

L-SOHC Questionnaire

Program Request Title: 7 Washington County St. Croix River Land Protection

Program Manager: Jane Harper

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A. REQUEST FOR FUNDING OVERVIEW:

1. Why there is an urgent need to act NOW?

For a limited time, several riparian landowners have offered to work with the county to keep their land in its natural state. The economic recession has slowed the rapid pace of development in Washington County. This has created a window of opportunity to complete these acquisitions before the economy picks up and developers will again be buying land. The properties to be protected are the remaining large lots along the lowest stretch of the St. Croix River and are in high demand for residential development. The landowners are all elderly and have a limited amount of time before they will need to move off the property. Future owners may not be conservation minded.

B. CONSTITUTIONAL CONTEXT FOR PROGRAM ACTIVITIES

1. Tell the Council how much of your proposal is acquisition and how much restoration/enhancement?

All of the \$4 million is for acquisition.

2. How will the public be able to use the all the projects in this program and enjoy the benefits of this public investment?

All of the projects will preserve the ecological integrity of the St. Croix River, a federally- and state-protected scenic riverway. These projects will help maintain the characteristics that qualified the river for these designations (clean water, high quality natural ecosystems, visible geologic features, strong sense of history, beautiful scenery, and abundant recreation opportunities) and to be protected for the enjoyment of future generations. These projects will help arrest the decline in water quality by limiting the additional nutrient and sediment loading that would come from full development of the properties. They will maintain a natural viewshed from both the river and St. Croix Trail (county road 21), a National Scenic Byway. All people who use the river for boating, fishing, or other recreational opportunities and all people who travel along St. Croix Trail will benefit from these investments. Opportunities will be available for the public to use the protected properties subject to negotiation with the private landowners (e.g. landowners allow hunting and fishing on the property with prior permission). Through related fee acquisitions, these projects will provide additional public access near the St. Croix River.

C. PRIORITIES

1. Specifically, how does your program address the Council's statewide and/or regional priorities?

This proposal will help the Council achieve its priorities #1 and #2 by

- Protecting big woods and oak savanna.*

- *The Department of Natural Resources has classified some of the woodlands to be protected as having high biological diversity.*
- *Some of the protected lands contain ‘old growth’ forest with a mean age of 150 years.*
- *Each acquisition will require a management plan that identifies methods to protect and improve the health of the natural communities.*
- *The acquisitions will protect critical habitat needed to support a variety of “Species of Greatest Conservation Need.”*
- *Protecting a habitat corridor along the St. Croix River.*
 - *The properties are the remaining large lots along the Lower St. Croix River and are the critical connections needed to complete a permanently-protected three-mile continuous corridor of forested bluffs and ravines.*
 - *Maintaining mature forests along the St. Croix River will help to defray pollution impacts from other parts of the watershed, contributing to a quality river fishery.*

2. Tell the Council how do you set priorities among the opportunities available to this program? Be SPECIFIC

These projects rated the highest out of 44 proposals to the county’s Land and Water Legacy Program. They are referred to as Tier 1 projects, those with a very high score and defined as showcase projects that best demonstrate the purposes of the funding referendum and the County Board priorities. The county’s priorities for this program include natural habitats for wildlife, fish and plants; shorelands of lakes, rivers and streams; lands important to protect the quality of the county’s ground water resources; lands that create critical connections and buffers; and lands that are accessible or visible to the public. High priority criteria (8 points) include riparian lands, large tracts of forest land, native plant communities, wellhead protection areas, area highly susceptible to ground water contamination, included in a land preservation plan, and adjacent to a county park. Medium priority criteria (5 points) include lands adjacent to other land which is permanently protected from development and erosion prone lands. Lower priority criteria (3 points) includes buffers to existing public facility and small parcels.

3. Tell the Council how you define “science-based strategic planning”

The county uses existing conservation plans and available data to evaluate all projects. Each criteria used to rate a project has a corresponding data set such as the Land Cover Classification System, Natural Resources Assessment, National Wetlands Inventory, Minnesota County Biological Survey, Washington County Geologic Atlas, and studies on Integrating Groundwater and Surface Water in Washington County; or a priority in various plans such as wellhead protection plans, State Conservation Plan, State Wildlife Conservation Strategy, community comprehensive plans, and watershed district management plan.

