

Preston Historic Campus and Riverfront Master Plan

**Telling the Story of the River,
Agriculture, and the Railroad**

Resolutions of Master Plan Support:

Preston Economic Development Authority (EDA) 06-25-2025

Preston Area Chamber of Commerce 07-07-2025

Preston Planning & Zoning Committee (P&Z) 07-21-2025

Preston City Council 07-21-2025

Master Plan Adoption:

Preston Historical Society (PHS) 08-07-2025

April, 2026

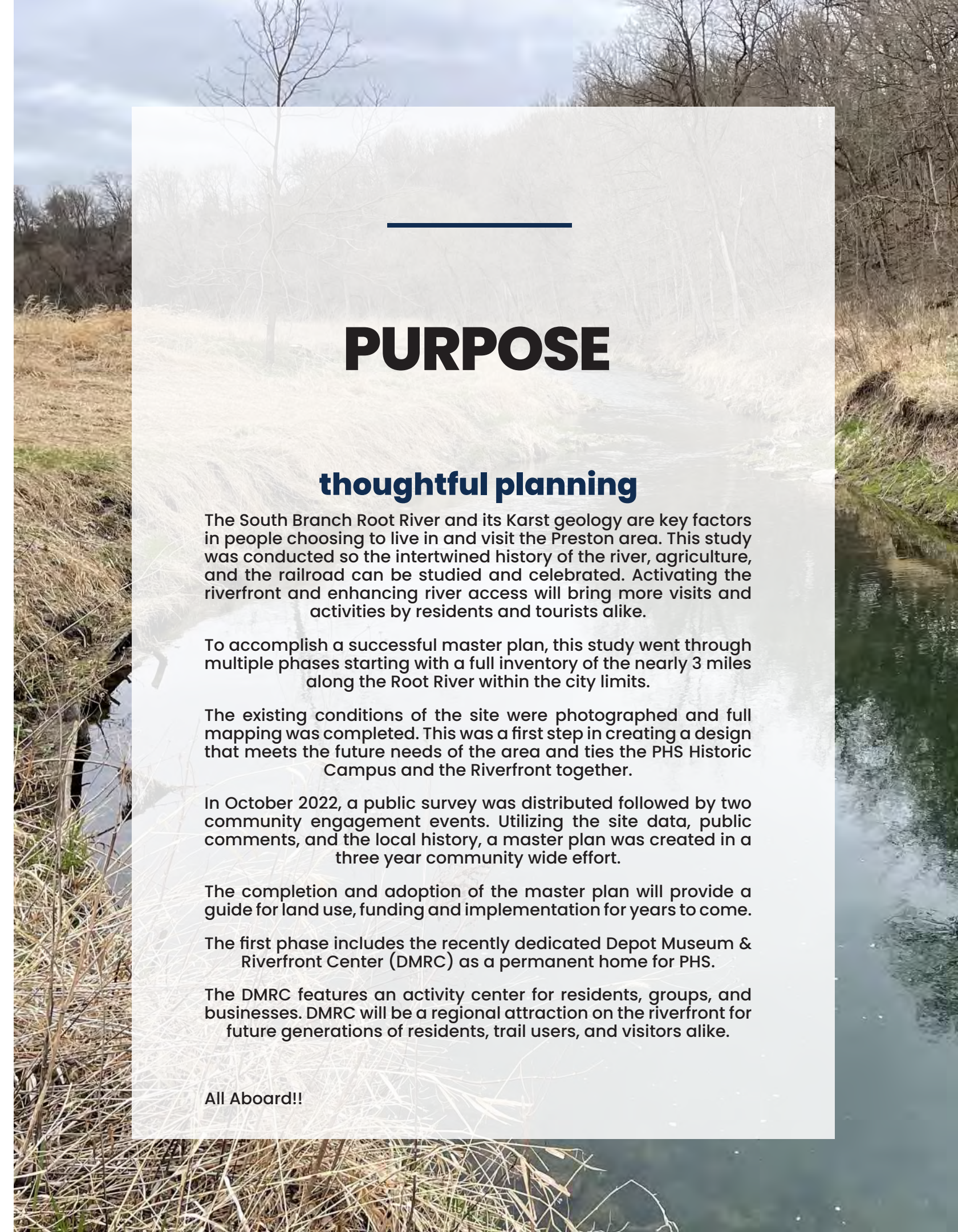


**Preston Area
Chamber
of Commerce**

*City of
Preston*

WIDSETH





PURPOSE

thoughtful planning

The South Branch Root River and its Karst geology are key factors in people choosing to live in and visit the Preston area. This study was conducted so the intertwined history of the river, agriculture, and the railroad can be studied and celebrated. Activating the riverfront and enhancing river access will bring more visits and activities by residents and tourists alike.

To accomplish a successful master plan, this study went through multiple phases starting with a full inventory of the nearly 3 miles along the Root River within the city limits.

The existing conditions of the site were photographed and full mapping was completed. This was a first step in creating a design that meets the future needs of the area and ties the PHS Historic Campus and the Riverfront together.

In October 2022, a public survey was distributed followed by two community engagement events. Utilizing the site data, public comments, and the local history, a master plan was created in a three year community wide effort.

The completion and adoption of the master plan will provide a guide for land use, funding and implementation for years to come.

The first phase includes the recently dedicated Depot Museum & Riverfront Center (DMRC) as a permanent home for PHS.

The DMRC features an activity center for residents, groups, and businesses. DMRC will be a regional attraction on the riverfront for future generations of residents, trail users, and visitors alike.

All Aboard!!

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*Barb Mielke, Preston Area Community Foundation (PACF) and
Historic Campus and Riverfront Master Plan Committee*

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Preface

The Preston Historical Society (PHS) received a grant from The Southern Minnesota Initiative Foundation (SMIF) in fall 2021. PHS had been working on the Milwaukee Elevator and railroad display at the Preston DNR Trailhead and realized the need for a permanent home for its collection and activities.

