



MASTER PLAN

ACKNOWLEDGMENTS

Adopted on March 4, 2025
Resolution No. 7 (2025)

Board of Supervisors

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Table of Contents

INTRODUCTION & PROJECT BACKGROUND	4
HISTORY	5
REGIONAL CONTEXT	5
EXISTING SITE CONDITIONS	6
PROJECTED PARK USERS	9
SUMMARY OF PREVIOUS PLANNING.....	10
PUBLIC ENGAGEMENT	10
DEVELOPMENT PLAN.....	11
INTERPRETIVE PLAN	15
NATURAL RESOURCES PLAN	15
LONG-TERM NATURAL RESOURCE MAMANGEMENT BEST PRACTICES	17
INVASIVE MANAGEMENT APPROACH	17
OTHER NATURAL RESOURCE RECOMMENDATIONS.....	19
COST ESTIMATES	21

INTRODUCTION & PROJECT BACKGROUND

The Eckert Blufflands Park Master Plan describes the history, existing conditions, public input, recommendations for natural resources and development, implementation actions, and costs for the park's proposed development.

This new St. Croix County Park was made available through the purchase of several properties along the St. Croix River. Together, the park will provide public access to 2,800 feet of shoreline and 170 acres of greenspace in the St. Croix Valley.

In early 2021, St. Croix County engaged the services of HKGI, a park planning consultant, to prepare a Master Plan for the park property. The master planning process allowed the public to weigh in on the park's design. The initial Master Plan process culminated in approval of the "*Eckert Blufflands Park Master Plan*" by the St. Croix County Board of Supervisors on February 1, 2022.

The *Eckert Blufflands Park Master Plan* adopted in 2022 can be found here:

<https://www.sccwi.gov/959/Eckert-Blufflands>

Proposed Park improvements in the 2022 Master Plan included camper cabins and yurts on the south portion of the park, a hike-in campground on the northern portion of the park, a new Highway #35 vehicular entrance, an entrance station, internal roads, playground and picnic areas, restrooms, parking lots, paved and natural surface trails with access to the St. Croix River, sledding hill, rock climbing and ropes activity areas and a mountain bike training course.

The estimated cost for all proposed improvements in 2021 was \$14,770,000. Applying a conservative annual inflation rate of 5%, the projected construction costs for the same plan in 2025 are expected to reach approximately \$18,000,000.

Continued inflationary factors, coupled with other budget challenges facing the County, necessitated a re-evaluation of park usage to achieve manageable development costs.

The objectives of preparing an amended Master Plan are to:

1. Emphasize nature based outdoor recreation activities (hiking, bicycling, play area, pavilion/picnic areas, nature viewing)
2. Prepare an amended plan with lower development costs that will align with a more modest development strategy for the property
3. Continued involvement and communication with residents, and Town and State officials

HISTORY

In 2015, St. Croix County purchased 53 acres of land from C.A. and Jeanette Richards. This property has access off Old Highway #35, is located along the St. Croix River in the Town of St. Joseph and includes 1,300 feet of river shoreline and 2,000 feet of bluff line.

The County purchased the Eckert Family property in 2018. This 114-acre parcel is located in the Towns of Hudson and St. Joseph and includes 1,550 feet of shoreline and bluff line along the St. Croix River. The parcel is south and adjacent to the Richards property.

