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INTRODUCTION

PROJECT BACKGROUND
The Center for Changing Landscapes worked with Redwood Falls, New Ulm, Saint Peter, and local citizens to create a whole systems approach to integrating state trails into communities and their landscapes. The design/planning work included site specific designs for the integration of the trail with trail communities that address such elements as trail head facilities, trail connections to natural and cultural sites, design of community trail systems that connect to the state trail, and in some cases, the state trail corridor. This project extends the design work done in Linking Communities, Design, Technology, & DNR Trail Resources, funded by the 2003-5 LCMR cycle, to three more communities on the Minnesota River State Trail. Valuable in and of themselves, state trails can leverage even more value if the larger context of natural resource systems, cultural amenities, future development patterns, and community form are considered and linked to trail corridors. This project extended and enhanced the traditional DNR Trails and Waterways Division corridor-based trail planning on the Minnesota River State Trail.

Project Funding:
Funding for this project was recommended by the Legislative Commission of Minnesota Resources (LCMR) for funding from the Minnesota Environment and Natural Resources Trust Fund and was appropriated by the Minnesota State Legislative during its 2005 session.

Center for Changing Landscapes:
The Center for Changing Landscapes is an interdisciplinary design center of the College of Design and the College of Food, Agriculture, and Natural Sciences, University of Minnesota. A team of architects, landscape architects, urban designers, and technical support created planning/design work at the regional, community, and site scales.

Collaboration:
Although the Center for Changing Landscapes is responsible for the project, CCL worked with the Department of Natural Resources (DNR) to assure that the DNR could use the design/planning work in its master planning efforts for the Minnesota River State Trail.

Design/Planning Intent: Reconnecting Communities to the River:
The Minnesota River Valley has a rich cultural and natural history. Pre-European settlements and post-European settlements were sited along the river because of its resources for food, transportation, industry, and energy. Through time many river communities have turned away from the river. The design/planning intent was to use the trail as a vehicle for strengthening each of the community’s connection to the river and to enrich the trail experience by connecting the communities to the trail. Trails and trailheads were placed in the communities close to the river to interpret the river and its landscape for both for the community members and the visitors who use the trail.

The State Trail as Environmental Educator:
The Minnesota River State Trail was seen as a vehicle for raising environmental awareness by experiencing the landscape and interpreting it. The Minnesota River Watershed is very interesting and beautiful. It is also a major polluter the Mississippi River. Trail design/planning sought to create greater understanding of both the environmental strengths and the weaknesses found in the valley in the belief that understanding is often the first step in valuing and protecting a landscape.

Linking Communities:
The Minnesota River State Trail was also seen as a catalyst for connecting communities together to create working partnerships among communities. In rural landscapes, such as the Minnesota River Valley, small communities are facing economic challenges as farms become larger and the farming population continues to decline. State recreational trails are very popular because they create opportunities for Minnesotans to experience the natural environment, add to the livability of communities, increase their desirability as places to live and work, and contribute considerably to the tourist economy. Using the state trail as a catalyst for connecting communities into a regional system that celebrates the Minnesota River Valley’s rich cultural and natural resources helps sustain the communities economically, environmentally, and socially.

Community Participation:
The Department of Natural Resources and the Center for Changing Landscapes led meetings with communities and local trail groups to ensure local and user input on environmental, recreational, tourism, and community livability issues. These workshops produced maps with each of the communities’ suggested trail alignment options and points of cultural, historic, ecological, and recreational interests. After receiving community feedback, the Center for Changing Landscapes produced preliminary plans/designs for each community at the regional, community, and site scales that were presented at a second community meeting for discussion and comment. From this information and feedback the final plans/designs were created. Final designs were then presented to the community in public meetings.
PROJECT BACKGROUND
PROJECT SCOPE

High-quality recreational experiences, alignment alternatives, natural systems protection strategies, community aspirations and concerns, linkages to cultural and natural amenities, impact of current and future development patterns, the needs of a variety of trail users, specific site designs, and local trail designs were studied.

Regional planning/design work included:
- Using geographic information systems (GIS) for an extensive inventory of recreational, ecological, and cultural resources,
- Interpreting cultural and environmental elements,
- Analyzing landscape character and experience,
- Identifying local and regional trail alignment options and network connections,
- Developing a design identity for the Minnesota River State Trail, and
- Locating potential trailhead sites throughout the region.

Community scale work included:
- Analyzing the opportunities and constraints to connecting the community, its downtown, local parks, and its local trails to the state trail,
- Identifying community amenities,
- Creating a visual character analysis, and
- Identifying potential locations for trailheads within the community.

Site scale work focused on:
- Designing trailheads at the site scale,
- Creating rest areas along the trail, and
- Designing a space to be used for the Commemorative March.

Trail identity work focused on creating a signature design vocabulary that reflected the landscape as it changed along the trail, it included:
- Designing a signature kiosk and bicycle rack, and
- Designing signature places of rest and contemplation along the trail.
The existing recreational trails in Minnesota River Valley were mapped and taken into consideration when designing the Minnesota River State Trail in order to create a comprehensive regional trail network that links the systems together.