The open houses at the “historic campus” – the caboose and the elevator - had attracted visitors to Preston and the Root River Trail. A theme emerged for a masterplan: Telling the Story of the River, Agriculture, and the Railroad.

As stated in the SMIF grant application: “The execution of a master plan will provide year round opportunities for Preston and Fillmore County residents but also for the surrounding cities and counties in S.E. Minnesota. The project will expand utilization of the DNR State Trail and attract multi-day visits from both Minnesota and nearby states”.

Community participation was critical to the success of the effort. A “Master plan” committee was formed representing local organizations, city boards and commissions, and business leaders. F&M Community Bank offered use of their Community Room, and the committee started monthly meetings December 6, 2021.

Preston Area Community Foundation (PACF) provided funding for a video to share the goals of the project and create public interest and support.

In spring 2022 the WiDSETH planning and engineering office in Rochester was chosen to lead the “conceptual planning” for the campus and the riverfront. A POET grant added resources for the planning work and public outreach.

Preliminary plans were shared at a Community Engagement meeting at the Preston United Methodist Church on October 26, 2022, with over 50 attendees. Based on public input, WiDSETH previewed a conceptual plan at a second meeting on April 25, 2023.

The Master Plan Committee has continued its work focusing on a home for PHS and an event center: Depot Museum & Riverfront Center.

We thank everyone for their donations, input, and encouragement for this three year effort and welcome your continued interest and involvement.

ALL ABOARD!!

identified needs



Step 1

The very first step of the project was collecting the identified needs from a broad range and demographic of residents in Preston. This list gave some starting direction as to what should be looked at throughout the entirety of the project.



REALISTIC THAT IT WILL HAVE TO BE PHASED

MORE SEATING ALONG THE RIVERFRONT

ACQUIRING AND CLEANING VACANT AND ABANDONED SITES

NATIVE HABITAT RESTORATION

HISTORIC RAILROAD AND BUSINESS SIGNAGE WITH A FOCUS ON THE MILL STREET PARK AREA

GAZEBO, ACCESS TO RIVER FOR FISHING

ADA FISHING RIVER ACCESS

MULTIPLE AREAS FOR PICNICS, GRILLS, AND GATHERINGS

"GATEWAY" WHEN COMING INTO TOWN WITH SIGNAGE

BEAUTIFY TRAILS - ADD BENCHES & SIGNAGE

AREA IS A MAGNET

MN. TROUT UNLIMITED GRANT FOR THE REMAINING RIVERFRONT NOT YET STABILIZED.



RIVER ROAD PROPERTY AT "OXBOW" ON RIVER - NEW "RIVERFRONT PARK & FISHING PRESERVE".

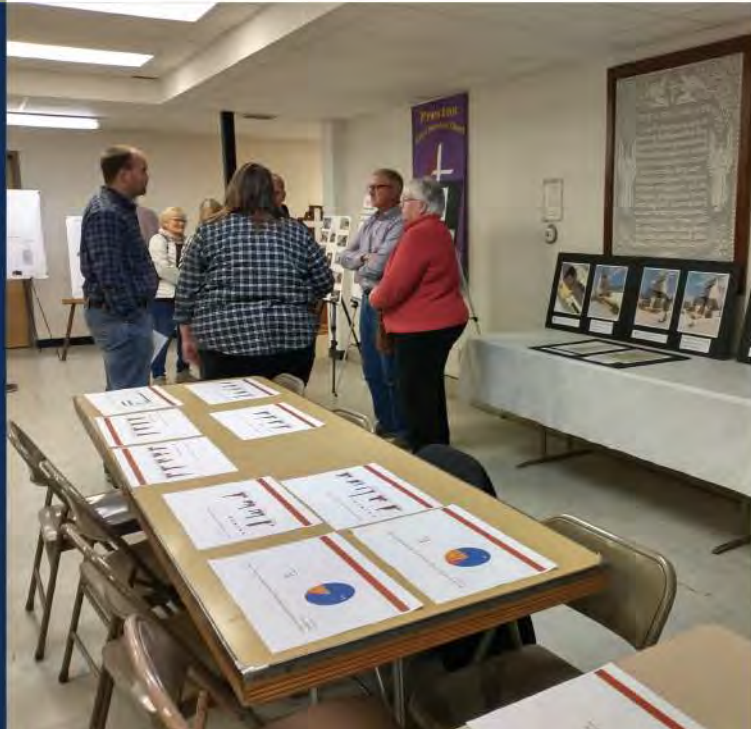
DOG PARK WITH PUBLIC SEATING AND VIEWING

RECONSTRUCTED "DEPOT" - PHS HOME, MUSEUM, AND ACTIVITY CENTER.

ACCESSIBLE UPDATED & LARGER PLAYGROUND

ENTERTAINMENT/ GROUP EVENT-MUSIC VENUE

**community
engagement**



Inventory & Analysis

Inventory

Preston is the county seat of Fillmore County. With its proximity to the Root River Trail, fishing streams, and larger neighboring towns, any enhancement to the proposed site will benefit all area residents and Minnesota as a whole for many years to come.

It was determined early on that for the benefit of the community and success of this master plan, the expanse of the 3-mile riverfront must tie in seamlessly with the Historic Campus expansion.

Walking the entirety of the riverfront gives a sense of what already exists and what could be added to activate the Trailhead Park area. What areas are people wanting to visit the most? Where should new parking be provided? What natural views should be highlighted and preserved? At what points along the riverfront are visitors cutoff from accessing the river? Where is ADA access missing? These are just a few of the questions looked at during the study.

