

# MILWAUKEE'S CENTRAL PARK: LAND & WATER

A VISION PAPER BROUGHT TO YOU BY:



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Looking south & east from Locust Court (the tower on Locust Street)  
Photo Kimberly Gleffe

## VISION

Create a central park along the Milwaukee River upstream of the North Avenue footbridge to Silver Spring Drive.

Preserve the wild aspect of the natural area while improving the habitat.

Improve water quality.

Restore native plant species while removing non-native invasive plants.

Improve public access to this urban natural resource.

## VIEW

Establish by municipal zoning a "viewshed" in the river valley that regulates new development on the river's edge to control development on the slopes or valley perimeter that would visually intrude in this natural landscape.

## VALLEY

Your valley. The land along the Milwaukee River in this area is mostly in public ownership. Milwaukee is now developing a North East Side plan to guide future development. Now is the time for residents to express their desires for the future of the valley.

## Imagine... Milwaukee's Central Park

You walk along the Milwaukee River on a recreational path winding six or so river miles from the city limits at Silver Spring Drive to the harbor at Lake Michigan; a soft pedestrian trail uniting suburban Glendale and Shorewood to their Milwaukee neighbors. This river path then zigzags through Riverwest, along Brewers Hill and the Beer Line B, past Park East through downtown and the Third Ward to the lake front. The cool river water bubbles over the rocks through a protected park bringing our neighborhoods and communities together.

Sheltered above by silver maple, cottonwoods and black willow, you cannot see or hear the activity of the densely developed neighborhoods nearby. What you notice instead are the deep blue spikes of blue vervain against the delicate lavender joe pye weed growing along the riverbanks.

Pedestrian bridges unite east and west at North Avenue and at Locust Street, creating a series of loops for runners, hikers, dog-walkers, and commuters. This path is net worked to the Oakleaf Bike Trail and the Milwaukee Urban Water Trail at multiple sites. Landscaped access points that are handicap accessible link the river to urban gardens, parks and city sites.

Finally you reach the Riverwalk District where views of downtown unfold, a contrast to the upstream wooded stretch. Here you find public access to retail, entertainment, and dining.

You are part of a Milwaukee celebrating its sense of place; a place where fresh water is central to its identity.

Imagine  
This path meanders alongside anglers enjoying the improved water quality and fish habitat, canoeists and kayakers exploring the natural beauty around the fast flowing water. You see picnickers along the banks and bikers pausing from an afternoon ride.

School children at Riverside Park are taking river samples and delighting in amphibian discoveries. At various sites citizen scientists are monitoring water quality.

Increased public access has made the river once

again a safe social and recreational gathering place. The greenway restores the river as nature's gathering place too. This urban corridor is home to the Butler's garter snake (a State protected species), the red fox, and white tailed deer. Overhead a Cooper's hawk flies away with a humble vole. A spawning salmon jumps below while migratory birds follow the waterway on a longer commute. You are discovering a shifting natural landscape in the heart of Milwaukee.

Imagine

This corridor unites the river's rich working past with its economic, recreational, and sustainable present. Historical markers note former boathouses, tanneries, swimming schools, and resorts with distinctive signage and corridor emblems.

Still home to Wisconsin Paperboard and other industries, the river maintains its working character through environmental improvements and management. The city has helped industrial sites employ storm water best-management practices and ensured attractive riverfront facades and landscaped setbacks. Residential property values have increased and nearby retail districts are booming as people come to enjoy this lively corridor.

The river corridor is the backbone for our city's green infrastructure as we move into the 21st century. Just as our sewers, roads, and buildings enliven modern life and commerce, we now see that green parks, gardens, and waterways must equally sustain our urban life.

We nurture this urban wilderness and its connection to our spirit. It is a magnificent place of beauty and refuge in the heart of Milwaukee.

From Imagination to Reality

We can imagine our Milwaukee River always remaining like this. Making our imaginings come true and stay true into the future is going to take planning and work.

This paper offers ideas on how we can make our imaginings come true.



Students of all ages discover the ecology of our river with help from the Urban Ecology Center. Photo U.E.C



Washington High School students find summer employment improving the river valley. Photo by R.R.F.

# Our River Our Flora & Fauna Our Valley

## Looking Around

Let's get our bearings. If you stand on the North Avenue Bridge that crosses the Milwaukee River and look south, you will see that the river, which has been running predominantly north and south, curves to the west. A pedestrian footbridge crosses the river several hundred feet downstream.

From there, the river flows west past a highly developed area with large buildings and condominiums, some newly built, some in remodeled factories. There are a few commercial spaces interspersed.

The river then turns south flowing through downtown Milwaukee and enters the harbor and Lake Michigan after traveling under the Hoan Bridge and past Jones Island.

If you walk across North Avenue and stand on the north side of the bridge and look upstream, you'll see that much of the valley is steep and wooded.

The Milwaukee River Valley north of the footbridge near North Avenue up to Silver Spring Drive is the area of primary focus for this paper.

## Looking Back



The River is beautiful in all seasons



Turtles aren't the only reptiles found in the river valley. Several species of snakes live on the grassy wetland and open upland. The Butler garter snake, a threatened species protected by state law, makes its home in over 30 acres of the river valley between North Avenue and Capitol Drive. Photo F.M.R.

The section near the North Avenue Bridge was intensely used for commercial and recreational use into the 20<sup>th</sup> century. Ships came up the river from the lake and off-loaded coal into piles near Humboldt Avenue. The Beer Line railroad, the second oldest rail line in Wisconsin, ran along the river here. It was functioning as a conduit of goods until the mid 1980s, when one of its major customers, Schlitz Brewery, ceased operations.

Some people doing development projects in neighboring areas thought of the valley as a nice deep dumping hole in the landscape. As new foundations were dug for homes and factories, it was not unusual for the soil and rock from the work to be dumped into the river valley. In fact, you still can see evidence of people using the valley as a dump site for waste concrete and household goods.

Above the old dam which used to span the river near North Avenue, boats of a different sort were used. Pleasure steamers carried passengers to beer gardens upstream. Canoeists launched their boats in Riverside Park on the east bank. Swimmers dove into the dam pond at Gordon Park and at other swimming schools that bordered the river shoreline. In winter ice skaters came down to the river and ski jumpers landed on the snow and ice near Gordon Park.

In the late 19<sup>th</sup> and early 20<sup>th</sup> centuries, much of the shoreline south of Capitol Drive was bare of trees. Gordon and Riverside Parks were wooded along the shore. These parks were

part of an extended plan by Lake Park designer Frederick Law Olmsted and Charles B. Whitnall. Known as the father of our park system, Whitnall referred to open areas along the river as the "lungs of the city." He lived along the river and his first wife was named Gordon, whose family homestead was donated to the park district.

These were places where the common man could breathe free and recreate. Think of all those homes burning coal for fuel as well as the smell that accompanied the use of horses as the main transportation of goods within the city. Fresh air was important. The legacy of the parks system, first laid out by early city planners, has kept much of the river valley in public ownership.