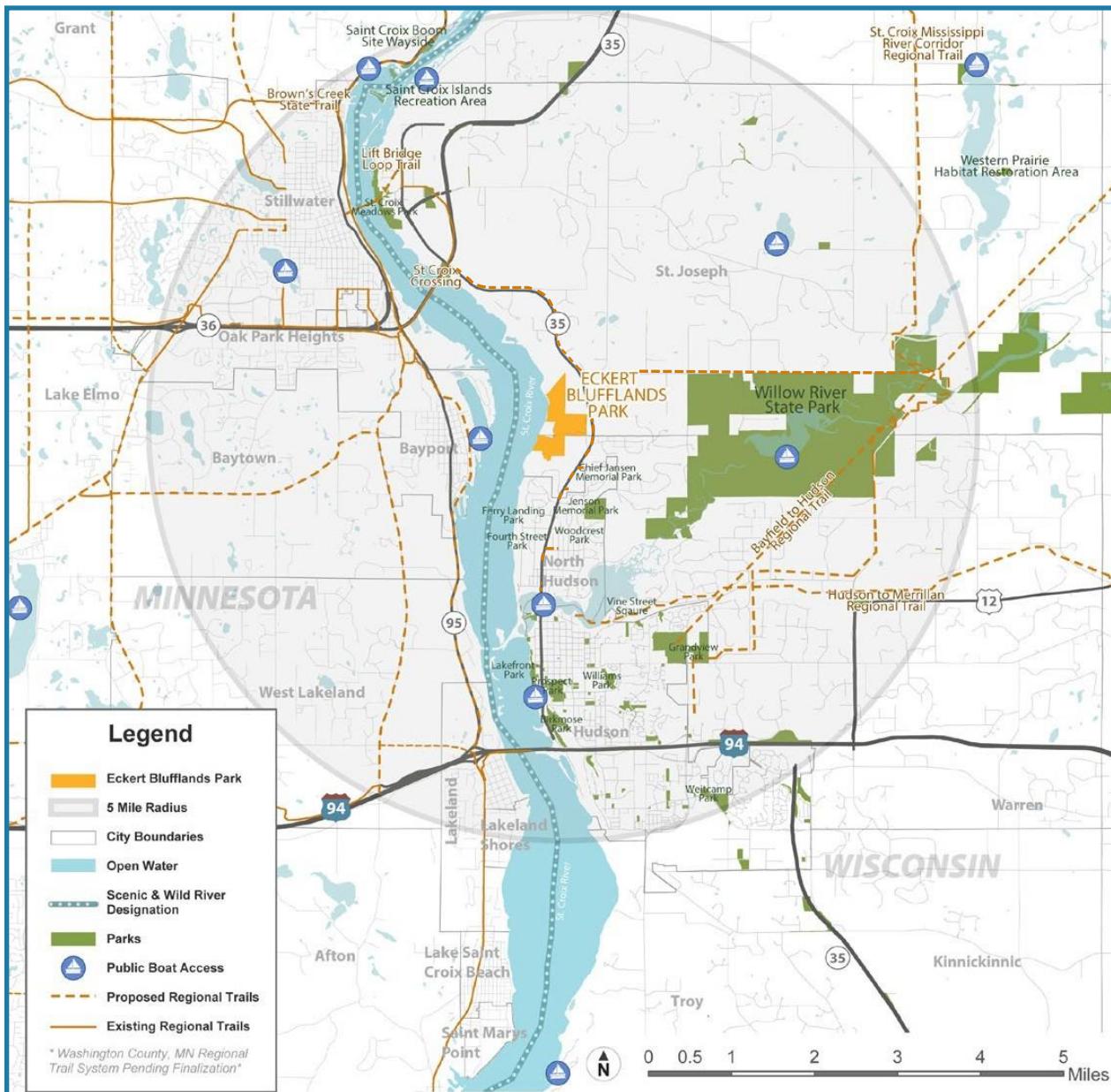
In 2020, the County obtained 1.99 acres of property from Gary Zappa. Combined, these acquisitions protect over 2,800 feet of shoreline and provide public access to nearly 170 acres of greenspace in the St. Croix Valley.



REGIONAL CONTEXT

Within a 5-mile radius of Eckert Blufflands Park, there are several recreation destinations to connect to in Wisconsin and across the river in Minnesota:

- Regional bike trail connections (St. Croix River Crossing Lift Bridge Loop Trail, Brown's Creek MN State Trail)
- Local trail connections (Highway #35 Off-Road Trail)
- St. Croix County Parks
- Willow River State Park
- St. Croix National Scenic Riverway
- City/Village parks and sidewalks in Hudson and North Hudson

