



# Currently

GREAT RIVER PASSAGE CONSERVANCY

## A Vision for the Gateway to the Mississippi



Dear Great River Passage Supporters,

By the time this newsletter is in your hands, the Conservancy will have hosted the community celebration around the Mississippi River Learning Center’s final schematic design concept.

This moment was clearly a milestone worth coming together around, but the journey to this stage was just as important. As we’ve shared throughout the process, the need for **equitable design** has been a focus for the designers and for the community during our four River Learning Center community meetings.

In plain terms, the importance of equity brings us back to **the “why” of our work: we are the river, and the river is for all of us.** We believe the Mississippi is the lifeblood of Saint Paul, and that means we must make the river accessible to all.

This “why” will continue to guide our equity mindset as we enter the project’s development phase. As you’ll see in the renderings in these pages, we have the right picture—now we must build it to bring that great river vision to life.

With the river,



**Peter Myers**  
Board Chair  
Great River Passage Conservancy  
Owner, Myers Communication Group



**Mary E. deLaittre**  
Founding Executive Director  
Great River Passage Conservancy

DONOR PROFILE  
A National Park in Our Backyard

While Jay Cowles grew up in Minnesota, our great river was slow to reveal its importance to him. Back then, Jay recalls, “The Mississippi River was hidden from view. Nobody went there, and you rarely saw it except driving over a bridge.”

It wasn’t until Jay traveled around the country that he began to connect with waterways, most notably the Colorado River while living near the Grand Canyon. Jay’s wife, Page Knudsen Cowles, also found appreciation from afar, connecting with the Columbia River in Portland. When the two later settled back in the Twin Cities, Jay had a new perspective. “As much as I appreciate the lakes here,” he says, “it was very clear to me that what was geographically unique about the Twin Cities was this extraordinary river.”

**“It’s going to be our Central Park”**  
After settling back in the area, Jay got involved with initiatives like the lighting of the Stone Arch Bridge, and became the St. Paul Riverfront Corporation’s board chair. He found that “these projects deepened what I began to feel naturally: that I was drawn to the nature of rivers. They lend themselves to storytelling: the water comes from somewhere so there’s an origin, and they’re going somewhere, so there’s a purpose or outcome.”

“We wouldn’t be here but for the Mississippi River. It’s what located Saint Paul, and Bdote [where the Minnesota and Mississippi Rivers meet] has deep cultural significance and meaning to Native Americans. I found myself wanting to elevate the appreciation in the community about the meaning of the river. I think in the long run it’s going to be our Central Park, our distinctive nature identity for the Twin Cities.”

**“People deserve access and opportunity”**  
Page shares Jay’s feeling that Saint Paul as the River Capital can be a national—and international—destination. “People from around the world visit Minnesota, and one of the things on their bucket list is to see the Mississippi River,” she says. “If there were a place they could go to see and learn about the river, that would be hugely attractive.”

The Great River Passage Conservancy’s Mississippi River Learning Center is designed to be just that place. Page and Jay have seen the project site



firsthand by going on several walking tours, and they are following the schematic design process closely. “Right now there’s a lot of space [at the Learning Center site] that is underutilized,” says Page. “We’ve seen the latest design renderings, and all the new accessibility and features are really going to open up that space for recreation and education.”

“With all the different programmatic partners and elements down there, I think of the River Learning Center as a way for the community to gather at the river,” adds Jay. “We can walk across the a bridge, but it’s not quite the same as being in the river or on paths.” The Cowles note, too, that the site is being carefully designed to be accessible to people of all physical abilities.

Both Jay and Page also stress what the River Learning Center and other Conservancy projects can do for the next generation of river stewards. Through her 20-year philanthropic relationship with the Trust for Public Land, Page says “it’s all about conserving land for future generations to enjoy.”

“For some children nature has become something unfamiliar, or uncomfortable,” Jay says. “With its multiple opportunities for education and programming, the River Learning Center will be a chance to really develop a personal relationship with a natural setting.”

“It can be miraculous and transforming to be introduced to that, especially as a young person,” adds Page. “People deserve access and opportunity.”