## Looking Away

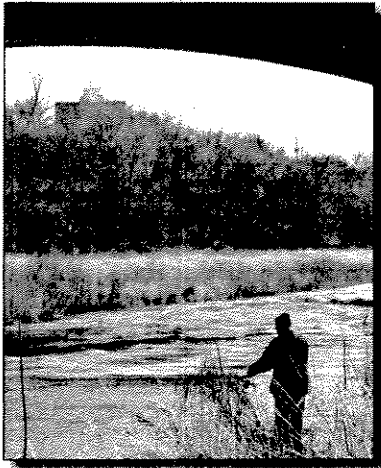
Attitudes toward the river valley changed as attention turned away from this section of the river. Undoubtedly the main reason this happened was the decline of water quality in the river, due to a number of factors.

Growth in the city and metro areas resulted in increased runoff from streets and construction sites. A majority of the sediment loading - the material that makes the water brown - comes from construction sites. This runoff also causes algal growth which when it dies and decays lowers the amount of dissolved oxygen in the water, which destroys the habitat for fish and the myriad of other creatures large and small that use the river as their lifeline.

Growing population also resulted in increased pressure on sewers and dumping of human and street waste directly into the river. Much has been done to mitigate these water pollution issues, but the attitude toward the river as a wasteland

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Left to Right:  
Fishermen have found the river again.  
The DNR is stocking the river with the native Sturgeon and as well as Walleye.  
Native white oak trees can be found along both sides of the river.

photos by Vince Bushell

but the attitude toward the river as a wasteland continues in many people's minds.

Over the years, all uses of the river declined. People stopped swimming in the river. Soon they stopped boating and ice-skating. The industrial uses declined due to changing economies. Shipping stopped using the river. The railroad shut down.

### Look Again

One day we turned around and the river valley near North Avenue was an abandoned back yard. Riverside Park was a river park in name only, as maintenance was discontinued and access to the western section of the park and river valley was made more difficult. The valley on both sides of the river reverted to a wild state.

This came to be seen as an asset as the Urban Ecology Center was founded and used its location along the river to create a living lab for members and students. Citizens had an opportunity to enjoy the natural area. It was a place to walk dogs, watch birds, catch fish, ride a bike, go for a hike, or just sit and enjoy the solitude.

The dam at North Avenue was removed in 1997, revealing mud flats that soon began supporting vegetation and pioneer tree species. This wild state came to be seen as a valued connection between nature and the city. Water quality began to improve, particularly after the removal of the dam and the sewerage district's deep tunnel lowered the incidence of overflows into the river.

The fish habitat improved with the water quality. A rock reef was installed below North Avenue as a breeding area last summer. The Wisconsin Department of Natural Resources (DNR) has been working to establish a reproducing fishery for native species such as walleye and sturgeon. Lake game species such as salmon and steelhead trout are now commonly caught by fishermen.

### Look Out for Invaders!

This return to a wild state was not an ideal situation for vegetation. Original, native species were not the ones that grew up most readily on the disturbed land. Opportunistic plant species invaded the area with vigor. Chief among the invaders are garlic mustard in both the woods and the flats and reed canary grass over the flats. Buckthorn is a woody shrub to small tree that is crowding out native tree species.

It might not be evident to the untrained eye, but these species are rampant and threaten native wildflowers and a diverse landscape that supports a broad base of native birds and other animals.

With the new century we have seen a new interest in the Milwaukee River valley as a place to live, work and play. The value of our river has been rediscovered, if not by all, certainly by developers. As awareness of this resource increases, so does a constituency for preservation of the swath of water and green that could come to be seen as Milwaukee's "central park," a place where man and

***If we want a place in the heart of Milwaukee where we can go be part of the natural world, where the city fades from view, we need to plan for future development that respects that natural world.***

nature come together just three short miles from downtown.

There are many groups and individuals who have played a role in this revival. Developers have made living on the river fashionable. The city has encouraged investment along the river.

### Looking Ahead

With the plan set forward in this paper (see page 8), the Milwaukee River Work Group is encouraging investment along the river that rivals the vision of other great cities that have set aside land for the common good. Land that will add value to all adjacent lands for generations to come.

The Milwaukee River Work Group is made up of the Friends of Milwaukee's Rivers, River Revitalization Foundation and the Urban Ecology Center. These three groups, working in association with neighborhood groups, the City of Milwaukee, the Wisconsin Department of Natural Resources DNR, Rivers and Trails Program of the National Park Service, Milwaukee County Parks Department and others are developing a vision for the future of this valley that incorporates their various missions to educate about, preserve, improve, and provide public access to the Milwaukee River valley.

If we want a place in the heart of Milwaukee where we can go be part of the natural world,

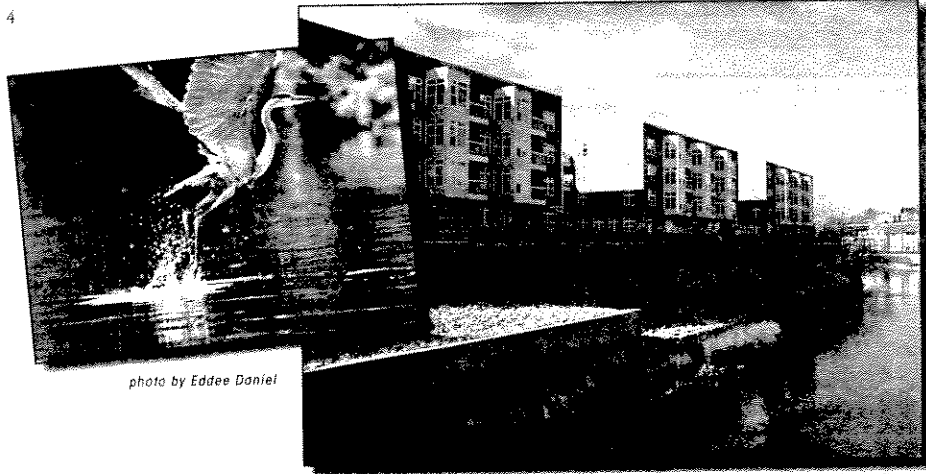
where we the city fades from view, we need to plan for future development that respects that natural world. We are proposing such a plan.

### About the Groups:

**Friends of Milwaukee's Rivers (FMR)** is designated as Milwaukee's "Riverkeeper." This designation recognizes their role in protecting our water quality by working to stop pollution from entering our public waters from industrial, agricultural, construction, and municipal sources. They have developed a Milwaukee Urban Water Trail Map that encourages use of the river by canoeists and kayakers. Their map shows where to launch and take out along our three rivers. Signage has been placed along the shore to mark these points. Water quality monitoring, advocacy and promoting public awareness of water issues form a major part of their work.