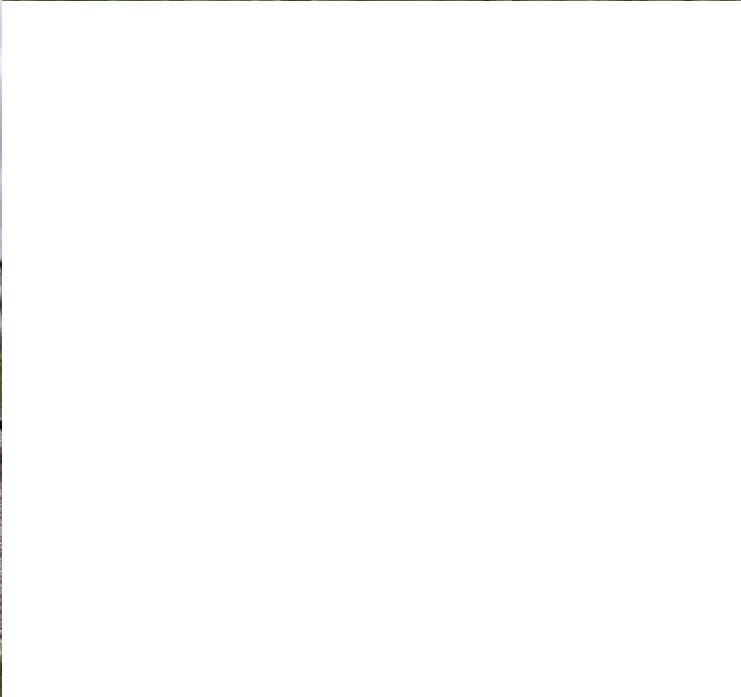


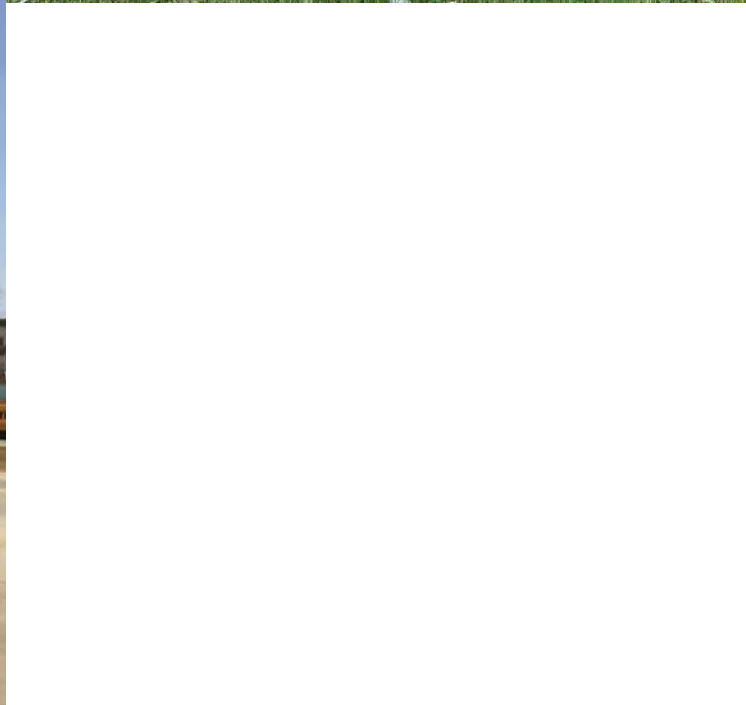




existing conditions







existing conditions



Project Boundary

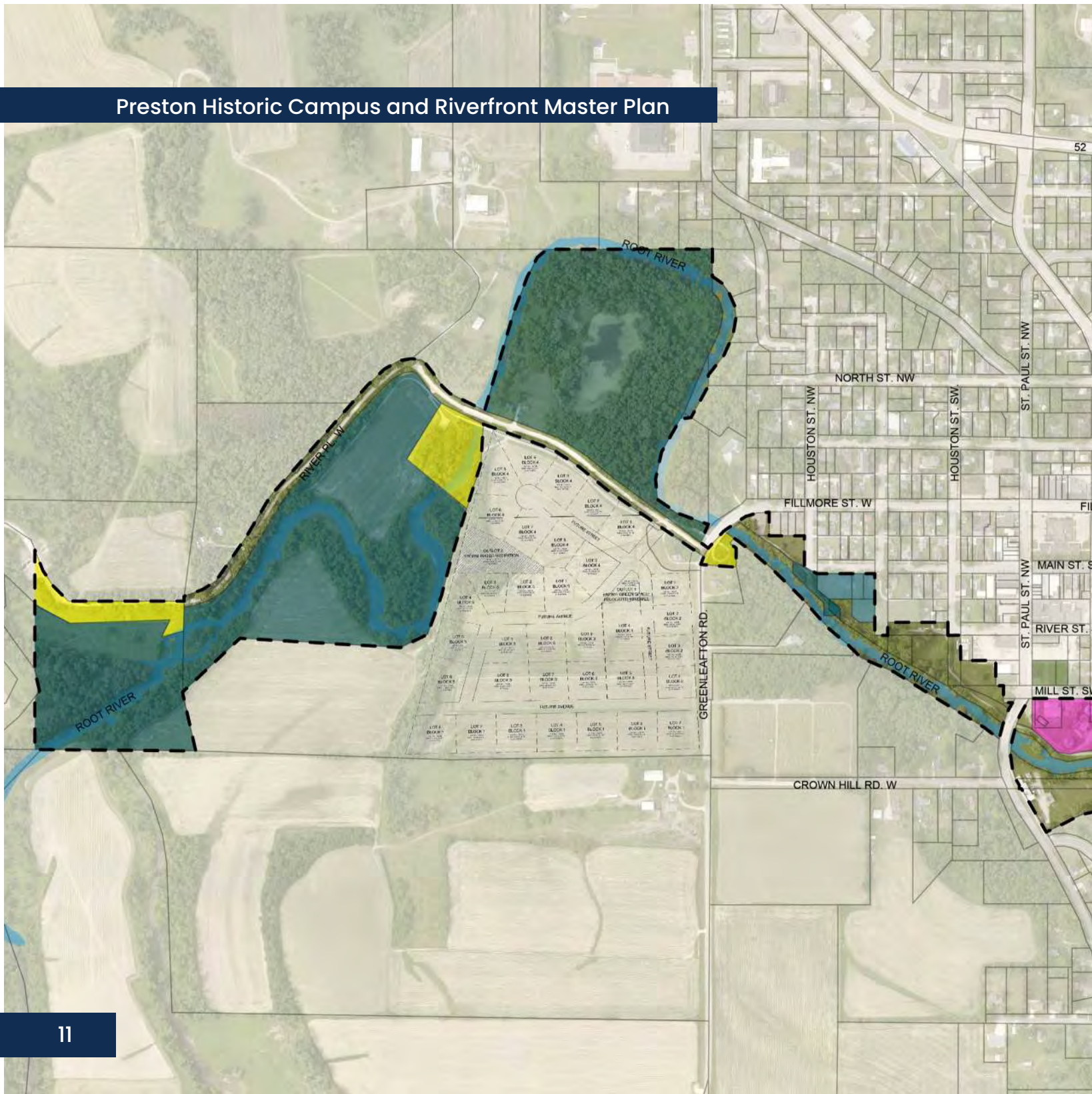
Preston Historic Campus and Riverfront Master Plan