Fully committed to the vision of bringing the river back to the center of public life, Page and Jay have become ambassadors for the Conservancy’s projects, inviting friends and other river supporters along on Learning Center walking tours. As Jay says, “It’s an opportunity to expand our experience of all the wonders of a national park in our urban backyard.”





# Creating a Vision for the Mississippi River Learning Center and National Park Service Headquarters

The Mississippi River Learning Center is a city-led project combining a mixed-use, river-focused space and a National Park Service headquarters at the Crosby Farm Regional Park, serving as a national gateway to the Mississippi River with year-round river learning and outdoor recreation experiences on and along Saint Paul’s great river.

## PARTNERS AND DESIGN TEAM

- City of Saint Paul
- Great River Passage Conservancy
- Mississippi Park Connection
- National Park Service
- Your Boat Club
- W Architecture & Landscape Architecture

## COMMUNITY ENGAGEMENT

Community voice has driven the River Learning Center design from day one, engaging people through three community meetings (nearly 200 attendees), stakeholder surveys, and focus groups. We have hosted partner meetings as well

as community advisory and technical advisory meetings to draw in the perspectives of other river-focused groups such as the Department of Natural Resources, Friends of the Mississippi River, Capital Region Watershed, Saint Paul Planning, and more.

## GUIDING DESIGN PRINCIPLES

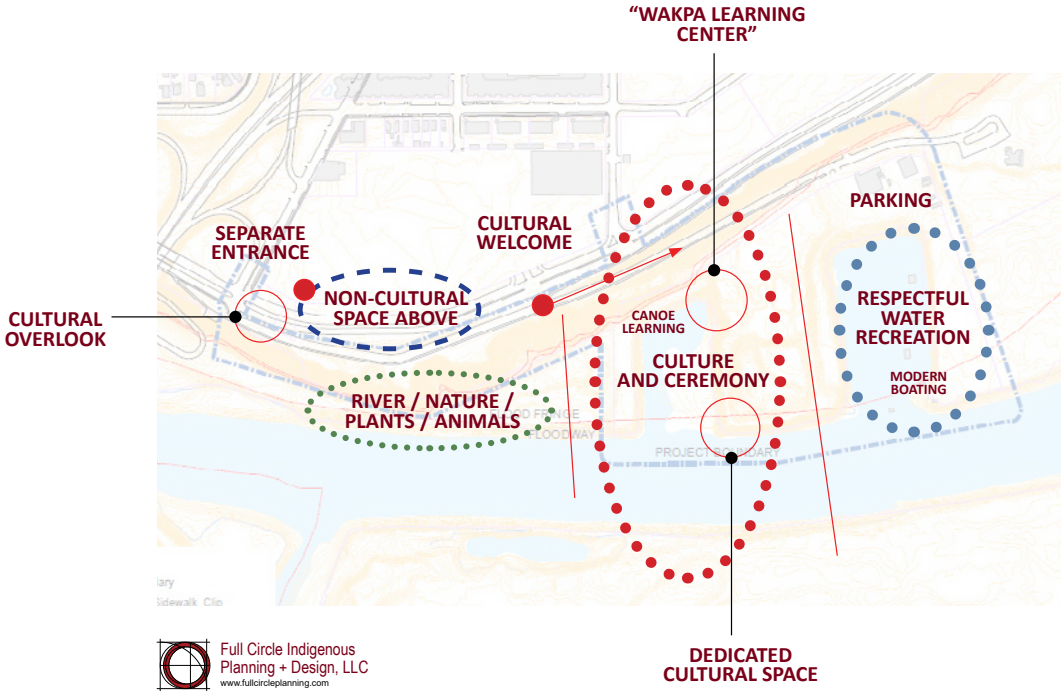
- A visible, welcoming gateway to the Mississippi
- A place to experience land, water, and culture
- Beautiful, safe, welcoming, and accessible to all
- Small-scale, light on the land, and forward thinking
- Regenerative and restorative: planned for future generations

## NEXT STEPS

A six-month transition period to include:

- Partner roles and responsibilities
- Finance strategy
- State bonding initiative
- Programming planning

## Balancing Conditions, Needs and Values



## DAKOTA PERSPECTIVE



## SITE CONDITIONS

1. Bike Racks – 357 (69%)

2. Picnic Pavilion – 265 (52%)

**Restroom 441 (86%)**

3. Fire Pit

4. Playground

5. Kiosk

6. Bike Storage

Visual Survey:  
WHAT AMENITIES WOULD YOU LIKE TO SEE?