**River Revitalization Foundation (RRF)** is our urban river land trust. Their goal is to protect the land adjacent to the river and improve public access to this resource. In 2006 the East Bank Trail opened between Riverside Park and the footbridge at Caesar's Park. This path greatly improves access to the river valley. On the west bank a section of the Beer Line rail corridor is owned by the foundation, and restoration of the woodland has begun. An ADA (Americans with Disabilities Act) accessible trail will be built providing another mile of trail and access to the east bank. The footbridge built by the City of Milwaukee over the old dam foundation at Caesar's park is a significant link in this trail system and represents a physical and cultural bridge between neighborhoods.

**The Urban Ecology Center (UEC)** is a national leader in providing access to the natural environment. They offer hands-on educational experiences in the natural world to young and old alike in the heart of a major metropolitan area. Their new center sits near the river and is an educational tool in itself, as it exhibits so many forms of green construction and energy saving infrastructure integrated into the building. The river valley is their main point of observation of the natural world. They offer many programs that bring visitors closer to nature, from the stars and planets in the night sky to the microscopic creatures living in the sediment of the river. The UEC provides appreciation of our local ecology and insight into the impact of our activities on the world at large.



# Milwaukee River at Risk

Have you ever gone on a hike or a bike ride along the Milwaukee River between the former North Avenue Dam and Silver Spring Avenue?

Have you ever put your canoe or kayak into the water for a slow paddle downstream?

Do you run or walk your dog alongside the river every day?

Do you drink water out of the tap?

If you answered "yes" to any of those questions, you should care about the Milwaukee River, which along with Lake Michigan, is one of our city's most prized natural resources.

The Milwaukee River offers a peaceful escape and a connection to nature in sharp contrast to the urban environment. The natural areas along the Milwaukee River help filter urban pollutants from entering our surface waters, provide migratory pathways for wildlife, and minimize the effects of flooding on downtown Milwaukee.

## An Unprotected Treasure

Whether you are a regular recreational user of this river corridor or a resident who just enjoys looking at the river as you drive over one of our many bridges, the value of the Milwaukee River to our local economy, our environment, and our quality of life cannot be overstated. Many people assume that this river corridor is legally protected as a "state park," "county parkway," or "environmental corridor." The truth is that this gem within the City of Milwaukee is largely without any legal protections and vulnerable to constant threat of destruction, development, and degradation.

If this seems a bit alarmist to you, I urge you to put down this paper and go for a walk along the Milwaukee River downstream of North Avenue. Milwaukee exists largely because of the access that our rivers provided for shipping, trade, and commerce. Our urban riverfronts provide a connection to that past, even as warehouses transition to condominiums and trading posts to parks.

However, the river corridor upstream from downtown Milwaukee that runs through present-day Riverwest, East Side, Glendale and Shorewood

is under extreme development pressure as the last few riverfront parcels downtown are being slowly redeveloped.

In addition, landowners currently have the right to cut down trees and vegetation from the top of the river bluff down to the river bank for no other reason than to improve their view. Such an incident in Shorewood last year spurred that municipality to create a shoreland protection ordinance to ensure that this couldn't happen again.

This is not to say that all riverfront development is a bad thing. In fact, there are positive reasons to have more residents living near the rivers - in short, more eyes and ears mean more people watching out for the river and its protection. Future riverfront development must occur in a sustainable fashion that respects the river valley.

guidance on building set-backs from the water, minimum lot sizes, building heights to protect scenic beauty, or vegetation removal.

Lack of design guidelines and uniform standards for riverfront development create an uneven playing field for developers and threaten this important natural resource. The river corridor exists in its current natural "green" state due to large expanses of Milwaukee County Parkland and the benevolence and good stewardship of private landowners residing in between the parks.

## What About County Parkland?

County Parkland you may say? Surely that is protected?

Thankfully, our County Parks are currently in well intentioned hands. However, Milwaukee County Government ultimately has jurisdiction over these properties, and they are broke.

If you think that the County would never sell off parkland, you may want to talk to Southside residents who recently thwarted the sell-off of Bender Park for the purposes of development. In addition, our County Parkland continues to be degraded by "benign neglect" - lack of funds to maintain the

health of the forests, trails, or rivers, or even to keep the park rest rooms open.

## DNR Protection?

What about State shoreland protection rules? Surely the Department of Natural Resources (DNR) must protect these riverbanks you ask?

Wrong again. While Wisconsin does have rules that regulate shoreland development in the form of NRI15, these rules are not applicable to Milwaukee County or many other areas that were already incorporated when the rules came into effect in 1968.

The DNR (as well as several other federal agencies) does have jurisdiction over some aspects of development that directly alter rivers and riverbanks such as dredging, filling, and stream bank alterations, as well as developments

*...this gem within the City of Milwaukee is largely without any legal protections and vulnerable to constant threat of destruction, development, and degradation.*

## A Patchwork Quilt

Recognizing the beauty and importance of the natural river corridor upstream of North Avenue, many City plans have suggested that this area be maintained in a natural state and that access be provided in the form of trails to enhance the quality of life for Milwaukee residents and increase value of surrounding neighborhoods.

While the City of Milwaukee created an overlay district to provide for creation of the RiverWalk (essentially a special zoning area that provides additional design guidelines and review for developments within 50 feet of the river from North Avenue downstream to Lake Michigan), nothing was ever done to officially protect the natural river corridor upstream of North Avenue. Current Milwaukee zoning for the river corridor from North Avenue to Silver Spring looks like a patchwork quilt of residential, industrial, business district and park uses. Regulations provide no

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Nothing like a summer day on the river.  
photo by Eddoe Daniel

**Creation of a special overlay district to protect these natural areas from future development and degradation benefits current homeowners along the river as well as future development.**

affecting floodplains. However, these powers do not prevent development on or destruction of the river corridor itself or its habitat.

**Comprehensive Planning – Too Slow?**

The City is in the midst of creating their Northeast Side Comprehensive Plan, which will look at the river as one small part of overall city

planning. This planning effort is expected to take two years, and will involve local residents in what they want to see not only along the river, but in the community.

Given the changes in land ownership that are rapidly occurring along this corridor, we cannot wait this long for legal river protection of this corridor.

**A Simple Solution**

The solution is simple. Let's keep what's green, green. It just makes sense.

Given the potential for future flooding (due to upstream development), protected park land is the

highest and best use for this riverfront property. There are also many studies that show that land values increase when adjacent to protected natural areas, and that parks provide important "quality of life" services that attract employers and employees.

Creation of a special overlay district to protect these natural areas from future development and degradation benefits current homeowners along the river as well as future development. This overlay district consists entirely of natural areas (mostly flood plains and steep river bluffs) at the present time, and would not affect any existing structures.



*"There is a time for everything, and a season for every activity under heaven," Ecclesiastes*  
Everything in its place, a place for riverfront development, a place for nature.

**Protecting the "Viewshed"**

The Milwaukee River Work Group also proposes the creation of a small "buffer" area adjacent to the top of the "green" river bluff, which would create a special zoning district where design guidelines would have to be adhered to for NEW, multi-lot development (existing uses and structures "grandfathered").