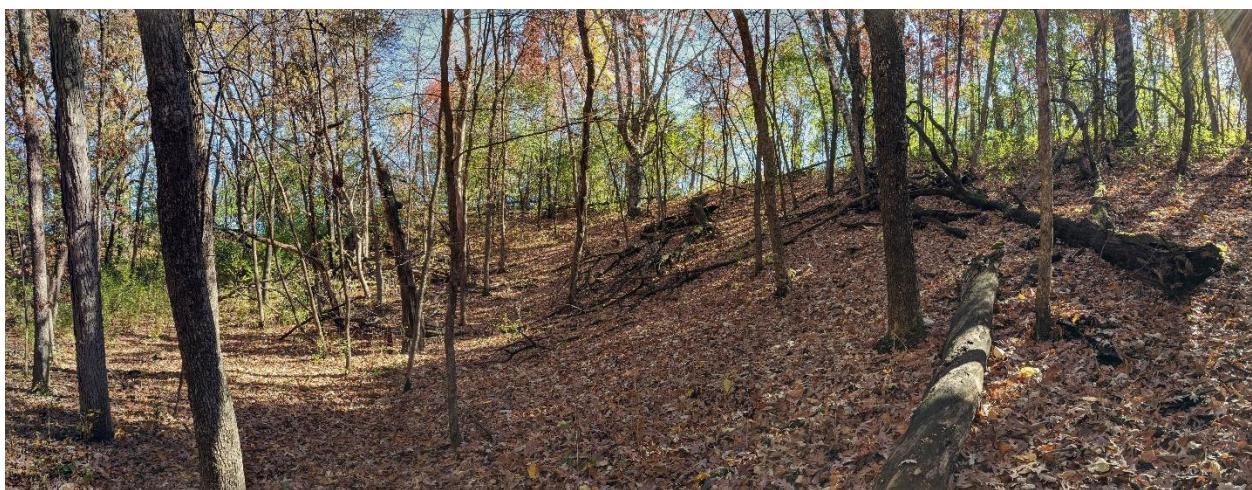


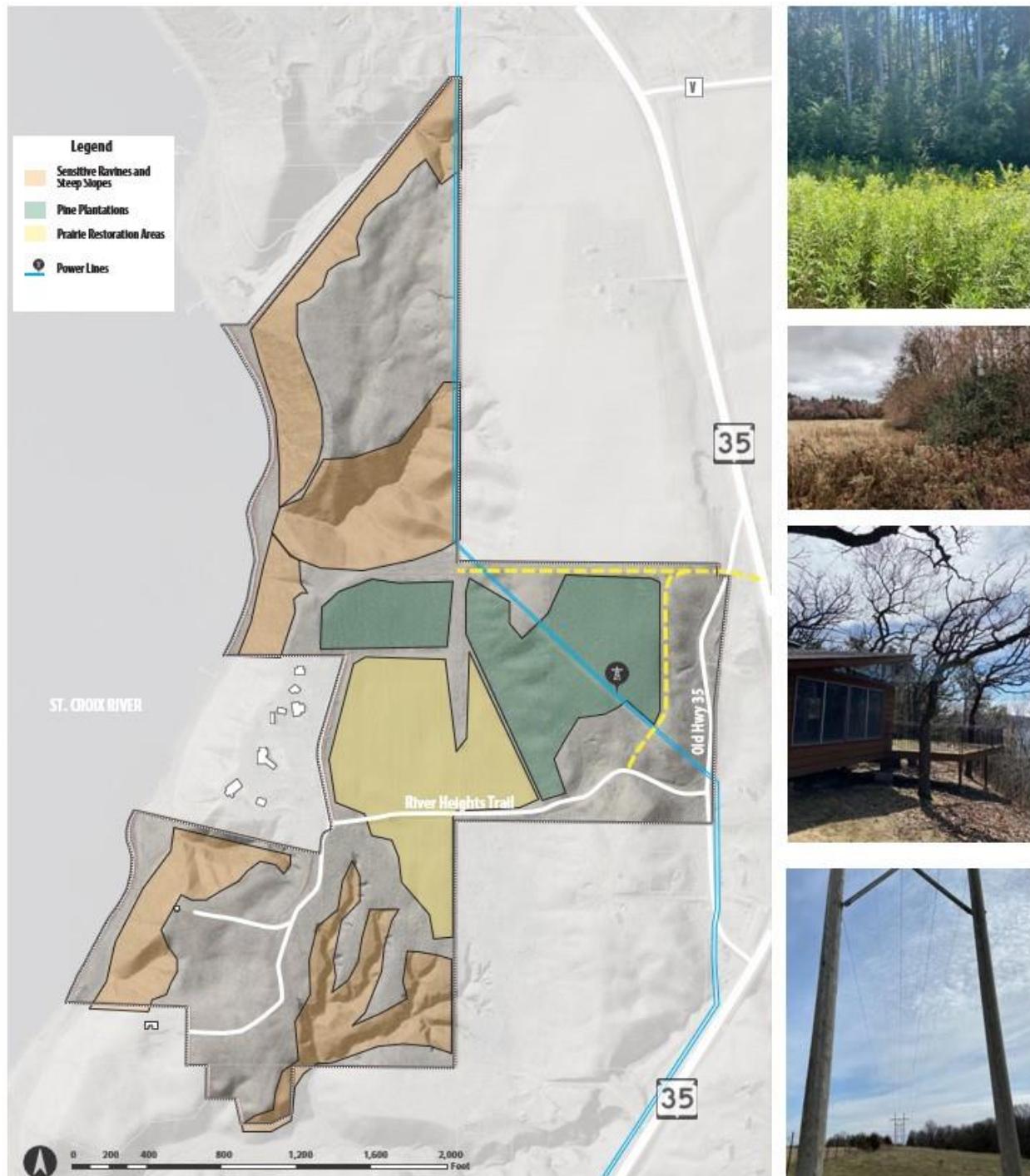
EXISTING SITE CONDITIONS

Eckert Blufflands Park is located on the St. Croix River, just north of Hudson, Wisconsin, and across the St. Croix River from Bayport, Minnesota. The park area covers approximately 170 acres between the St. Croix River and State Highway #35, contains steep bluffs and several ravines, and is adjacent to several private home sites and agricultural land.

The park's upland contains former agricultural fields that now exist as grassland areas. Dense tree stands exist throughout the upland, the ravines, and on the bluffs. A cabin formerly owned by the Eckert family is the only existing structure on the park site today. Several deep ravines cross the park descending to the St. Croix River. The shoreline provides spectacular views in all directions.

More detailed site characteristics are provided in the Natural Resource Section of the Plan.





PROJECTED PARK USERS

St. Croix County is among the fastest-growing counties in Wisconsin, which will lead to increased demand for recreational facilities and open spaces. As of 2023, the county's population was 96,763 (U.S. Census) and is projected to grow by 24% to reach 120,000 by 2040 (State of Wisconsin Dept. of Administration).

The Wisconsin State Comprehensive Outdoor Recreation Plan 2019-2023 (SCORP), created by the Wisconsin Department of Natural Resources (WDNR), surveyed Wisconsin residents relating to needed recreational opportunities (by County). Wisconsin counties are then grouped into regions within the SCORP. St. Croix County is within the Mississippi River Corridor Region. Recreational needs identified in this region are shown below:

Mississippi River Corridor Region

- Bicycling - bicycle touring/road riding and mountain biking/off-road biking
- Bird or wildlife watching
- Camping - developed and primitive
- Canoeing or kayaking
- Cross country skiing
- Dog walking
- Fishing
- Gather mushrooms, berries, etc.
- Hiking, walking, trail running, backpacking
- Hunting - big game
- Nature photography
- Participating in nature-based education programs
- Picnicking
- Snowshoeing
- Visiting a beach, beach walking



St. Croix County will offer all but camping and canoeing/kayaking activity usage at Eckert Blufflands Park.