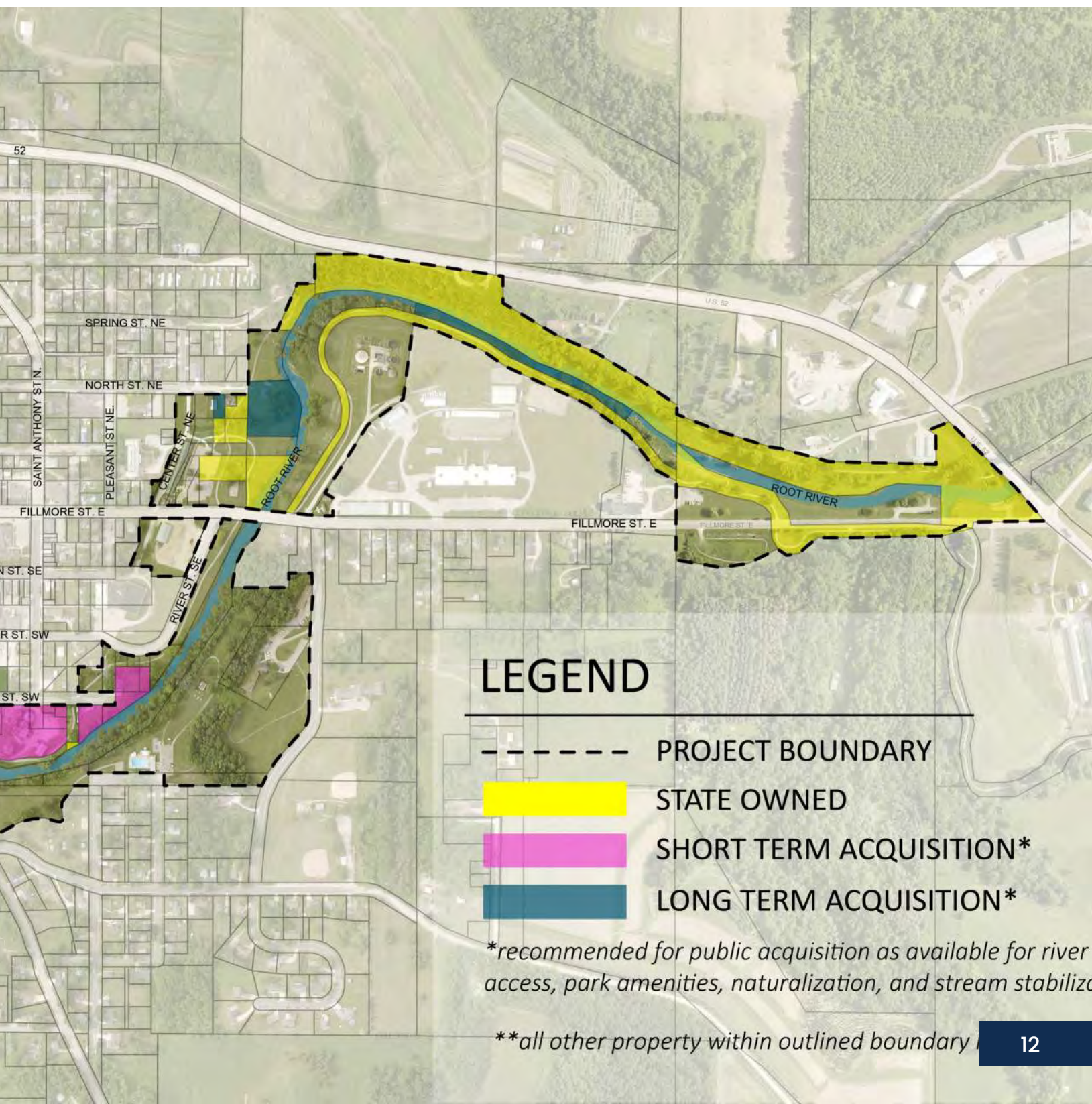




Parcel Ownership

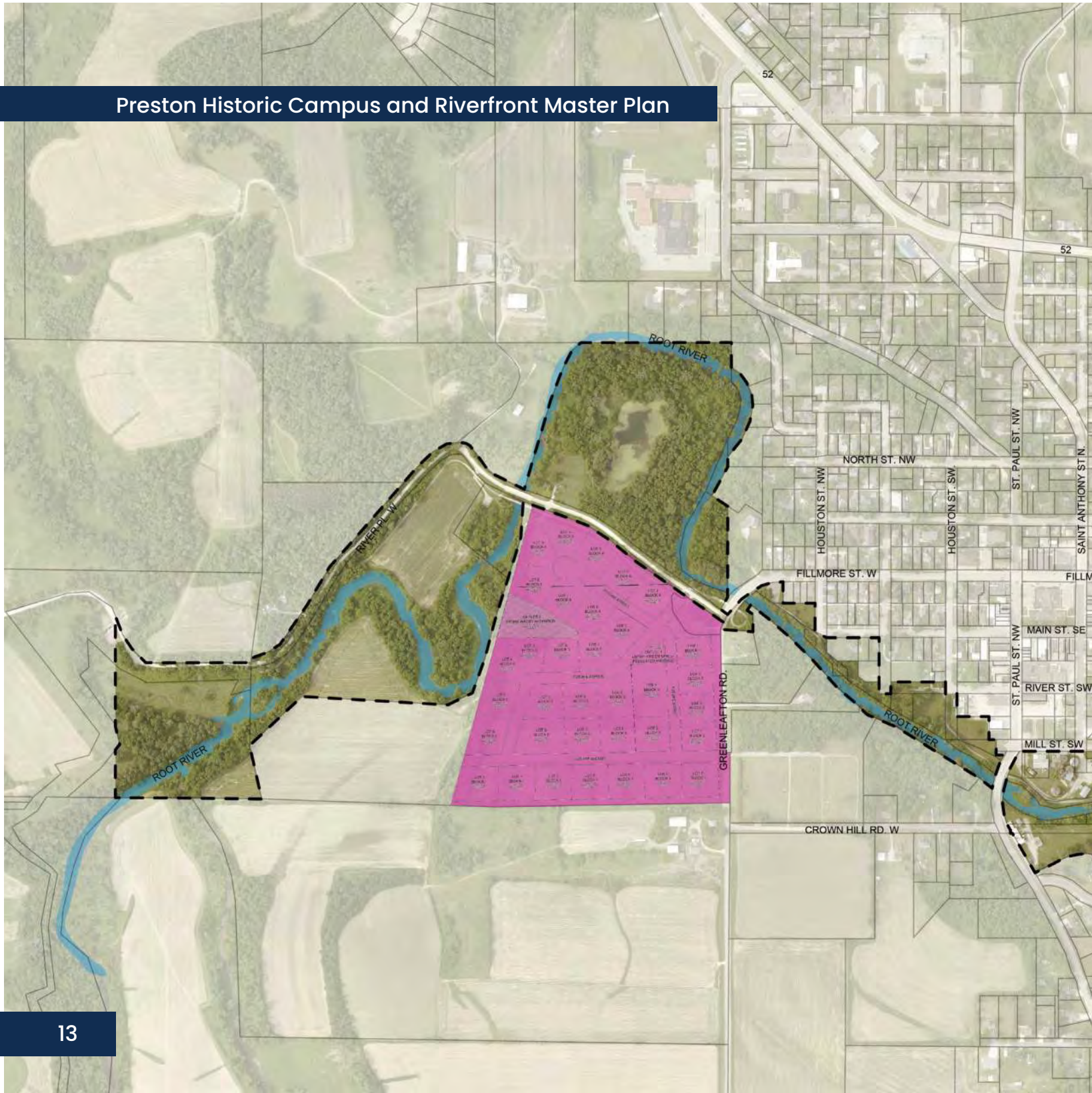