This would not affect homeowners of single family homes or duplexes, and would just come into effect when multiple lots are consolidated or old industrial properties are being redeveloped in the future.

The design guidelines would address building heights adjacent to the river, set-back of buildings from the bluff edge, vegetative screening requirements, and other components.

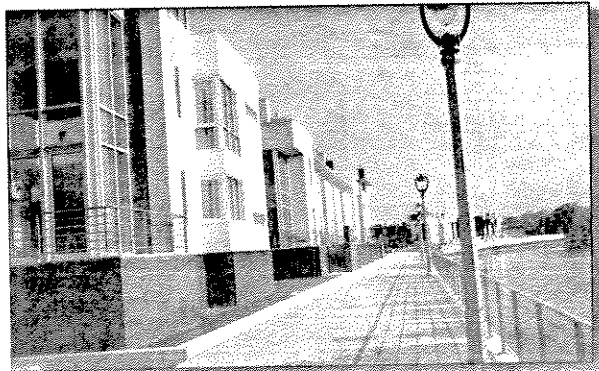
The overall goal of this overlay district would be to protect the "natural feel" of this river corridor and buffer the effects of urban development on the "scenic viewshed" from the level of the river.

Many residents and visitors of Milwaukee alike marvel at the beauty of our river corridor. We don't need to go to northern Wisconsin to have a nice hike or a nice paddle down the river, but can enjoy the "wilderness" in our own backyard – what a tremendous community asset!

However, this experience is substantially degraded when adjacent buildings encroach not only physically but visually into the river corridor.

Good development and re-development can occur while protecting this "urban wilderness" experience. Other cities like Chicago have instilled river corridor design guidelines to protect these assets, and other cities such as Denver and San Antonio are even creating (at great expense) natural river corridors where they never previously existed.

Milwaukee needs to embrace our river resources, and ensure that they are protected for current and future generations.



# Silver Spring Drive

at the top edge of map

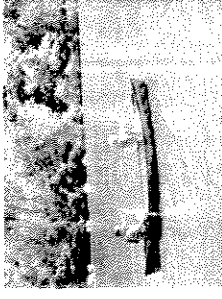
# Lake Michigan

touching shorewood



Scouting the river for organisms

# Hampton Avenue



Canoeing can be enjoyed in this entire stretch of the river.

# Capitol Drive

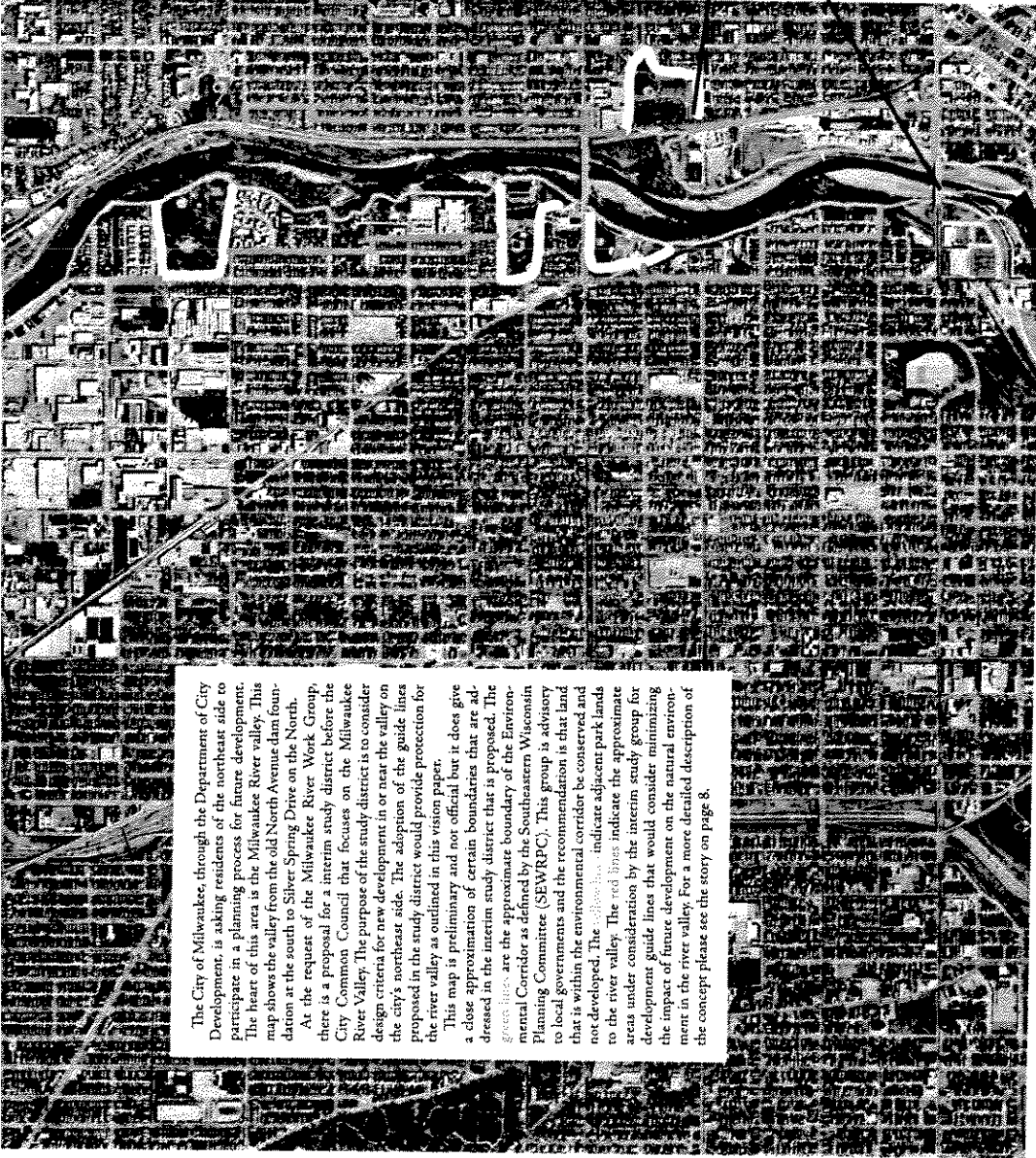




The City of Milwaukee through the Department of City Development, is asking residents of the northeast side to participate in a planning process for future development. The heart of this area is the Milwaukee River valley. This map shows the valley from the old North Avenue dam foundation at the south to Silver Spring Drive on the North.

At the request of the Milwaukee River Work Group, there is a proposal for an interim study district before the City Common Council that focuses on the Milwaukee River Valley. The purpose of the study district is to consider design criteria for new development in or near the valley on the city's northeast side. The adoption of the guide lines proposed in the study district would provide protection for the river valley as outlined in this vision paper.