The amended plan will initially provide approximately 80 parking stalls, with the capacity to add another 80 stalls in the future. Peak usage is anticipated during weekends in the spring, summer, and fall.

During peak weekends, the parking lots are expected to be 65% full, with an average of three people per vehicle and a minimum vehicle turnover of twice per day. This would result in approximately 312 visitors per day. Weekday visitation is expected to be lower. Visitor numbers are also projected to decline modestly during the winter and early spring seasons.

Vehicle trip estimates during peak use are approximately 208 trips per day. This figure will be lower on weekdays and significantly lower during off-season periods. For comparison purposes, one-single family home generates 10 vehicle trips per day, year-round.

These visitor estimates do not account for pedestrian or bicycle traffic accessing the park via the off-road trail from Highway 35.

(A vehicle trip is defined as one instance of a vehicle either leaving or returning to a location.)

SUMMARY OF PREVIOUS PLANNING

2018-2019 St. Croix County Park Resident Survey:

- Hiking trails were by far the most popular facility identified by the County survey for expansion and investment

2019-2023 St. Croix County Outdoor Recreation Plan:

- Outlined the history, geography and needs assessment for the Richards and Eckert properties (now known as Eckert Blufflands Park). The Outdoor Recreation Plan identified the need for a master planning process for the properties to identify potential uses and to include surveying and biological inventory

2021-2022 Eckert Blufflands Park Master Planning process

- Master planning process included significant public input and culminated in a master plan with a biological inventory adopted by the St. Croix County Board on February 1, 2022

2022-2025 St. Croix County Strategic Plan

- Natural Resource Objectives identified in the document include, "Improve accessibility to our County natural resources and recreation" and "Explore physical and educational activities for the people using our parks and trails"

PUBLIC ENGAGEMENT

Public engagement for this amended plan process included:

- 2024 – Various public meetings with the Town of Hudson, Town of St. Joseph and the St. Croix County Community Development Committee. Discussions with the Wisconsin Department of Transportation on the proposed reconfigured intersection for Old Highway #35/Highway #35
- December 17, 2024 – Public Open House at St. Croix County Government Center to review draft of the Amended Eckert Blufflands Park Master Plan (abutting property owners to the park property received an individual invitation)
- January 16, 2025 – St. Croix County Community Development Committee meeting. Review draft document and summary of comments received from December 2024 Open House
- February 18, 2025 – Public Open House to review draft of the Amended Eckert Blufflands Park Master Plan
- February 20, 2025 – Public Hearing conducted by the St. Croix County Community Development Committee to consider Amended Eckert Blufflands Park Master Plan

A summary of comments received at each open house and public meeting will be provided on Attachment A at the end of the Master Plan document.

DEVELOPMENT PLAN

This Development Plan serves as a guide for park development. The dimensions, scales on the Master Plan Map, and descriptions of improvements in this section are approximate and not exact.

Compared to the Master Plan adopted in 2022, this plan update focuses on nature based outdoor recreation activities. The amended plan eliminates camping activities that were proposed in the initial plan and relocates the main entrance to the park off the existing south leg of Old Highway #35 and River Heights Trail.

PARK PROGRAM REQUIREMENTS

Due to grant funding received by St. Croix County to purchase portions of the park property, the following program elements are required at Eckert Blufflands Park:

- Hiking
- Cross country skiing
- Fishing
- Bow and Gun Hunting
- Trapping



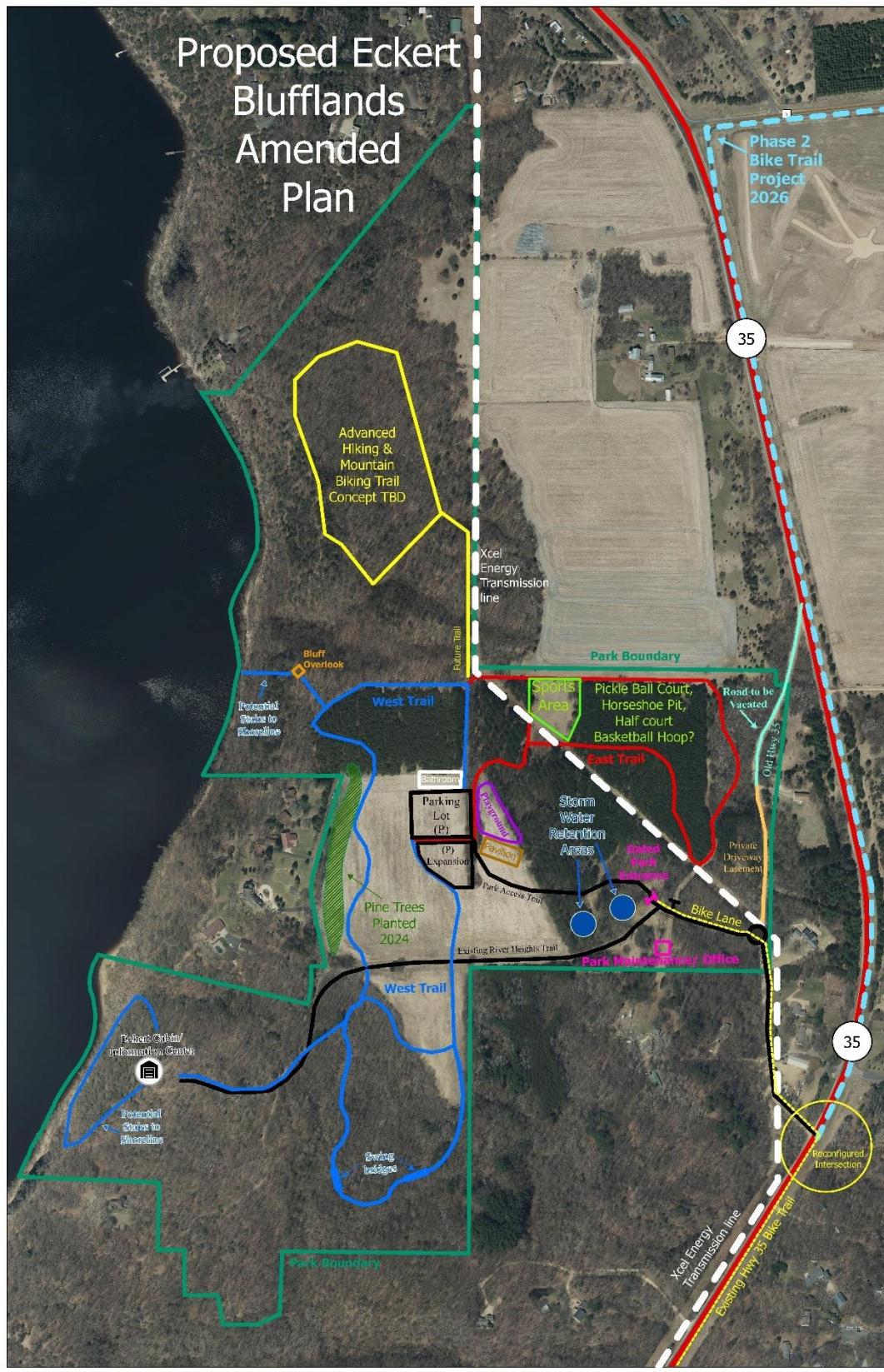
Playground



Picnic Shelter



River Overlook



ACCESS AND PARKING (VEHICULAR, BICYCLE, PEDESTRIAN)

Vehicular access to the park will be established through a reconfigured intersection at the south leg of Old Highway 35 and Highway 35. Old Highway 35 will be paved from this intersection to River Heights Trail, where a cul-de-sac will be constructed. The main park entrance will be situated approximately 500 feet west of the River Heights Trail and Old Highway 35 intersection and will consist of a driveway that will lead to a main parking area. River Heights Trail will be widened to 22 feet between Old Highway 35 and the main park driveway entrance. Access to inholding properties will remain unaffected.

North of River Heights Trail, Old Highway 35 will be vacated, with private driveway easements granted to property owners who currently access their properties via this section of the roadway. Signage will be installed along Old Highway 35 and River Heights Trail to clearly distinguish public park access from residential access.

Park access will branch off from River Heights Trail and be controlled by a gated entrance. A turnaround will be constructed near the front gate to allow vehicles to reverse direction when the park is closed.

A 900-foot-long paved driveway will extend northwest from the gated entrance to reach the main parking area. This will be a 22' wide driveway section with appropriate shoulders. It is anticipated that a number of storm water retention facilities will be built somewhere along the 900-foot driveway to control the rate of storm water run-off from the additional paved areas. The main parking lot will measure approximately 130 feet by 230 feet and provide 80 to 100 paved parking spaces. Adequate areas exist for a second phase of parking should it be warranted in the future.

Bicycle and pedestrian access to the park will be provided via the recently constructed off-road trail along Highway 35, which extends northward from Hudson and North Hudson. Although the trail runs along the east side of the highway near the park, a flashing beacon and designated crossing point, installed during Phase One of the trail project, will enable safe crossing to the west side of Highway 35. As part of the reconfigured intersection project, a bicycle lane will be added and marked, extending up to the park's main entrance.

In the future, the Highway 35 off-road trail will be extended northward to the Loop Trail Trailhead in Houlton. From Houlton, existing trails connect to Stillwater and the Regional Trail System of the Twin Cities metropolitan area.

PARK AMENITIES

The park's main activity area will be located near the main parking lot as indicated on the Master Plan Map. East of the parking lot, **playground** structures will be installed to engage and attract families. Nearby, **picnic tables** and a **picnic shelter** will be added to offer visitors a comfortable place to eat and shelter from the weather. To the north of the parking lot will be a **flush toilet bathroom** facility. **Bicycle rack** facilities will also be installed.

TRAILS AND ASSOCIATED IMPROVEMENTS

Extending northward and then east from the main parking area will be the **East Trail Loop**. This trail loop will be constructed of gravel and crusher fines, and range in width from 8 to 10 feet with the ability of upgrading to a bituminous surface in the future. A **designated “active area”** will be accessed off this loop. This active area may include, but not be limited to, pickle ball courts, horseshoe pits, half-court basketball court, and other activities. The easterly trail loop will extend through wooded areas in the northeast corner of the park.