The **Minnesota River Valley Scenic Byway** was designated as a byway in 1996. The Byway is managed by the Minnesota River Valley Scenic Byway Alliance, a nonprofit corporation. Its purpose is to promote, develop, and share the stories of the river. It is an automobile route that follows quiet county roads close to the river and connects many of the important natural and cultural valley resources. The Byway starts in Brown’s Valley on the Minnesota/South Dakota border and continues east down the river to end in Belle Plaine. A well-developed web site allows byway users to create their own journey by providing a variety of routes, maps, and brochures that focus on a particular river story. Along the Byway many existing “discovery sites” have interpretive panels or plaques that were placed over time by a variety of organizations. There is a plan to place interpretive byway kiosks along the Byway that will tie the route together. The Minnesota River State Trail will enhance the Byway and add to the promotion of the Minnesota River Valley as a route and a destination. The design and placement of state trail kiosks are to be coordinated with the Byway.

The **Minnesota River Canoe Trail** starts in Ortonville and travels the length of the entire river. Brochures and maps, provided by the Minnesota Department of Natural Resources, divide the trail into four segments: Ortonville to Granite Falls, Granite Falls to State Highway 4, State Highway 4 to Le Sueur, and Le Sueur to Fort Snelling. The Minnesota River Trail connects to the canoe trail’s public water access points and canoe carry-in points wherever possible.

The **Minnesota River Valley Birding Trail**, a project of Audubon Minnesota, promotes the enjoyment of natural resources, habitat, and wildlife along the Minnesota River and throughout the Minnesota River Valley Basin. The Birding Trail divides the watersheds into regions that describe the area’s natural character. Regional loops are designed to focus on the prime birding areas in each region. The birding loops follow existing roads and tie into existing amenities. Birding has recently become quite popular, and the Minnesota River Valley Birding Trail draws in many visitors to the Minnesota River Valley each year. The Minnesota River State Trail planning/design work connects many of the birding loops together along the Minnesota River corridor to foster interpretation of the natural resources within the valley.

Presently Southwestern Minnesota and Minnesota River Valley region have only a few state trails. The design of the Minnesota River State trail sought to connect to the existing state trails and the state trails that are being planned in order to create a comprehensive state trail network for the region. The **Sakatah ‘Singing Hills’ State Trail** starts near Mankato and continues through the Lakes Region to Fairbault. Once the Chicago Great Western Railroad line, the abandoned railroad bed is now paved to serve bicyclists, hiking, and in-line skating. The trail connects many small lake towns and Sakatah Lake State Park. Equestrian trails are incorporated from Lime Valley Road in Mankato to Eagle Lake and from Sakatah Lake State Park to Morristown. These trail segments are used for cross-country skiing in the winter.

The **Minnesota Valley Trail** links Fort Snelling State Park and units of the Minnesota Valley National Wildlife Refuge to the Minnesota Valley State Recreation Area. The area extends from Shakopee to Belle Plaine. It includes paved biking trails, unpaved mountain bike trails, hiking, and equestrian trails. In the winter it is used for cross-country skiing and snowmobiling. The state recreation area is divided into six main areas: Chaska/Shakopee, Lawrence, Carver Rapids, Nyssen’s Lake, and Rush River. Each of these areas has unique trailhead amenities. The specific listings of its features and facilities as well as trail maps can be found on the web site of the Minnesota Department of Natural Resources. The Minnesota River State Trail would eventually connect to the Minnesota Valley State Recreational Area at Rush River near Le Sueur.

In Southwest Minnesota the **Casey Jones Trail** is planned from Split Rock Creek State Park to Walnut Grove. It will travel through Pipestone, Woodstock, Lake Wilson, Hadley, Slayton, and Currie to connect to Lake Shaket State Park. The segment from Pipestone to Woodstock is built as a multi-use trail. The planning for this trail began in the late 1960’s in order to use an abandoned railroad bed to connect Pipestone to Lake Shaket State Park. Progress was made in the 1970’s. Recently new interest and support from the counties and local communities has spurred additional planning and fundraising to complete this trail. The community of Redwood Falls has expressed interest in a trail segment that would connect the city to the Casey Jones Trail at Walnut Grove.

The **Fair Ridge Trail** connects the town of Fairfax to Fort Ridgley State Park and the Minnesota River Valley. This paved trail starts at the historic Fairfax Depot Park and Museum, follows State Highway 4, enters the state park at two different points, and ends at two scenic overlooks. Bicycling, hiking, jogging, and in-line skating are welcome on this trail.

The many additional trails within the Minnesota River Valley include: snowmobile trails, equestrian trails, state park trails, community trails, and county park trails. These trails are shown in the existing regional trail maps found within each community study area.
CONNECTING THE TRAIL TO EXISTING SYSTEMS

- Mankato Community Trails
- Scenic Byway
- State Trails
- Birding Trail
- Fair Ridge Trail
- Commemorative March
- Mankato Community Trails

Locations:
- Redwood Falls
- New Ulm
- Saint Peter
- Mankato