This map is preliminary and not official but it does give a close approximation of certain boundaries that are addressed in the interim study district that is proposed. The green lines are the approximate boundary of the Environmental Corridor as defined by the Southeastern Wisconsin Planning Committee (SEWRPC). This group is advisory to local governments and the recommendation is that land that is within the environmental corridor be conserved and not developed. The yellow lines indicate adjacent park lands to the river valley. The red lines indicate the approximate areas under consideration by the interim study group for development guide lines that would consider minimizing the impact of future development on the natural environment in the river valley. For a more detailed description of the concept please see the story on page 8.



Building the castbank trail



View upstream from old dam

## Locust Street



Urban Ecology Center

## North Avenue



## Old dam

at North Avenue  
now with a pedestrian bridge

# 8 A Proposal for Public Policy: Greenway = Milwaukee River Central Park

## What's the best way to preserve the good green Milwaukee River Corridor from North Avenue to Silver Spring Drive? The Milwaukee River Work Group has a proposal.

### Who is the Milwaukee River Work Group?

The Milwaukee River Work Group (MRWG) is a coalition of organizations concerned with the Milwaukee River, including representatives from the Urban Ecology Center, Friends of Milwaukee's Rivers, and River Revitalization Foundation, along with other interested agencies, businesses and individuals. Together, they have been exploring a variety of methods and techniques to preserve natural spaces, manage adjacent development and ensure public access along the river.

They advocate a comprehensive plan that includes public policy, zoning, preservation guidelines and a stewardship plan for the future.

### Proposed Zoning Regulations

The MRWG recommends that a comparable approach be implemented to protect the more natural upstream portions of the Milwaukee River corridor.

The proposed Milwaukee River Greenway would extend the concept of setting development guidelines and site plan reviews upstream from the former North Avenue to the northern city limits. Ultimately, the MRWG would like to see a comparable approach to the more natural portions of the river taken by other municipalities upstream from the Milwaukee city limits.

Shorewood has already done this by adopting a shoreland ordinance and River Hills is proposing a similar overlay district.

The MRWG is proposing that Milwaukee residents join with them in calling for the city of Milwaukee to appoint a Greenway Task Force consisting of a diverse group of property owners, business representatives, river protection advocates and representatives of government agencies.

The Greenway Task Force would work together to delineate a Milwaukee River Greenway, prepare design and development guidelines, and recommend a site plan review process that is based on public comment elicited through a series of workshops and public input opportunities. Further recommendations of the MRWG concerning this proposed policy, as well as a detailed map of the area under discussion, are included in this Vision Paper.

### Goals

The MRWG has identified seven primary goals and objectives:

1. Permanently protect existing natural areas along the Milwaukee River primary

environmental corridor, floodplains, and river bluffs that are important to protecting water quality, minimizing flooding, and providing migratory pathways for wildlife.

2. Protect the "viewshed" of the greenway corridor so that persons enjoying the river or engaging in activities such as canoeing, kayaking, fishing, or hiking along the river's edge will have a natural experience.

**The proposed Milwaukee River Central Park would extend the concept of setting development guidelines and site plan reviews upstream of North Avenue to the northern city limits.**

3. Establish building setbacks and design guidelines for new multi-lot construction within a buffer area adjacent to the top of the green bluff along the river.
4. Establish enhanced guidelines to control erosion and runoff entering the river.
5. Preserve and enhance native vegetation, fisheries and wildlife habitat along the river corridor.
6. Encourage land uses and activities within the river corridor that take into account the objective of maintaining a natural greenway corridor, without altering present uses.
7. Create a Milwaukee River Central Park Trust Fund to finance land and water stewardship into the future.

### Strategies for Preservation

The MRWG has studied a broad range of tools to preserve the natural greenway corridor within a predominantly urban environment. The first step that is underway is for the Milwaukee

Common Council to create a study district for the river corridor and surrounding areas.

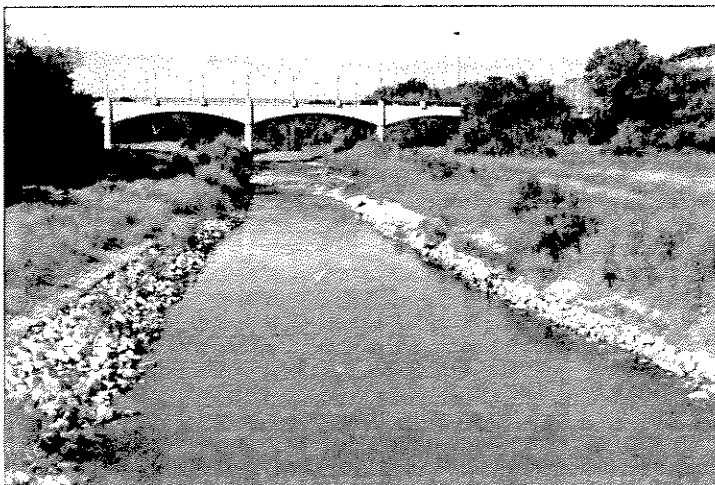
The creation of a Milwaukee River Greenway would involve eliciting public input and establishing guidelines for new development projects adjacent to the river that are compatible with the goals of maintaining a natural greenway along the river corridor and preserving the "viewshed," so imposition of urban views would be kept to a minimum for people using the river valley.

### Past Successes

The concept of this kind of oversight has been successfully used by the city of Milwaukee in the past.

When the city was in the early stages of planning the RiverWalk project, they passed legislation regulating development of land adjacent to the Milwaukee River corridor from the Harbor northwards to the former North Avenue dam.

As the RiverWalk has been developed, these regulations remain in place. Any projects proposed in this area are subject to guidelines and site plan reviews through the Milwaukee River Corridor Site Plan Review Overlay District. Currently, the City Plan Commission reviews all projects for these specific regulations within 50 feet landward of the existing dock wall along urban sections of the river. The resulting system of riverwalks and other river edge improvements on both sides of the Milwaukee River through the downtown area has become a tremendous asset and amenity for all citizens. The city has always envisioned that this public access would continue via a series of natural trails upstream of the former North Avenue Dam.





# The Milwaukee Central Park Philosophy: Sustainability into the Future

A large portion of the land along the Milwaukee River is already in public hands. The vision of a Central Park along the river is an expansion of that reality.

With a connected and protected corridor, some obvious questions arise. How is the land managed? Who takes responsibility for upkeep? How are policies decided? Who enforces those policies? Who pays the bills?

How do you get involved in this process? If you have read the preceding pages you may have concluded that you concur in our philosophy and support these concepts. You can become part of the "We" that proposes these ideas of a Milwaukee Central Park. Here is what is proposed. Joining in the process influences the outcome.

## Public Input

We need public input on best usage, policies and structure for this land. How do we get input from people who live and work near the river valley, and from people who want to use it?

We propose a series of public meetings and planning workshops, open to anyone with an interest in the river and land. These will be publicized through articles in the local press and news stories on electronic media. We will also engage the outreach efforts of community organizers from groups like Community Partners and the YMCA-Community Development Center.

