have been made to redress the impacts of heavy industry through ecological restoration and cultural preservation. Several proposals have been put forward recommending removal of the dams, which no longer serve the volume of boat traffic they once did. While removal of the dams is not immediately forthcoming, other groups, such as Friends of the Mississippi River, are leading other efforts in partnership with American Rivers, the City of Minneapolis and MPRB to coordinate a study of potential redevelopment scenarios for the Upper Harbor Terminal (UHT) site and surrounding area, including a proposal for an EcoPark.

The MPRB has also re-focused its energies on the river, and is actively acquiring riverfront property. Most of the properties south along the river are owned by the Park Board or the University of Minnesota. Recently Mill Ruins Park opened, unveiling a lost history of foundations, ducts and wells from lumber mills that once lined the river banks. As a result of MPRB efforts, the riverfront is cleaner and less congested than even the lakes. Much of the private development is similarly sensitive to citizen needs, focusing on housing and public spaces, garnering a “higher and better use” than the equivalent in standard commerce.



Source: MPRB/New Yorkers for Parks

The Minneapolis park system has been called "...the best-located, best-financed, best-designed, best maintained public open space in America."
Alexander Garvin *The American City: What Works, What Doesn't*



Source: MPRB

Song of Hiawatha

(excerpt from Henry Wadsworth Longfellow)

With him dwelt his dark-eyed daughter,
Wayward as the Minnehaha,
With her moods of shade and sunshine,
Eyes that smiled and frowned alternate,
Feet as rapid as the river,
Tresses flowing like the water,
And as musical a laughter:
And he named her from the river,
From the water-fall he named her,
Minnehaha, Laughing Water.



Source: MPRB

Resources

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Mosedale, Mike. "Let the River Run." *City Pages*. Volume 23: Issue 1140 (October 9, 2002)
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Source: Kestrel Group

Minneapolis Waters: Life of the City



“Look forward for a century, to the time when the city has a population of a million, and think what will be their wants. They will have wealth enough to purchase all that money can buy, but all their wealth cannot purchase a lost opportunity, or restore natural features of grandeur and beauty, which would then possess priceless value...”

— Horace W. S. Cleveland,
Minneapolis Park System
Landscape Gardener, 1883

Thomas Wirth Park
Source: J. Quistershot