

Issue: Protection – Restoration – Management

Historic settlement, modern-day development, and agricultural practices have replaced, degraded and fragmented natural resource systems throughout Dakota County. Nearly every monitored waterbody in the County is impaired in some way, and many habitats have been reduced to small pocket remnants.



The project scope and scale across urban, suburban and rural landscapes encompass some of the best natural resource features found in the metropolitan region. A sound fiscal and prioritized landscape approach to conservation attempts to balance the interests, rights, and responsibilities of private landowners, with the public's concerns about water and habitat quality and protection, restoration and long-term natural resource management.

Dakota County's Conservation Leadership and Experience

The County is a leader in strategically implementing natural resource protection through its land conservation programs and its early efforts to ensure rivers and streams buffer compliance.

- Completion of 148 agricultural and natural area conservation easements and fee title acquisition projects totaling 11,907 acres since 2003
- County Board approval of a comprehensive Natural Resource Management System Plan for all parks, greenways, and easements in May 2017.
- County Board approval of a new Land Conservation Plan (LC Plan) for Dakota County in November 2020
- Development of a two, new combined County and BWSR wetland banks totaling 188 acres

Ongoing County Commitment to Protect and Restore Natural Resources and Natural Areas for Current and Future Generations

With its staff experience and capacity, data, effective partnerships and landowner relationships, the County is seeking Outdoor Heritage funds to continue its successful and strategic efforts to protect additional habitat and restore and enhance natural resources to provide multiple public benefits.

The new LC plan is based on a number of State, regional, County, and local plans and experience gained during the past twenty years. It takes a longer-term, landscape approach by establishing 24 preliminary Conservation Focus Areas (CFAs) totaling 74,863 acres, of which 35,521 acres are already protected. Landowners will be contacted to determine their conservation interests and needs to begin developing or strengthen the critical relationships required for voluntary conservation.



The LC Plan also established a goal of creating a City – County Conservation Collaborative recognizing the need to engage, incentivize and increase the capacity and commitment of cities to protect and improve natural resources within their jurisdictions. Already, all of the cities have agreed to participate in this innovative effort and have identified priority restoration sites for consideration.

With this funding request, the County intends to continue its land protection efforts, but also shift to a greater focus on restoring and enhancing protected lands - especially larger scale agricultural wetlands which is a key goal of the recently approved Groundwater Plan for Dakota County.

Project Activity One: Assess and Prioritize Restoration Activities (no grant funds requested)

- Prioritize restoration areas, goals and activities and determine which landowners with protected lands are willing to participate
- Complete new or update Natural Resource Management Plans for all sites and align with OH and County priorities and funding

The Dakota County Board of Commissioners commits annual funding to match leveraged funds for land protection and restoration.

Project Activity Two: Implement Restoration Activities on Protected Public and Private Land

- Complete Landowner Natural Resource Management Agreements, if not already in place
- Contract for necessary natural resource services and implement priority activities to restore approximately 1,100 acres of various permanently protected habitats

Outdoor Heritage Funding Request: \$3,200,000

Project Activity Three: Refine Targeted Natural Habitat Protection Areas (no grant funds requested)

- Conduct outreach within the Preliminary CFAs to seek interested landowners for voluntary land protection
- Complete initial habitat assessment for interested landowners
- Utilize a technical advisory committee to recommend protection projects based on revised project evaluation criteria

Project Activity Four: Acquire Easement/Fee Title

- Complete valuation, negotiation, development of NRMPs and due diligence to protect an estimated 570 acres through acquisition permanent conservation easements or fee title

Outdoor Heritage Funding Request: \$4,800,000

Primary Partners: Dakota County Soil and Water Conservation District, cities, non-profit organizations, the Vermillion River Watershed Joint Powers Organization, and others

Long-Term Benefits

This comprehensive conservation approach provides the best opportunity to effectively protect key community natural assets and well-being by providing:

- Additional and improved habitat for plants and animals,
- Improved surface water and groundwater quality and quantity,
- Greater resilience against the negative impacts of climate change,
- An increasingly important component of local and regional economies,
- Protection of past public investments,
- Scenic beauty, and
- Improved opportunities for outdoor recreation.

Total OH Funding Request:

\$8,100,000

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