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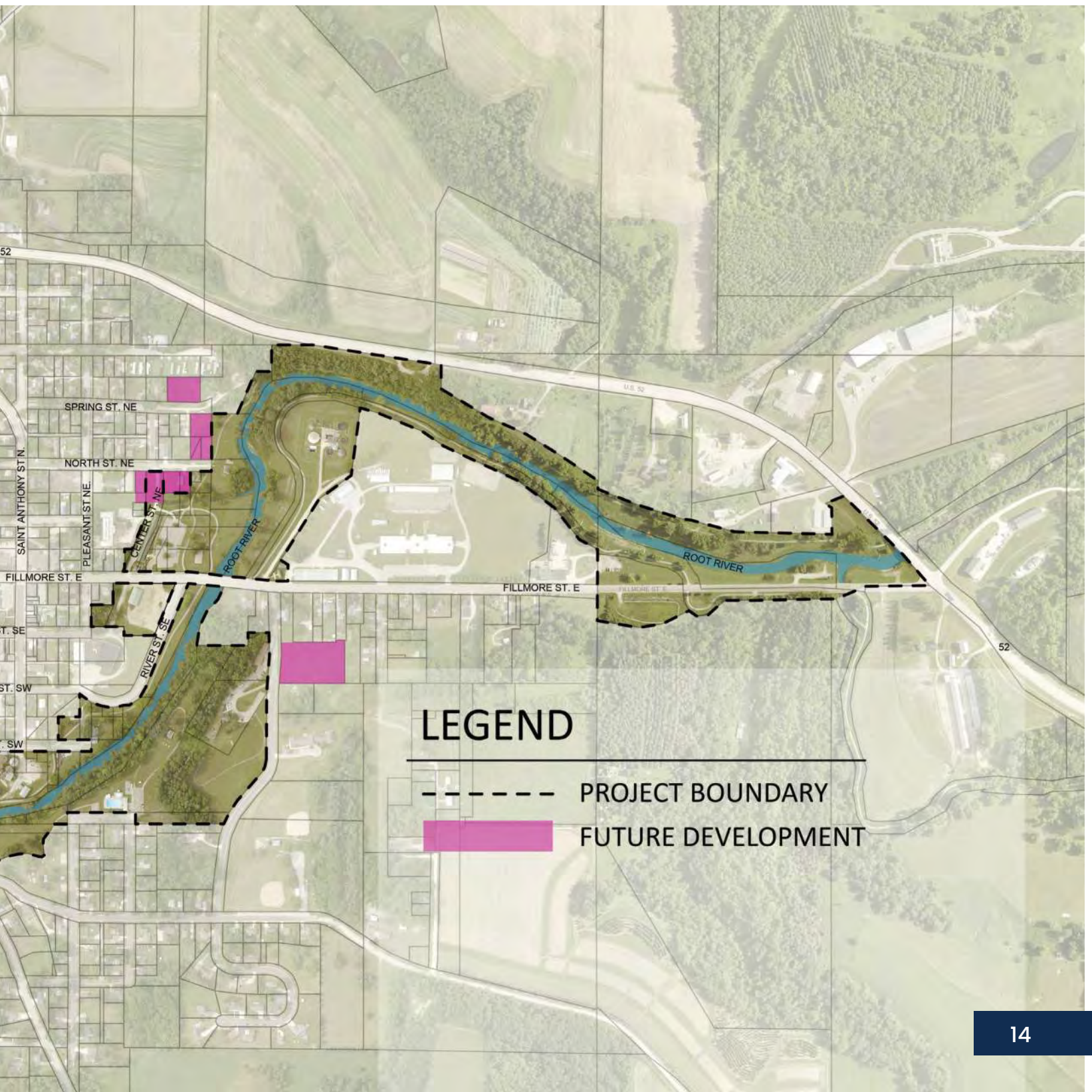




