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March 19, 2013

To: St. Paul City Council; Michael Hahm, Director -Parks
From: District 1 Community Council

Re: Great River Passage Park Plan

The District 1 Community Council wishes to voice its deep concern about certain aspects of the Great River Passage Park Plan. Although we are in support of the idea of connecting the city and its neighborhoods to the river, and we would like to see even greater access to parts of the river in District 1 which lie out of residents' reach, our concerns lie in the implications this proposal has for funding of the park system generally, and neighborhood parks in particular.

As it currently operates, the Department of Parks and Recreation is following a system plan (one that has not been approved by City Council and, therefore, has not been subjected to an official public hearing...) that proposes to staff a limited number of large park facilities and privatize smaller neighborhood parks. District 1 has been particularly susceptible to this approach as Parks has begun implementing this system plan. We keenly feel the impact it has on our local neighborhoods and are having to spend an inordinate amount of time counteracting that impact. The reasoning behind this plan is that funding for parks and for recreational activities is increasingly limited.

At the same time, Parks is proposing an enormous expansion of the parkland with the Great River Passage Plan. It is also proposing that new facilities be added to new parkland, which will require increased funding for personnel AND/OR further reducing funding for personnel at other facilities. In addition, it is proposing a new entity that will focus on raising funds for the GRP, similar to the separate funding entity dedicated to Como Park. This means that these two entities will be competing for limited funding, along with competing with the relatively new fundraising entity that is supposed to be raising money for the system generally. We foresee that this organizational complexity and competition will result in further dramatic disinvestment in neighborhood parks.

Is the purpose of the park system to develop national showcases or to provide the city's residents with the health, social and community benefits of participating at and identifying with their local neighborhood facilities? Although we would all like to believe that both are possible, is that belief realistic in this fiscal environment? We think not. Which neighborhoods, and which ethnic and economic communities, within the city are most highly dependent on local park facilities, and how many of these will have immediate access to GRP amenities?

We urge the City Council to support local neighborhood parks and recreation facilities, equitably distributed across the city, above any showcase within our park system.