Friends of Milwaukee's Rivers on behalf of the Milwaukee River Work Group (MRWG) has recently received a grant from Wisconsin Coastal Management Program, to hold a series of planning sessions to begin the process. These public planning sessions can help gather input from the people who are interested in the future of the Milwaukee River Valley.

There are many questions to be answered about how to set up our Central Park area. It will take time and effort to reach a meaningful consensus that makes this land useful for as many people and interests as possible.

## A Gathering of Stakeholders

Next we come to the question of who should administer the management and protection of the land on an ongoing basis. This is something that no one organization or governmental unit can take on by itself.

The majority of the land is designated park and owned by Milwaukee County. Determining the use of the few remaining parcels that will make this area a central park is the goal of the public input process as we move from a vision to reality.

We propose a consortium of stakeholders: individual neighbors, representatives from area organizations, businesses and business organizations, neighborhood associations, governmental agencies, city departments, schools, Milwaukee County Parks Department, and others who have a stake and interest in how the land and water is managed. This group would serve on a voluntary basis, and be granted authority to make decisions through an agreement with necessary public and private agencies.

Who should be at that table? The MRWG has a start in bringing stakeholders together, and that list is growing. The public process will help determine the structure of the governing body.

Please check the back page for information

on how to contact the different groups and public officials involved.

## Guardianship: How to Handle Enforcement?

Many of the present users see the River Valley as a place to walk the dog, ride a mountain bike, take a hike, drop a fishing line. Bird watchers and nature lovers are common users. School kids and adults learn about the environment in this urban ecosystem.

Not all of these activities are mutually compatible. One question that keeps coming up is, "What can I do and where can I do it?" Answering this question requires land and water use policies, and a means of communicating these policies to land users.

Once policies are in place, they will need to be enforced.

It is too costly to employ city or county police to patrol the valley – and probably not the best solution. After all, natural areas are usually places where people want to relax and have fun.

However, there need to be policies and rules, to keep the area safe and protected.

We propose that those who regularly use the land come together to decide policies. This kind of consensus agreement will create "unofficial officials." In other words, people who have helped to decide policy will help to enforce policy.

Given that, we also acknowledge that there needs to be some official oversight of the area. While we may be able to rely to some degree on local law enforcement officers and city and county parks employees, we need to be able to fund a level of rule enforcement. Some signage will be needed and at some point employees to educate users of the river valley about policies and help maintain the area. This will provide guidance on rule enforcement.

## Show Me the Money

How do we finance the creation and maintenance of a Milwaukee River Central Park area?

In the past, we have counted on city, state and county tax dollars to fund public recreation areas. However, given growing demands on public funds, this new vision of land use along our river seems to call for new approaches to funding, and to guaranteeing that funding into the future.

We propose the creation of a Milwaukee River Central Park Trust Fund. This fund could be set up and managed so that proceeds of the fund could be used to finance land and water maintenance into the future. There could be a special entity set up – apart from any of the stakeholders or members of a governing board – to manage the fund. There are models for this kind of funding currently in place in other areas.

The fund would grow through donations of concerned citizens and groups. This would be a community effort.

## Future Problem-Solving

As we plan for the organization, administration and funding for the valley, we need to create a means to carry that effort into the future.

We propose that the early planning process focus on the creation of a Milwaukee River Central Park Philosophy – think of it as an ecological constitution – that will help planners and policy makers of the future understand that we want to keep our beautiful river clean and green and accessible to everyone. This kind of philosophy statement will make it easier for us to guide all of our planning as we work to define and create our Milwaukee River Central Park area. It will help us maintain it and sustain it in a meaningful way into the future.

## PLANNING PROPOSALS

### PUBLIC PROCESS

- Hold a series of public meetings and planning workshops to create a meaningful consensus on best usage, policies and rules for the Milwaukee River Central Park area.

### PARTICIPATION

- We propose that a group of people who regularly use the land come together to decide policies. Create a Milwaukee River Central Park Trust Fund to finance land and water maintenance into the future for this area.

### PHILOSOPHY

- Promote a Milwaukee River Central Park Philosophy that will create and strengthen the strategy needed to maintain the beauty of the river valley and keep it accessible to everyone. The Central Park area is a "third place," that is, "a setting beyond home and work (the 'first' and 'second' places respectively), which people enjoy and connect with on a regular basis." This area will provide a natural place in the city for people who need and want a setting beyond home and work where they can relax and connect with the natural world. It will remain available to our urban children so they can learn from and experience a natural setting.

The Milwaukee River Work Group includes: **Partnering Organizations** Friends of Milwaukee's Rivers (FMR), River Revitalization Foundation (RRF), Urban Ecology Center (UEC), local residents and neighborhood groups that have a shared vision for the Milwaukee River valley. We believe there is increased credibility given to our position statements by working together.

We were concerned that state shoreland law does not protect natural areas in Milwaukee's river valleys while the state does have a role in all the other counties in Wisconsin. It is up to city government to adopt rules to protect the land and water in Milwaukee County.

The city has begun a multi year planning process for the North East side of Milwaukee. It seemed appropriate to get our views down on paper and hold community information sessions to involve the public in these decisions. We are promoting land

use concepts that promote preservation of natural assets while improving public access to these same lands and the Milwaukee River.

FMR leads in water quality protection as the designated "Riverkeeper" for Milwaukee's rivers.

RRF is our urban land trust dedicated to assure protection through land ownership and stewardship, public access and environmental protection easements.

UEC is a leader locally, statewide, and nationally in environmental education. They provide an access point for all to experience our natural world right here on the banks of the Milwaukee River.

Below are each groups perspectives on stewardship and access to natural lands and our rivers in an urban environment. We encourage you to read them. **Please join us.** See back cover for contact information.

## Milwaukee Urban Water Trail Paddle the rivers in your own back yard



...residents and visitors increasingly use our rivers for recreational boating and to enjoy the natural, cultural, and historical attractions that can be discovered from the water.

However, a growing gap existed between interest in riverfront recreation and information about public access to our rivers. The lack of information on

legitimate public access points lead people to use makeshift, and at times illegal and unsafe, access points. In addition, increasing riverfront development has made it harder for paddlers to find access points from the land and distinguish between a throng of unsigned private and public piers from the water.



When asked what they value most about the greater Milwaukee region, people frequently refer to the close proximity to Lake Michigan or one of the area's three rivers. This is reflected in the building and redevelopment boom along Milwaukee's rivers, improved public access to the waterways, and increasing numbers of anglers and paddlers using Milwaukee's rivers and the lakefront.

This change in perception has been brought on in part largely through improved water quality and river conditions, such as the removal of North Avenue Dam. As a result, residents and visitors increasingly use our rivers for recreational boating and to enjoy the natural, cultural, and historical attractions that can be discovered from the water.