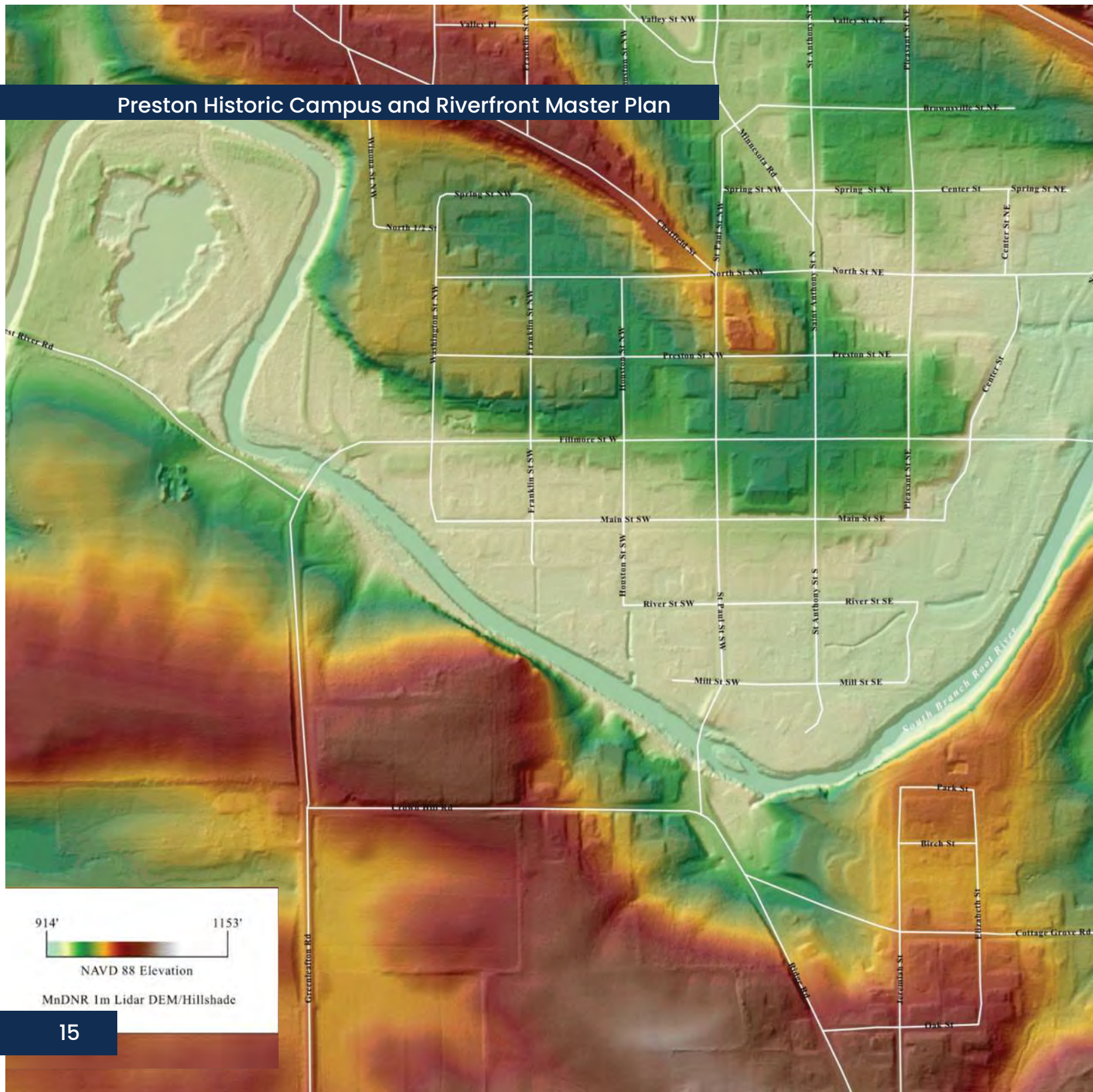
Future Development

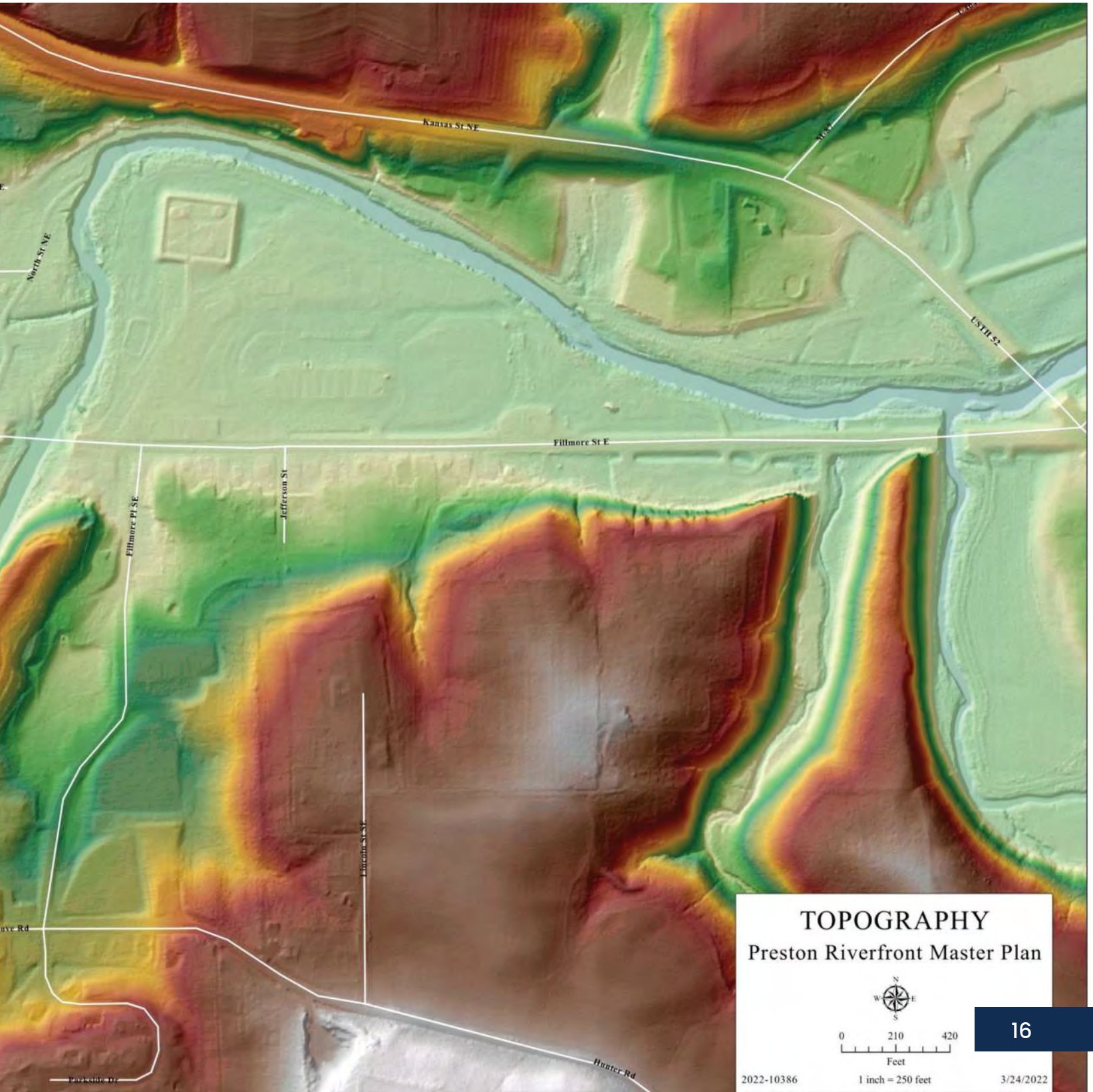
Preston Historic Campus and Riverfront Master Plan