Extending north and northwest from the main parking area will be the **West Trail Loop**. This trail will follow the edge of a tree line as it runs west to the St. Croix River. This trail loop will be at ADA-accessible grade, be constructed of gravel and crusher fines, and range in width from 8 to 10 feet with the ability to upgrade to a bituminous surface in the future. As the trail nears the bluff line of the St. Croix River, plans include the construction of an **overlook platform**, designed to highlight views offered by the 170-foot-high river bluffs across the St. Croix River Valley and a prime spot to bird watch. The plan also includes the construction of a **picnic shelter** in this area along with the **potential for the construction of stairs to access the shoreline below**.

At the northern end of the west trail loop, a trail connection is planned to extend into the northern third of the park property. This area features uneven terrain, including steep to very steep slopes and ravines. The trail in this section may be left as a dirt path or minimally improved with gravel or crusher fines in some areas. These trails will likely vary from 2-6 feet in width due to terrain. This area is intended to provide **opportunities for more challenging hiking and rugged biking experiences**.

The **West Trail Loop** will continue southward and run west of the main parking area and eventually cross River Heights Trail for approximately 350-400 feet before turning back to the north. Sitting benches will be spaced along the various trail sections.

Future trail projects will branch off this trail section south of River Heights Trail and are shown on the Master Plan Map. This loop trail will traverse wooded areas with ravines and include a number of swing bridges. A trail will then run west from this area toward the **Eckert Cabin**. This cabin, built as the Eckert family cabin in 1970 and included in the purchase of the Eckert property by the County in 2018, has the potential to serve as an information center for the park. A section of trail is proposed from the Eckert Cabin down to the shoreline of the St. Croix River. Where park boundaries abut private and inholding properties along the shore of the St. Croix River, “Private Property” signs will be installed.

COOPERATION WITH GOVERNMENTAL AGENCIES

St. Croix County will continue to work with the Town of Hudson and Town of St. Joseph relating to the planning and development of the park as the park boundaries lie in both jurisdictions. Portions of the park property area are also located within the Lower St. Croix Riverway Overlay District and are subject to development standards and regulations of these provisions. St. Croix County will be working closely with the Wisconsin Department of Transportation in the design, permitting and construction of the reconfigured intersection at Old Highway 35 and Highway 35.

MAINTENANCE FACILITY

An approximate 40' x 60' maintenance shed for park vehicles and equipment is proposed south of River Heights Trail near the entrance to the park. The building would be placed so as to minimize views from River Heights Trail. The building would also include space for office and staff facilities.

LIGHTING

Park lighting will be designed with a focus on security while minimizing light pollution. Lighting will be installed only in areas where it is necessary for safety and security, such as near the main parking lot, bathroom facilities and maintenance building. Efforts will be made to use energy-efficient fixtures with downward-facing shields to limit light spill and prevent unnecessary illumination of the entire property, preserving the park's natural setting and surrounding environment.

XCEL ENERGY EASEMENT

Xcel Energy has been granted easements that allow for an electrical transmission line that traverses the property. This permits Xcel Energy to be on the property to maintain or rebuild the line as needed. While there is not a formal list of activities that are not allowed within the easement area, any plans for work within the easement should consult Xcel Energy Engineering for review to ensure the proposed work does not impact the utility lines. Key concerns include protection of the utility poles and ensuring adequate clearances between the conductors are maintained.

PARK PROPERTY RESTRICTION

Currently, the southernmost 1.99 acres of the park property are limited to single-family residential use through the Starr Wood Plat Covenants and Restrictions, executed by the Starrwood Homeowners Association, Inc. The County may explore options to remove those restrictions which were placed on the property after the County negotiated the purchase and shortly before closing on the property if any future park development is intended in this area.

INTERPRETIVE PLAN

The Eckert Cabin will serve as an information center for the park. This may include the ability to provide historic facts relating to the property along with information on park activities, site geology, biology, St. Croix River, and other natural resources.