Q3: (Multiple Choice)  
Which of the following do you like as inspiration(s) for the welcoming entrance at the top of the bluff?

**Entry Plaza, Plants, and Signs– 56%**

## COMMUNITY VALUES



- Bluff Gateway Goals:
- Connect to Sam Morgan Trail
  - Draw people into the park
  - Provide orientation to the park below
  - Improve pedestrian crossings at Shepard Road



- Floodplain Gateway Goals:
- Create a more public and accessible riverfront
  - Create a welcoming arrival space
  - Restore native habitat and provide storm water management



BEFORE



AFTER (proposed)



BEFORE



AFTER (proposed)



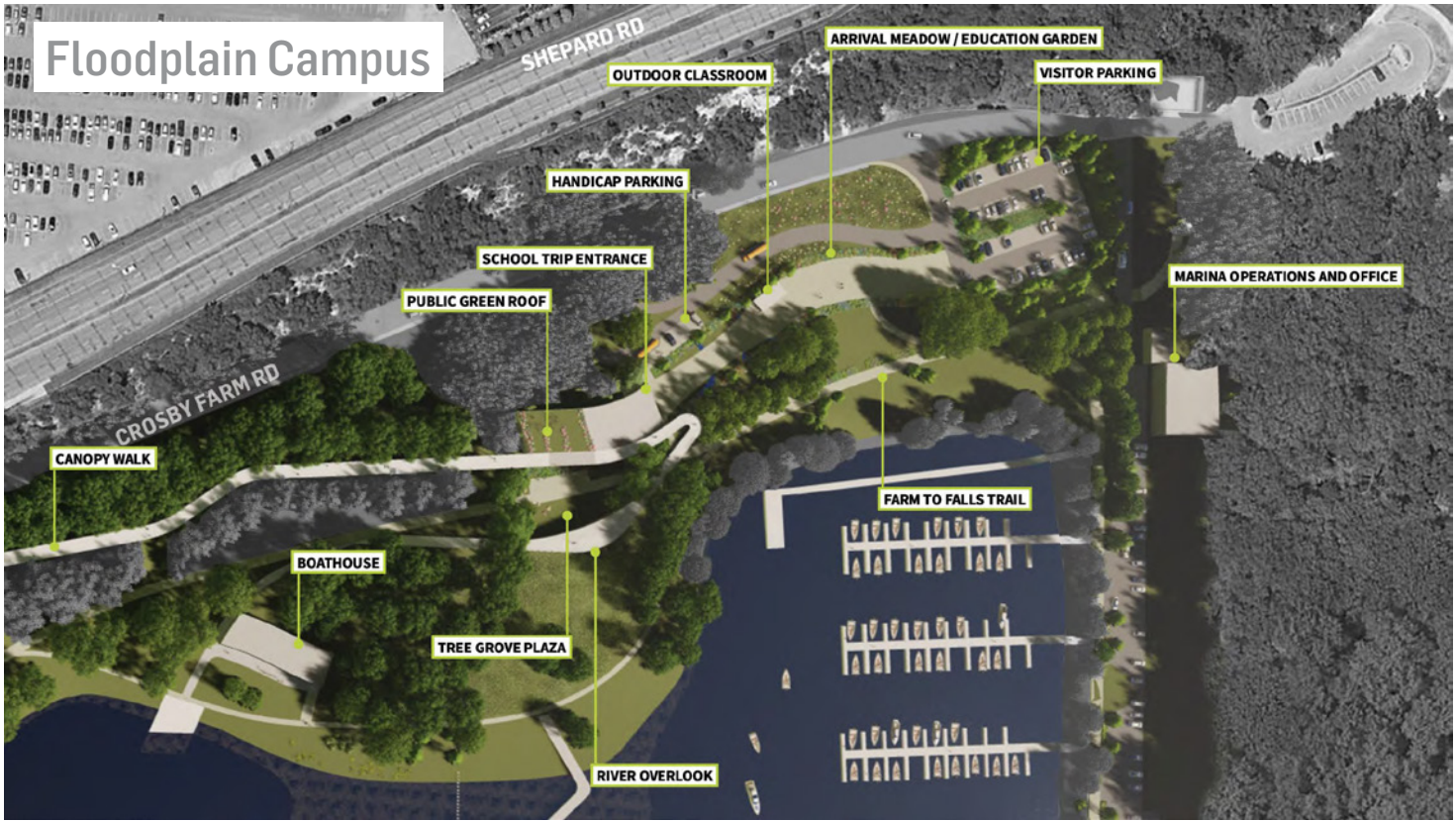
Bluff Campus Goals:

- Provide “trailhead” on Sam Morgan Trail
- Provide public restrooms and vending
- Provide info on the Mississippi River Learning Center and regional park below
- Keep existing trees



Floodplain Campus Goals:

- Create a welcoming learning facility with indoor and outdoor spaces
- Provide public restrooms
- Provide a small café space



BEFORE



AFTER (proposed)

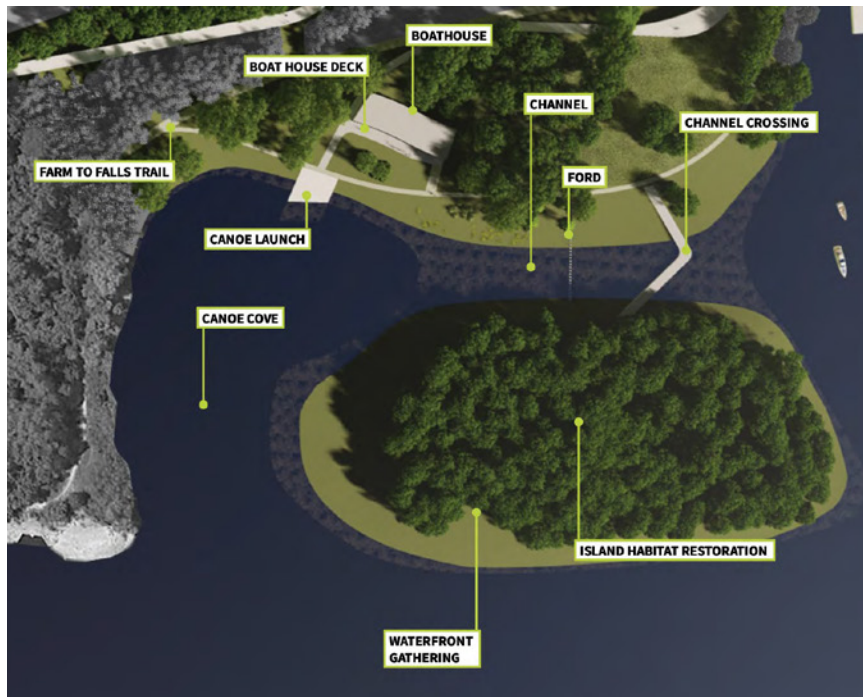


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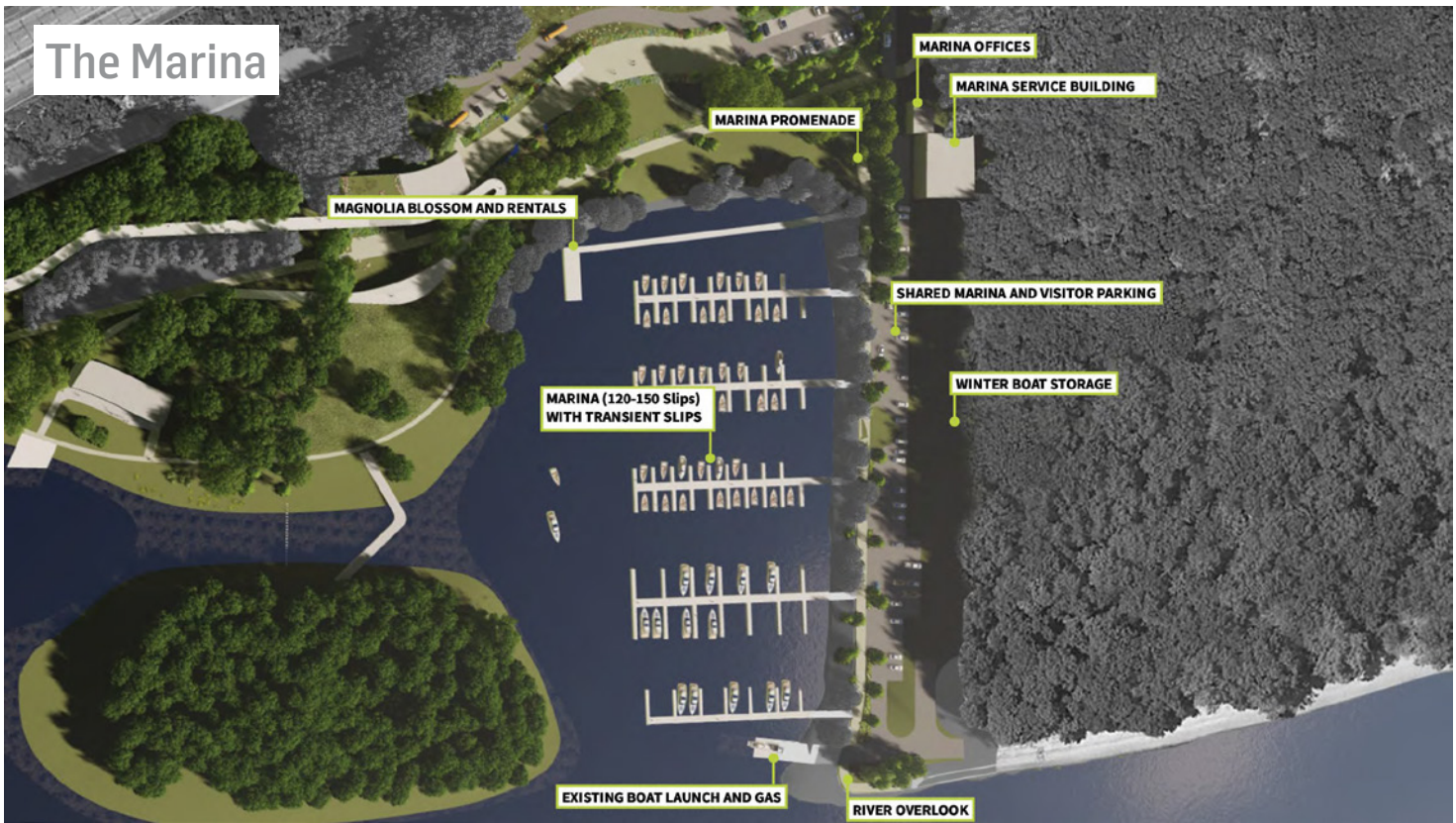


AFTER (proposed)





- The River Goals:
- Provide public access to the waterfront
  - Remove unnatural steep slopes
  - Improve forest ecology
  - Naturalize habitat



- Marina Goals:
- Make it more public
  - Combine marina operation with pedestrian access to water
  - Provide shared marina and visitor parking
  - Accommodate winter boat storage needs
  - Accommodate boat rentals and transient slips



AFTER (proposed)





# GREAT RIVER PASSAGE CONSERVANCY

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*Great River Passage Conservancy is a 501(c)(3) nonprofit. Donations are tax-deductible to the extent of the law.*

## About the Great River Passage Conservancy

The **Great River Passage Conservancy** was founded in late 2018 to rally philanthropic support for the Great River Passage Initiative's river-focused projects designed to build economic vitality along Saint Paul's stretch of the Mississippi River. All on Dakota homeland, these three projects—the River Learning Center and National Park Service Headquarters, River Balcony, and East Side River District—respond to the enduring qualities of the Mississippi River that link it to Saint Paul and the wider region's historical, cultural, environmental, and economic well-being.

With Saint Paul's 17 miles of river, 26 miles of river edge, and 3,500 acres of publicly owned land, we have a unique opportunity to become the River Capital and unite our region's two greatest assets: its people and one of the three great rivers of the world, the Mississippi. By advancing major projects along the Mississippi River that allow all people to experience the river in new and equitable ways, the Great River Passage Conservancy fosters environmental stewardship, community health, and economic development.

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