Topography





TOPOGRAPHY
Preston Riverfront Master Plan

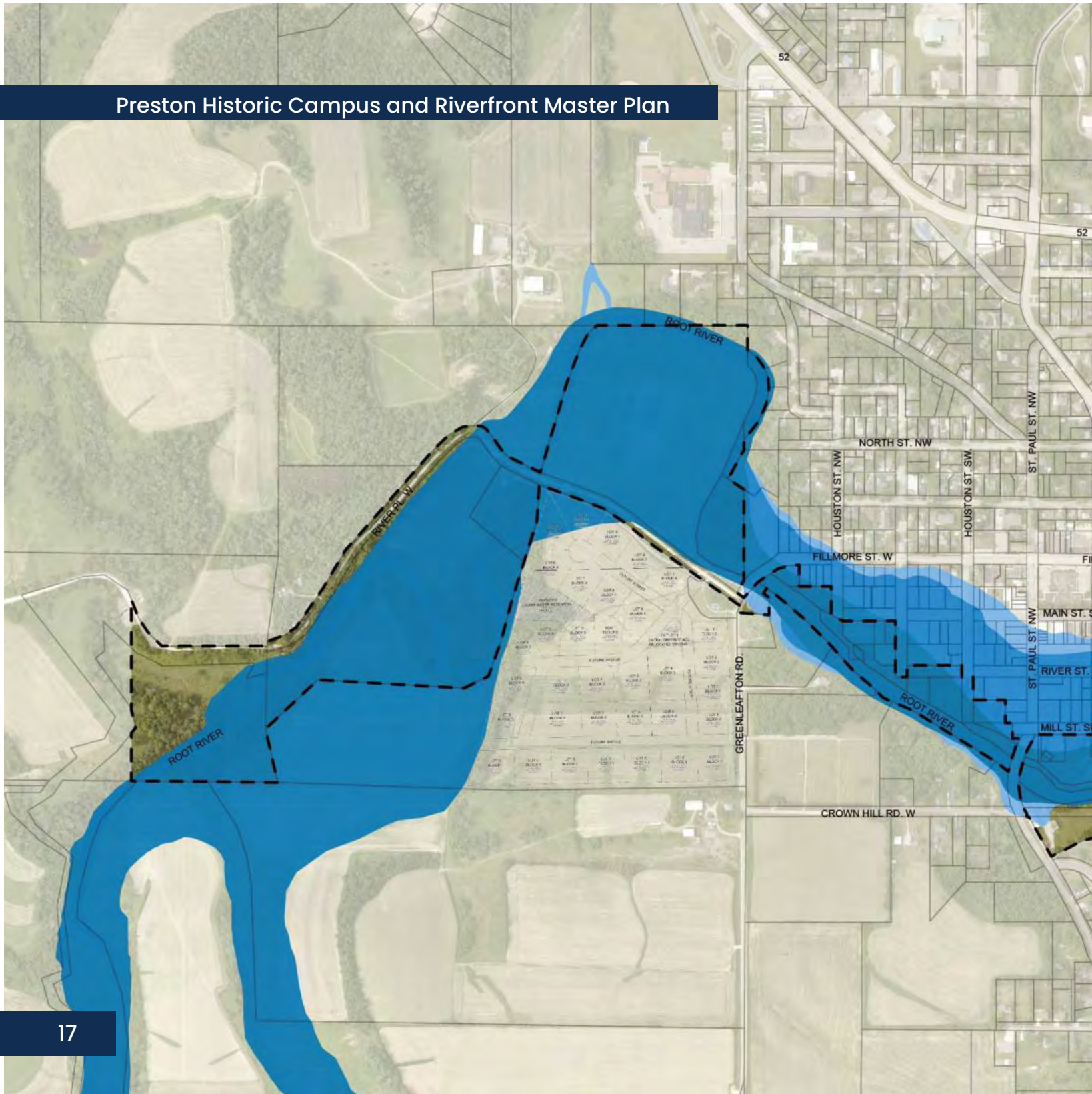