NATURAL RESOURCES PLAN

OVERVIEW

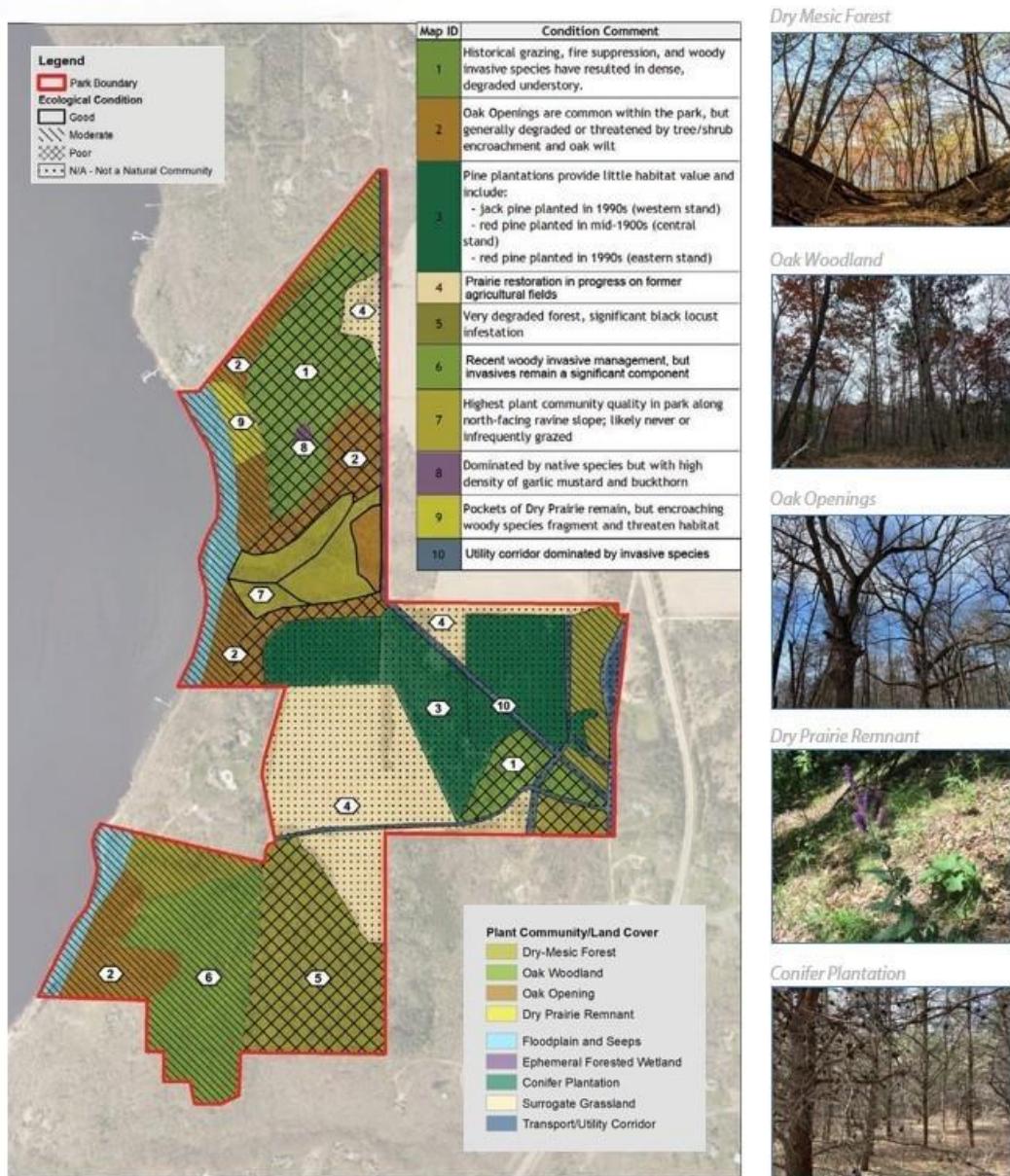
Site visits were conducted by Emmons & Olivier Resources, Inc. (consultants) at Eckert Blufflands Park in the spring and summer of 2020 to evaluate the land's natural resources. Proper

stewardship of the variety of habitat types found in the park will make Eckert Blufflands a fascinating place to explore.

While much of the uplands were formerly grazed, farmed, or planted for timber, the park's steep forested ravines and bluffs have limited human disturbance in some areas, preserving plant communities in moderate to good ecological condition.

The highest quality native plant community on the site is a dry-mesic forest located on the side slopes of the major ravine in the north/central part of the park. This area was likely never grazed and has a sensitive forest floor.

The lowest quality natural communities are the surrogate grasslands (former crop fields) and pine plantations, along with some of the forested areas that have been degraded by invasive species.



LONG-TERM NATURAL RESOURCE MANAGEMENT BEST PRACTICES

Conservation and ecosystem management strategies will be used as Best Management Practices (BMP's) at Eckert Blufflands. This will include implementation of sustainable land use activities/practices and vegetation management. Every year staff will monitor the property for erosion problems and try to enhance native plant communities.

INVASIVE MANAGEMENT APPROACH

The site's natural resources guided the design of the site, and management of its natural resources is an integral part of providing a quality visitor experience and supporting healthy habitat for wildlife. Because management of a park this size can be resource intensive, it is recommended that efforts be prioritized in the following ways:

- The primary focus should be on preserving the integrity of the remaining native land cover types by eliminating or reducing populations of garlic mustard, buckthorn, barberry, and black locust within the areas listed as good quality
- Once small, outlying populations of invasives are well managed in the high-quality areas, work managing invasive species within the moderate quality native plant communities should begin
- Infestations that abut already managed and good quality areas should be prioritized, to maintain the status of work that has already been accomplished
- Habitat areas that exist in poor quality and altered/non-nativeland cover types, like the black locust dominated woodland on the south and the pine plantations, are the lowest priority. Eliminating invasives where they are dominant and well- established requires a significant effort. Preventing spread of invasive populations to adjacent, higher quality habitats is generally a more reasonable approach

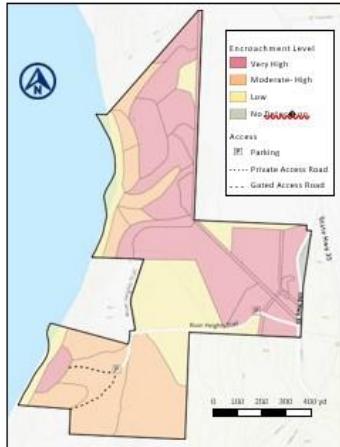
Buckthorn is pervasive throughout the park property, except in the agricultural fields and shoreline areas. Black locust dominates the dry-mesic forest south of the agricultural fields and is spreading west into the oak woodland. It's also taking hold in the old field north of the conifer plantation.

Garlic mustard can be found throughout virtually all the woodland areas, except the small patch of dry-mesic forest in the far north of the park. Other problematic invasives include Japanese hedge parsley, Japanese barberry, and leafy spurge (which dominates the Xcel Energy transmission line corridor).

