



**CITY OF SAINT PAUL**  
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**DATE:** March 1, 2017

**TO:** Comprehensive Planning Committee

**FROM:** Lucy Thompson, Principal City Planner

**SUBJECT:** *Saint Paul River Balcony Master Plan*

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### **BACKGROUND**

Reconnecting to the Mississippi River has been a City of Saint Paul and community priority since completion of the *Saint Paul on the Mississippi Development Framework* in 1997. Like so many American river cities, Saint Paul turned its back on the Mississippi River for decades. But, in the last 20 years, the City and its partners have worked tirelessly to embrace the river and recognize it as a natural, historic, cultural, recreational and ecological amenity.

The *Great River Passage Master Plan*, adopted by the City Council in April 2013 as an addendum to the *Saint Paul Comprehensive Plan*, calls for the creation of a River Balcony along the downtown river bluff (green/yellow line on the image below).



The design rendering in the *Great River Passage Master Plan* shows an active, vibrant public ledge overlooking the river:



Since 2015, City staff from Planning & Economic Development, Parks & Recreation and Public Works have been working with a design team comprising staff from the Minnesota Design Center at the University of Minnesota, BKV Group and Landscape Research on a master plan and Phase 1 schematic design for the River Balcony. A Project Review Team comprising property owners along the River Balcony route, CapitolRiver Council representatives and other key stakeholders advised the consultant team and City staff throughout the process. In addition to nearly a dozen Project Review Team meetings, the City hosted three focus topic roundtables, four design team workshops, a public open house in September 2015 and a public meeting in April 2016. The community meetings were well-attended, and support has been high for the River Balcony.

The *Saint Paul River Balcony Master Plan* is now ready for public review. It will be adopted by the City Council as an amendment to the *Great River Passage Master Plan*. The Phase 1 schematic design deliverable is not being considered at this time; it will form the basis for more detailed schematic design to be undertaken in the next phase.

### **THE SAINT PAUL RIVER BALCONY MASTER PLAN**

The Master Plan lays out a vision for the River Balcony:

*The River Balcony is envisioned as a publicly-accessible pathway connecting public spaces and bluff-side redevelopment sites from the Science Museum to Union Depot. It will be designed to accommodate walking, outdoor seating, gathering and related public activities; and to be a catalyst for economic development.*

A set of core goals establishes the role of the River Balcony in not only activating the public realm along the river bluff but also in catalyzing high-quality private development on key sites along Kellogg Boulevard. The River Balcony will:

1. reconnect downtown to the river visually and physically;
2. provide a public linear path along the downtown river bluff with occasional vertical connections to the river's edge;
3. activate private development on the Ramsey County West/Adult Detention Center, Ramsey County East and Custom House sites; and
4. connect public spaces and private development sites along the river's edge in downtown.

The River Balcony Master Plan contains design guidelines based on the following general design principles:

1. The River Balcony is a public space, accessible to all, at all times of the day and during all seasons.
2. The main purpose of the River Balcony is to provide visual and physical connections between downtown and the Mississippi River.
3. The River Balcony is an integral part of a larger public realm network comprising the Capital City Bikeway, City and regional parks and trails, streets, plazas and skyways.
4. The River Balcony is both a horizontal (linear) and vertical (from upper bluff to river's edge) system of movement.
5. The River Balcony will be a fundamental feature of new development on private property along the bluff, including Custom House and the Ramsey County riverfront properties.
6. The River Balcony will be designed to add value to adjacent private development.
7. The River Balcony will be built with high-quality, durable materials.
8. The River Balcony will be designed as a coherent series of public spaces, with overall continuity of design, but allowing for site- or district-specific expressions of place.
9. The River Balcony will be designed to be a "light touch" on the bluff landscape.
10. The River Balcony will incorporate natural features as much as possible, recognizing that some areas will be more predominantly hard-surfaced.

The Master Plan also contains sections on land use history and cultural resources; project precedents from around the country and world that inspired our vision; and design guidelines for 1) the River Balcony as a whole; 2) each component of the River Balcony; and 3) adjacent private development sites.

The guidelines for the River Balcony as a whole address:

- Identity
- Connected pedestrian amenities
- Balcony structure
- Materials
- Landscaping
- District (utility) systems
- Furnishings
- Retaining walls
- Paving
- Railings
- Wayfinding signage
- Lighting
- Vertical circulation towers
- Historic resources
- Public art

The guidelines by component address four conditions along the 1.5-mile route:

- Balcony on-grade at sidewalks and plazas
- Balcony on-grade at street crosswalks (Wabasha and Robert streets)
- Free-standing balcony
- Balcony connections to the river

The guidelines for adjacent private development sites address how the following elements on privately-owned sites interface with and activate the River Balcony:

- Site development
- Building form and façade
- Landscaping
- Historic preservation
- Sustainability and district systems
- Furnishings

### **NEXT STEPS**

The *River Balcony Master Plan* will be adopted by the City Council (after recommendation from the Planning Commission) as an amendment to the *Great River Passage Master Plan*. The master planning process was led by PED staff; future implementation work will be led by staff in the Great River Passage Division of the Saint Paul Department of Parks and Recreation.

While the master plan adoption process is underway, Great River Passage Division staff are convening a meeting with stakeholders along the route (property owners, business and downtown representatives and other interested parties) to gauge their interest in and commitment to proceeding with the project, including detailed schematic design, cost estimating, fundraising, organizational structure, and responsibility for operations and maintenance.

### **STAFF RECOMMENDATION**

Staff recommends that the Comprehensive Planning Committee forward the draft *Saint Paul River Balcony Master Plan* to the Planning Commission with a recommendation to release the document for public review and set a public hearing for May 19, 2017.

Attachments:

*Saint Paul River Balcony Master Plan*, March 3, 2017 draft for public review

Website link: *Great River Passage Master Plan*:

[https://www.stpaul.gov/sites/default/files/Media%20Root/Planning%20%26%20Economic%20Development/GRP\\_MASTER\\_PLAN\\_June\\_27\\_2013sm\\_201312201553296331.pdf](https://www.stpaul.gov/sites/default/files/Media%20Root/Planning%20%26%20Economic%20Development/GRP_MASTER_PLAN_June_27_2013sm_201312201553296331.pdf)