Due to these reasons, Friends of Milwaukee's Rivers (FMR) developed the Milwaukee Urban Water Trail in 2005, in collaboration with a variety of government, non-profit, and private stakeholders. The Milwaukee Urban Water Trail is a canoe and kayak route through the urban portions of the Milwaukee, Menomonee and Kinnickinnic Rivers contain-

ing more than 25 miles of paddling opportunities. The trail includes 33 access sites (including portages), passes through portions of five cities and two coastal counties, and connects the three rivers to paddling opportunities on Lake Michigan. The map can be obtained at the Milwaukee Environmental Consortium, Urban Ecology Center, Laacke and Joys, the DNR, and many other locations. It is also available on the FMR website at: <http://www.mkenriverkeeper.org/watertail/map.htm>. Most of the Water Trail sites have posted signs identifying them as official public sites to minimize confusion about which sites are public and private.

In 2006, the Milwaukee Urban Water Trail was designated as a National Recreation Trail by the U.S. Department of the Interior, as well as an American Canoe Association Recommended Trail. As the Milwaukee Urban Water Trail becomes more popular, residents increasingly realize that they do not need to travel long distances to go canoeing or kayaking. Instead, they can enjoy the rivers right in their own backyards.

See back cover for contact information.

## The Good Earth Open land is a vanishing resource

The Milwaukee River valley is under pressure from development moving up the river from downtown. By purchasing some land in the valley, RRF has protected a section of the environmental corridor. By working to preserve the existing forested and undeveloped land in the Milwaukee River valley, RRF plans to leave a legacy of connected public lands that are accessible. This is a vital urban connection to the natural world.

The web of life on earth extends into our great cities. Natural areas are important not only for our survival but the survival of all those species, large and small that rely upon the complex nature of wild space to survive.

The preservation of natural habitat along the river is good for the economy, our water and our future. It is not a technique to prevent development but it does allow the beauty of the river and bluff system to remain and co-exist within the development. Just like Manhattan, a Milwaukee Central Park will be a destination sought by many.

We need to provide for wild spaces within our urban boundaries while the opportunities exist or we risk losing them. Not all urban dwellers are able to leave the city to experience the wonders of the natural world. They cannot value what they do not know. By preserving and providing opportunities for city dwellers, young and old, to walk in the green valley of the Milwaukee River, we are creating a citizenship with an understanding and

appreciation for the natural world.

Time is critical. If residents and city and county government do not act now to protect these river lands, the opportunity to do so will pass. The cost of land all over our state is rising. The cost of land in the city along the river has skyrocketed. With the help of organizations like RRF, Friends of Milwaukee's Rivers and the Urban Ecology center, it can be saved.

If any thing is a finite resource it is our land and water. Our wise use of land and water helps us sustain life. As for the land, we have scoured it and dumped on it but the bedrock sits mostly quietly below, popping up to the surface at some points. As is our tradition and our law, mostly invisible lines of ownership mark the land.

In the quest to protect land in its natural form and provide the public access to our land and water resources, River Revitalization Foundation (RRF) was formed. RRF is our River Land Trust. The Foundation owns land in the public trust in the Milwaukee River Valley and is looking at other parcels to purchase.

Another option for RRF besides outright purchase, is to acquire easements from private land-owners for access or conservation. An easement is

a voluntary legal agreement between a landowner and a qualified land trust to permanently protect the lands conservation values. The landowner retains ownership and use of the property. This preservation method allows non-profits, such as RRF, to protect more land because it is less expensive than buying land outright.

Placing a land preservation agreement along a portion of the river bank is an effective protection method. Unless we protect these areas now, there will be little remaining for future generations to enjoy.

The East Bank Trail was constructed last year and now legally allows public access onto private lands. We can thank the many property owners who shared our vision for the valley for this accomplishment.

Wisconsin Coastal Management provided a grant to build the trail. Volunteers worked with a landscaper and Milwaukee County Park employees to get the trail built. Construction firms donated materials. Donors gave the matching funds needed for the grant.

The result is improved access for all to areas of the river that were largely inaccessible before.

Protect the good earth. Please join us.

See back cover for contact information.

River  
Revitalization  
Foundation



## Stewardship • Access • Stewardship • Access

### 4-Wheeling in the Park: Opening the urban outdoors to persons with disabilities



This is Ken from UEC. For years I have had this crazy dream of one day going canoeing and fishing in Riverside Park with my good friend, Carijean Buhk. Carijean and I have done a lot of outdoor things over the years. We have been sledding together, we've gone calling for owls in deep snow with sub-zero temperatures and once we went sailing on Lake Michigan. These may not sound so crazy to most people, but Carijean has Arthrogryposis Multiplex Congenita, which means she cannot walk, her arms and hands have limited mobility and she uses a wheelchair to get around.

Carijean is the longest lasting employee at the Urban Ecology Center. She has been a huge asset over the years in the development of our newsletter, website and PR materials. Yet I sometimes wonder how she feels as she hears us talk of the growing number of species of fish in the river, sees us run out to investigate the

newly found beaver trees along the river's bank and watches the weekly canoe trips take off from the Center during the summer. She sees and hears of all of this, places pictures of these activities in our brochures, but is not able to experience these things for herself. The banks in the park are too steep and the trails too rough. There is no place along the entire five mile stretch of natural urban corridor that has a wheelchair accessible route to easy fishing on the river.

It is for this reason, not just for Carijean but for all persons with disabilities, that a small but dedicated group of volunteers and professionals has spent the past year ironing out a complicated master plan for pathways and accessibility in Riverside Park. This was done thanks to a planning grant from the state's Coastal Management Fund.

It is a tricky business. We want to keep the natural wild character of the park, yet as more people visit the area it becomes critical to improve the trails, stairways and river access. With a lot of citizen involvement -- as well as the support of landscape architects, civil engineers, County Parks and Department of Natural Resources personnel, with representatives from Independence First, Friends of Milwaukee's Rivers, the River Revitalization Foundation and our local elected officials -- I am absolutely thrilled to

share with you our end result!

The full plan is quite ambitious and includes improved staircases, erosion control, a fishing pier, a canoe launch and an elegant pedestrian suspension bridge across the Oak Leaf Recreational Trail. We also plan to extend Park Place across the trail to a 50 to 60 car parking area (not in the park). From this parking area, a fully accessible path will lead both to the Oak Leaf Trail and the river.

Thanks to the incredible generosity of our neighbor, Pieter Godfrey, much of the difficult stretch of the wheelchair accessible path has already been created ... a beautiful winding path down the embankment to the flood plain of the river. This path will not only connect to our fishing and canoe area, but will lead south to North Avenue via the new East Bank trail constructed by our colleagues, the River Revitalization Foundation.

We have divided the park into three trail types:

- Natural trails that will remain essentially as they are as meandering narrow dirt pathways through the forest
- Improved trails which will convert some of the old asphalt trails into more natural but still wider pathways and
- Accessible trails graded and surfaced with crushed limestone that allows wheelchairs and walkers to maneuver, but not roller blades

See [www.UrbanEcologyCenter.org](http://www.UrbanEcologyCenter.org) for a map that shows the full details of the plan.