Black Locust *Robinia pseudoacacia*
Eckert-Richards Blufflands, St. Croix County, Wisconsin
November 2019



Common Buckthorn *Rhamnus Frangula*
Eckert-Richards Blufflands, St. Croix County, Wisconsin
November 2019



Garlic Mustard *Alliaria officinata*
Eckert-Richards Blufflands, St. Croix County, Wisconsin
November 2019



Japanese Hedge Parsley *Torilis japonica*
Eckert-Richards Blufflands, St. Croix County, Wisconsin
November 2019



Japanese Barberry *Berberis thunbergii*
Eckert-Richards Blufflands, St. Croix County, Wisconsin
November 2019



Leafy Spurge *Euphorbia virgata*
Eckert-Richards Blufflands, St. Croix County, Wisconsin
November 2019



OTHER NATURAL RESOURCE RECOMMENDATIONS

- Field locate all trails and utilize sustainable trail design principles in the construction of the park's natural surface trails, especially where they traverse sensitive slopes and high-quality areas
- Consider opportunities to educate the public on ways to prevent invasive species from spreading
- Consider organizing interested volunteer groups for invasive species monitoring and removal efforts



Numbers correspond to the map on the next page.

Inventory and Analysis of Natural Resources



- 1 Sensitive ravine landscape: Higher quality woodland with fewer invasive species; Incredibly sensitive soils/slopes
- 2 Actively eroding ravine warrants stabilization
- 3 Rare species known to inhabit shoreline - navigate conflicts with program
- 4 Higher quality woodland with fewer invasive species - Rolling topo
- 5 Consider off-site ravines as part of drainage and erosion control issues
- 6 Pine plantation--needs forest management
- 7 Interesting ephemeral landlocked wetland
- 8 Ravines contain invasive species and dumping; Black Locust dominate woodland
- 9 Lead batteries observed in this ravine
- 10 Open corridor / old field road
- 11 Agriculture fields--Future prairie restoration
- 12 Mixed Forest / Woodland--rolling terrain

- Opening (shoreline, ag. fields, grassland)
- Bluffs/Steep Slopes
- Moderate-High Quality Woodland
- Low Quality Woodland (invasives)
- Off-site Ravines
- Mixed Forest / Woodland
- Pine Plantation



COST ESTIMATES

St. Croix County Community Development will continue to actively pursue grant and community partnership opportunities for park development infrastructure.

Project Items 1 though 8 – Initial Phase (2025-2026)	Estimated Cost
1. Reconfigured intersection of Old Highway 35 and Highway 35 with bituminous upgrade up to Old Highway 35/River Heights Trail intersection (includes striped bicycle lane)	
2. Vacate portion of Old Highway 35 north of River Heights Trail and establish private driveway easement to northernmost home on Old Highway 35	
3. Establish bituminous parking lot area and access drive to parking lot area off River Heights Trail – approxiamte area of parking lot (130' x 230')	
4. Establish gated access to park area and turn-around facility for vehicles to reverse direction when park is closed	
5. Install signage to delineate separate park access and access for residences	
6. Establsih storm water retention ponds along park access drive	
7. Layout and clear East Trail (if funding allows) – approximately 3,300 feet	
8. Establish West Trail (crusher fines and gravel surface) generally to the area of River Heights Trail – approximately 4,000 feet	\$1,500,000
9. Flush Toilet Facilities, Electric, and Well	\$325,000
10. Playground and sitting benches	\$250,000
11. Picnic Shelter and Picnic Tables	\$125,000
12. Overlook to river, stairs to river, and picnic shelter	\$200,000
13. West Trail south of River Heights Trail and westward to Eckert Cabin and river shoreline - includes two (2) swing bridges and set of stairs near shoreline. Approx. 4,400 feet of trail. Includes property line signage	
14. East Trail signage, benches, and trail surface improvements	\$350,000
15. Active Sports area (northeast of main parking area)	\$150,000
16. Challenging terrain biking and hiking trails in north 1/3 of park property (with assistance of local organizations)	To be Determined
17. Maintenance Building Facility and related parking area	\$700,000
ESTIMATED PARK IMPROVEMENT TOTAL	\$3,600,000

APPENDIX A – SUMMARY OF PUBLIC COMMENTS

December 17, 2024 Open House:

1. Access consideration for narrow strip of land owned by Randy Wimer
2. Eckert Blufflands Park Plan much better now
3. Very strong objection to south entrance to Old Highway #35. Honor the original 2022 Master plan and keep it on the north side to avoid sending all visitors to the houses on Old Highway #35

January 16, 2025 Community Development Committee meeting:

1. Adjacent property owner raised issues/concerns with switching access to the park by utilizing Old Highway #35 and the impact of park traffic for this area, concern with the pedestrian crossing on Highway #35 given current traffic speeds, and hunting concerns and signage for the park boundary

February 18, 2025 Open House:

1. No comments

February 20, 2025 Public Hearing with the St. Croix County Community Development Committee:

1. Objection to park access off of Old Highway #35, Old Highway #35 needs to be built to town standards, verify emergency response access, concern with property line fence that was removed along park boundary, concern of park users straying onto private property and concerns with hunting buffer from proposed structures in the park