

May 12, 2015

Friends of the Parks and Trails of St. Paul and Ramsey County has been diligently working to protect, preserve, and enhance parks, trails, and open space in our community for 30 years. As one might imagine, much has changed throughout that time frame in terms of development on the Mississippi River, yet much has stayed the same.

There was a time when St. Paul “turned her back” to the River. Now, we are re-framing our collective efforts to “turn towards” the River, as we recognize what a magnificent resource we have in our midst. While Friends of the Parks is pleased that the community is embracing the value of the Mississippi River, we are concerned that pressure to develop along the corridor, and indeed, within the Mississippi National River and Recreation Area National Park, puts this magnificent resource at risk. At the same time it is being recognized for its bountiful scenic, natural and historic resources, those very qualities are endangered by human development. It is the familiar dance that has played out through centuries, that is development versus natural resource protection.

The Friends are not the first to recognize this dance, of course. It was this that prompted the State of Minnesota, in 1973, to pass the Critical Areas Act, protecting places with “exceptional historic, cultural, or aesthetic values or natural systems.” Our predecessors realized that these areas were of significance beyond the local area only and that unregulated development threatened them and thereby, the public interest.

The project at 1465 Davern Street is within the Mississippi River Corridor Critical Area, the product of bi-partisan natural resource protection efforts.

In St. Paul, elected officials and ordinary citizens alike have gone to great lengths to set standards for development in order to protect our shared natural resources. The Great River Passage Master Plan and the River Corridor Chapter of the Comprehensive Plan are two examples.

In the above-referenced decision by the Planning Commission to grant the variance request by Johnson Brothers of 33.5 additional height to a project within overlay districts (River Corridor 3 District and Traditional Neighborhood 3 District) it made a judgement that does not comply with the requirement that the proposed project meet the Findings necessary to grant the variance. Others have defined this in detail and I will not repeat the justifications for the appeal here. However, please note that Friends of the Parks and Trails add our voice to those appealing the approval of the variance.

In particular, the Friends are concerned about the impact on scenic views by a project that is literally above and beyond that which current zoning allows. The location of this project is in an area the Dakota considered the “Center of the World”. Building this project would alter the essential character of the surrounding area and set a precedent for future projects. I attended the Planning Commission meeting at which this variance was granted. While mention was made that “each project is considered individually”

mention was also made of other developments within the area. To suggest that a particular variance will not set precedent is contrary to practical application.

Thank you for accepting these comments and for your consideration as part of the appeal process. Friends of the Parks is not opposed to development, but support development that works within the framework put forth by the community. We look forward to working together within that framework.

Sincerely,

Shirley Erstad, Executive Director
Friends of the Parks and Trails of
St. Paul and Ramsey County
1660 Laurel Avenue
St. Paul, MN 55104
612-703-9044

www.FriendsoftheParks.org

Celebrating 30 years of promoting, protecting, and enhancing
parks, trails, and open space in our community.