

L-SOHC Questionnaire

Program Request Title: 18 Valley Creek Protection Partnership

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A. REQUEST FOR FUNDING OVERVIEW:

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

All of the parcels identified for protection represent urgent opportunities. Although the landowners are committed to conservation, financial realities of the current economic climate mean that two of the potential parcels likely will be sold for development in the near future if funds to purchase conservation easements cannot be secured in a timely manner. Similarly, timely restoration and enhancement of the in-stream and associated upland habitats also are critical in order to prevent degradation of this important resource.

B. CONSTITUTIONAL CONTEXT FOR PROGRAM ACTIVITIES

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

Of the \$2,530,000 requested, \$2,249,000 is for acquisition of conservation easements. \$281,000 is for restoration and enhancement work.

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 advance the protection, restoration and enhancement of habitat, including an outstanding trout spawning area along Valley Creek. The public will directly benefit from this habitat through the creation of the first public access to Valley Creek as part of this program.

C. PRIORITIES

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

This proposal addresses the L-SOHC Priority Actions for the Metropolitan Urbanizing Area Section by:

- Protecting and restoring oak savanna;
- Protecting, restoring and enhancing a coldwater fisheries system; and
- Protecting a habitat corridor along the St. Croix River

This proposal addresses the L-SOHC Statewide Priorities by:

- Furthering an ongoing program that addresses actions and targets of the Metropolitan Urbanizing Area Section;
- Producing habitat, water quality, and outdoor recreational benefits;
- Leveraging past, current, and future investments in Valley Creek;

- Allowing the first public access to Valley Creek, thereby creating an outstanding opportunity for world-class trout fishing;
- Addressing conservation opportunities that will be lost if not immediately acted on;
- Using a science-based strategic planning model to prioritize and focus efforts; and
- Working in a location of state endangered, threatened and special concern species, habitats for species of greatest conservation need, and MCBS sites of biodiversity significance

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

The Partners have used data from existing plans as the basis for selecting priority conservation areas within the watershed. Within these areas, priority tracts are selected using the following criteria in this order:

1. Quality of existing habitat
2. Probable success of any needed restoration & long-term maintenance costs
3. Proximity to existing protected land
4. Level of understanding of ecological processes at site
5. Landowner willingness to participate

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

The decision to work in the Valley Creek watershed was based upon solid science and a strategic assessment. The importance of Valley Creek as a coldwater trout stream, a habitat corridor, and a component of the St. Croix watershed has been recognized in numerous biological assessments and conservation plans. The Partnership also has identified focal species that can be monitored and will be indicators of success or needs to modify efforts over time.

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.

This proposal consists of multiple actions:

1. Acquisition of 2-3 perpetual conservation easements to protect 100-150 acres, including approximately 1 mile of trout stream. Potential parcels include:
 - A 60-acre parcel that is one of the few remaining unprotected parcels located at the lower end of Valley Creek. Valley Branch Watershed District recently invested approximately \$250,000 on water quality improvements on this parcel, making this property a prime target for permanent protection and additional habitat restoration. This parcel also is suitable for providing public angling access to Valley Creek.
 - A 50-acre parcel that contains ideal trout spawning habitat. The opportunity to protect this parcel could be lost if funding for a conservation easement is not secured soon.

- A 32-acre parcel that is adjacent to land already protected or anticipated to be protected. This parcel is one of the few remaining unprotected parcels at the lower end of Valley Creek.
2. Acquisition of the underlying fee on at least one parcel to secure public angling access to Valley Creek.
 3. Restoration of the stream, surrounding upland habitat, and key upstream habitat on 50-60 acres. Proposed activities include:
 - Removal of buckthorn, reed canary grass, and other invasive species.
 - Enhancement of in-stream habitat and natural stream function.

b. What species will be helped?

This project will help a variety of game and non-game species. Specifically, we will protect and enhance habitat for brook trout, brown trout, and rainbow trout. Recent fish sampling conducted by the Valley Branch Watershed District (VBWD) indicates the success of past protection and restoration efforts at Valley Creek, and we expect to see similar measurable outcomes from the work currently proposed.

Approximately one year after the VBWD downstream stabilization project on Valley Creek, the number of different fish species collected was eight, compared to only one species collected during a fish survey at the same location two years prior to the project. One year after the VBWD project, 84 trout (including two brook, 79 brown, two rainbow, and one tiger) were sampled at the site. Two years prior to the VBWD project, 30 trout (all brown and no brook trout) were sampled.

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

All of the proposed work at Valley Creek is part of an ongoing program and partnership. All five entities have capacity to complete the work but lack the necessary funding to move forward with this next phase of projects.

2. Program Work Location

- a. **What percent of your work will be prairie?** 80-96 percent of restoration work will be prairie (oak savanna). 32-48 percent of protection work will be prairie (oak savanna).
- b. **What percent of your work will be wetland?** See below.
- c. **What percent of your work will be forest?** See below.
- d. **What percent of your work will be aquatic systems?** All of the enhancement work will be related to an aquatic system. We have allocated 4-10 percent of restoration work and 52-68 percent of protection work to aquatic systems because of the focus on Valley Creek, but this work will include a mix of wetlands, forests, and habitat for fish, game and wildlife.

e. Is it part of a larger habitat complex? If yes BRIEFLY describe the complex.

The Valley Creek watershed covers approximately 14 square miles of land originally characterized by savanna, tallgrass prairie and maple-basswood forest. The exceptional habitat value of Valley Creek has been identified in Minnesota's State Wildlife Action Plan, which identifies Valley Creek as a "Key River Reach." Valley Creek is one of 13 trout streams within the Twin Cities Metropolitan Area and is one of only a few that has a naturally reproducing population of brook trout, the only trout species native to Minnesota. Due to past conservation efforts, approximately 1,400 acres of land adjacent to and within Valley Creek critical areas have been protected. Many of those acres have been restored to native communities.

3. 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 that facilitate public access and accomplish in-stream trout habitat enhancement. Anything beyond a small reduction could jeopardize the Partnership's ability to accomplish this goal.

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, while the Valley Creek Protection Partnership has identified multiple protection opportunities. If the County's project is funded through the Conservation Partners Grant program, this project would not be considered by the Partnership and funds would be used for other priority opportunities. Valley Branch Watershed District submitted two Conservation Partners Grant requests, but neither project is within the Valley Creek watershed. The Minnesota Land Trust submitted one Conservation Partners Grant request for a project in Goodhue County, which is unrelated to this proposal.

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

The Partnership has received past support from LCCMR, Doris Duke Charitable Foundation, other private funders, and EPA 319 grants. We believe that the Outdoor Heritage Fund is the best source of support for this phase of the program.

4. Personnel Details

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

The personnel included in this proposal all are existing positions, but without this funding, staff would not be working on these Valley Creek projects. Positions include both office staff to negotiate and complete conservation easements and field staff to conduct site assessments and restoration work.