The plan is not going to happen overnight, but as the eternal optimist, come next fall I may be able to pull off a date with Carijean to fulfill a dream I've had for a long time.

See back cover for contact information.

## Glossary of Terms

### Greenway Task Force

A group proposed by the Milwaukee River Work Group. This diverse group of property owners, business representatives, river protection advocates and representatives of government agencies would work together to delineate a Milwaukee River Greenway, prepare design and development guidelines, and recommend a site plan review process.

### Milwaukee River Central Park Area

A name proposed by the Milwaukee River Work Group for the approximately 800 acre area in the environmental corridor along the Milwaukee River from the North Avenue dam to the city limits at Silver Spring Drive. This area is roughly the same acreage as Central Park in New York City. The Milwaukee River Work Group is proposing that the City of Milwaukee adopt zoning to protect this area as a greenspace, and also protect the "viewshed" of this area from the imposition of urban views to preserve the natural experience of people using the river.

### Milwaukee River Central Park Trust Fund

A fund proposed by the Milwaukee River Work Group to be set up and managed so that proceeds of the fund could be used to finance land and water maintenance into the future. There could be a special company set up -- apart from any of the stakeholders or members of a governing board -- to manage the fund. There are models for this kind of funding currently in place in other areas. The fund would grow through donations of concerned citizens and groups. This would be a community effort.

### Milwaukee River Greenway

Milwaukee River primary environmental corridor, floodplains, and river bluffs between North Avenue and Silver Spring Drive. This Vision Paper suggests that this Greenway be preserved by establishing guidelines for new development projects along the river valley, that would protect water quality, preserve migratory pathways for wildlife, and minimize flooding.

### Milwaukee River Work Group

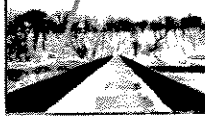
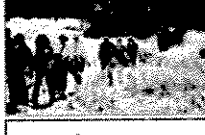
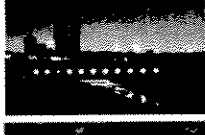
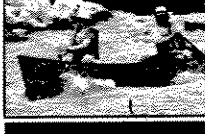
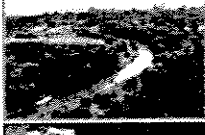
A coalition of organizations concerned with the Milwaukee River, including representatives from the Urban Ecology Center, Friends of Milwaukee's Rivers, and River Revitalization Foundation, along with other interested agencies, businesses and individuals.

### Viewshed

The concept that the view from the river and the greenway corridor should include natural elements as much as possible, and imposition of urban views would be kept to a minimum for people using the river valley, so persons enjoying the river or engaging in activities such as canoeing, kayaking, fishing, or hiking along the river's edge will have a natural experience.

## Opportunities For Involvement

Give us a call  
Send an email  
Check out our websites  
Drop us a line  
Go fishing  
Get in a canoe  
Take a hike  
Ride a bike  
Walk your dog  
Plant a tree  
Help remove invasives  
Offer financial help  
Take a tour  
Go bird watching  
Volunteer  
Go skiing  
Jog  
Share this with a neighbor  
Attend a meeting  
Participate in a clean up  
Think about it



Friends  
of Milwaukee's  
Rivers



**Friends of Milwaukee's Rivers**  
1845 N. Farwell Ave. Suite 100  
Milwaukee, WI 53202  
Phone: 414.287.0207  
Fax: 414.273.7293  
www.mkriverkeeper.org

**River Revitalization Foundation**  
1845 N. Farwell, Suite 100  
Milwaukee, WI 53202  
Phone: 414.271.8000  
Fax: 414.273.7293  
www.riverrevitalizationfoundation.org

**Urban Ecology Center**  
Riverside Park  
1500 E. Park Place  
Milwaukee, WI 53211  
Phone: 414.964.8505  
www.urbanecologycenter.org  
Email uec@urbanecologycenter.org

Please check our websites for updates and meetings on Milwaukee River Central Park.

### Contact City of Milwaukee Officials

The City of Milwaukee, through the Department of City Development, is asking residents of the northeast side to participate in a planning process for future development. The heart of this area is the Milwaukee River valley. Additionally, at the request of the Milwaukee River Work Group, there is a proposal for a interim study district before the City Common Council that focuses on the Milwaukee River Valley. The purpose of the study district is to consider design criteria for new development in or near the valley on the city's northeast side. The adoption of the guide lines proposed in the study district would provide protection for the river valley as outlined in this vision paper. Please consider contacting the Mayor and the three alderman listed below whose districts include the river valley. You may also contact Janet Grau of the Department of City Development, who is coordinating the Northeast Side Area plan and is compiling stakeholder input.

Tell them you support the idea of a Milwaukee River Central Park, and the adoption of guidelines to protect this valuable public resource.

**Mayor Tom Barrett**  
Office of the Mayor, 200 E. Wells Street  
City Hall Rm.201, Milwaukee, WI 53202  
Phone (414) 286.2200, FAX: (414) 286.3191  
mayor@milwaukee.gov

**Northeast Side Area Plan**  
Contact Janet Grau,  
Dept. of City Development  
414- 286-5724  
Email Janet.Grau@mkedcd.gov

### Phone contact information for all Alderman:

Phone: (Office) 414 286-2221, (TDD) 414 286-2025, (After hours) 414 286-2150, FAX: (O) 414 286-3456

**Alderman Michael D'Amato**  
3rd Aldermanic District  
City Hall, Room 205  
200 East Wells St.  
Milwaukee, WI 53202  
E-Mail:  
mdamat@milwaukee.gov

**Alderman Ashanti Hamilton**  
1st Aldermanic District  
City Hall, Room 205  
200 East Wells St.  
Milwaukee, WI 53202  
E-Mail:  
ahamil@milwaukee.gov

**Alderman Michael McGee, Jr.**  
6th Aldermanic District  
City Hall, Room 205  
200 East Wells St.  
Milwaukee, WI 53202  
E-Mail:  
mmcgee@milwaukee.gov

This is not a task for the City of Milwaukee alone. All the communities that border our rivers in Milwaukee County should be addressing river edge development and conservation measures. Shorewood has adopted a shoreland ordinance and other communities are considering action as well. The work done here can be a model of how to be good stewards of our river lands and waters.

Thank you to all who participated in the preparation of this vision paper.

In particular:

- \* The staff of the Friends of Milwaukee's Rivers, River Revitalization Foundation, and the Urban Ecology Center.
- \* The volunteers who coordinated and participated in the process to develop a vision and who will continue to work to implement the goals.
- \* Our editor.
- \* And the donor who made the publication of this paper possible.

We purposely tried not to associate most of the content with any one group or individual. The goal was to present a unified vision.

We thank you for any support you may be able to provide.