D. PROGRAM DETAILS:

1. The Work

- a. **Enumerate the specific kinds of action you plan to take to protect, enhance, and/or restore natural systems.**

Acquisition of 4-6 perpetual conservation easements or fee title to permanently protect 400 acres, including approximately one mile of St. Croix River shoreline. Potential parcels include:

- *An 88-acre parcel adjacent to the north boundary of the St. Croix Bluffs Regional Park. Other sides of the property are bounded by the St. Croix River to the east,*

properties protected by scenic and conservation easements to the north, and farmland to the west. The property is nearly all “old-growth” oak and maple-basswood forest with a mean age of 150 years.

- *A 75-acre parcel adjacent to the north boundary of the Carpenter Nature Center and containing about ¼ mile of St. Croix River frontage. Some of this property is cropland, some of which will be restored to native cover after acquisition of the conservation easement.*
- *A 90-acre parcel surrounded by Carpenter Nature Center property to the north and west and containing ½ mile of St. Croix River shoreline to the east. The county and Carpenter Nature Center are currently negotiating to acquire the parcel along the southern boundary.*
- *An additional 147 acres of critical habitat along or near the St. Croix River.*

Preparation of a management plan for each acquisition that identifies activities that are needed to protect and improve the biological diversity and ecological quality and functions of the natural communities.

b. What species will be helped?

This project will help a variety of game and non-game species. The river’s sloughs and backwaters, as well as the relatively intact vegetation along its banks are home to rich variety of native and endangered species and habitat. Its waters support 95 fish species and approximately 38 mussel species, many of which are on the state- and federally-endangered species lists. Its forested lands are nesting habitat for Bald Eagles and home to several threatened and endangered species such as the peregrine falcon and the Karner blue butterfly.

A diverse number of birds, including a significant number of bird species of greatest conservation concern and special interest, depend upon the St. Croix River and adjacent riparian and upland habitats. This habitat is particularly critical as it provides a natural north-south migratory corridor of upland deciduous forests for many species of interest and concern to Minnesota including the following:

- *High numbers of bald eagles forage, roost and nest along the river;*
- *Red-shouldered hawks are common;*
- *Warblers, a species of conservation concern are frequently found breeding here in the northern limit of their range;*
- *The golden-winged warbler is found along the river in significant numbers; over 40% of its population is within Minnesota; and*
- *The whip-poor-will, tufted titmouse, blue-winged warbler, cerulean warbler, black-throated blue warbler, mourning warbler, worm-eating warbler, Kentucky warbler and hooded warbler are other species of conservation concern found along the river.*

c. Do you currently have the capacity to get the work done that you are requesting dollars for in FY 2011? -- Explain

The county has the capacity to complete the work. The proposed work is part of the county’s ongoing Land and Water Legacy Program. The county has funded one full-time project manager and the time of staff throughout the organization to assist with the program. Much of the ‘spade’ work (e.g. project scope, due diligence, appraisals, etc) has been done so that the acquisitions can be completed within 12-18 months after matching funds are secured.

3. Program Work Location

- a. **What percent of your work will be prairie?**
23%
- b. **What percent of your work will be wetland?**
1%
- c. **What percent of your work will be forest?** 76%
- d. **What percent of your work will be aquatic systems?**
- e. **Is it part of a larger habitat complex? If yes BRIEFLY describe the complex.**

The properties are located within the St. Croix Corridor of the Metro Conservation Corridors, a network of remaining critical habitat natural areas that are critical for the movement of native plants and wildlife across the landscape.

The properties are located within a Regionally-Significant Ecological Area identified by the Department of Natural Resources as being of sufficient size and shape to provide habitat for a spectrum of wildlife; areas that connect to other natural areas; and areas with the most intact native plant communities.

4. How We Plan to Use the Funds Requested

- a. **What percent reduction could you accept without rendering your project inoperable?**

The majority of the funding requested is needed to complete conservation easements with current willing sellers. The county is committed to leveraging additional conservation funding from other sources. Therefore, a reduction in the funds requested would reduce the number of projects that the county could complete and the number of acres that could be protected until other outside funds are secured.

- b. **Have you also applied to the Outdoor Heritage Fund Conservation Partners Grant Program operated by DNR?**

Washington County has applied for funding for one specific conservation easement project along Valley Creek. That project is not included in this funding proposal.

- c. **Where else might you get money for this project?**

The county has received a small amount of funds from the Department of Natural Resources Metro Greenways Program. The county has unsuccessfully sought funds from a number of other programs such as the Legislative Citizen Commission on Minnesota Resources, various Department of Natural Resources grant programs, and the National Fish and Wildlife Foundation.

4. Personnel Details

- a. **Describe the personnel duties. Are they office staff or field staff – existing or new positions?**

None of the requested funds will be used to fund personnel.