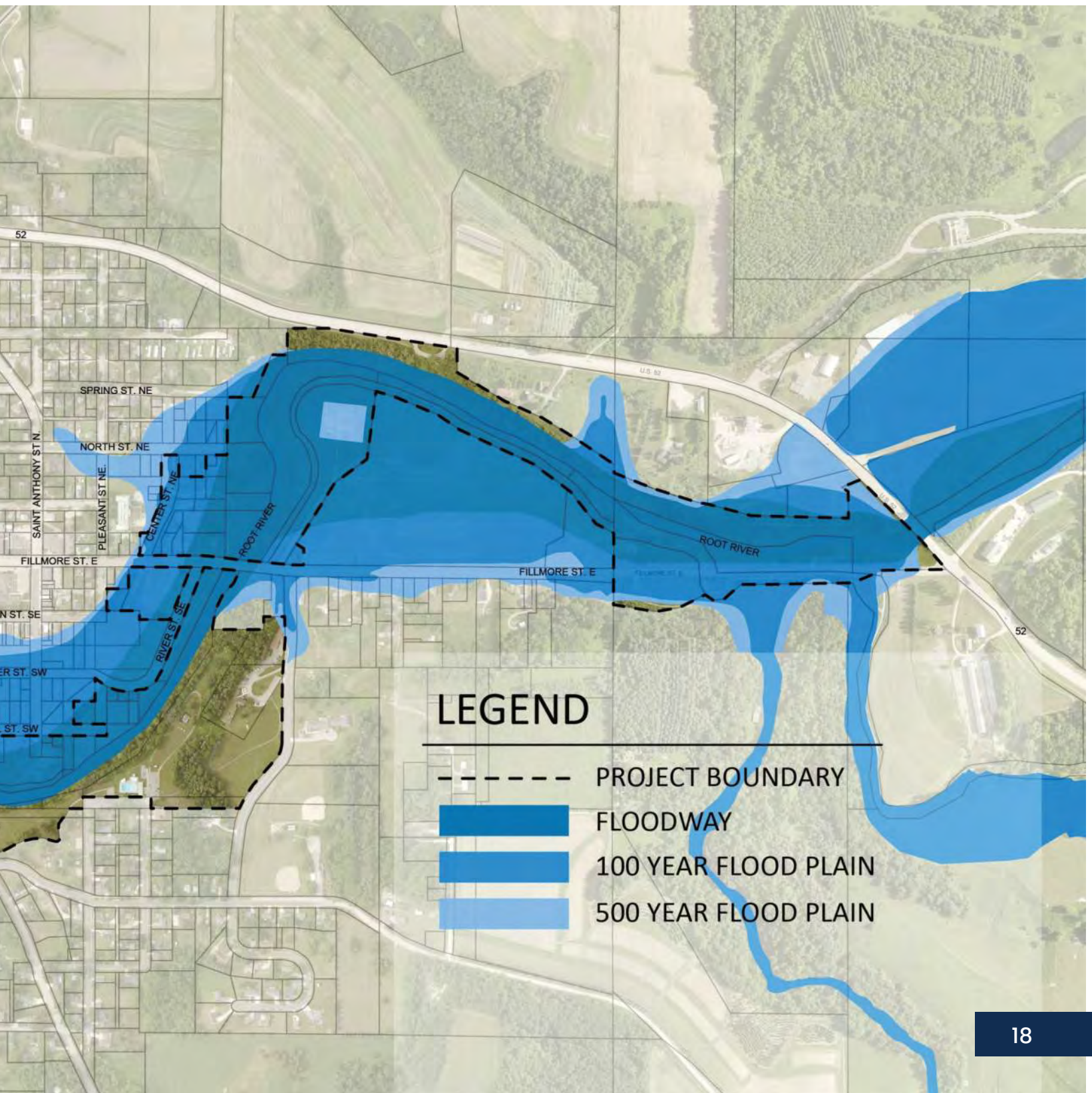
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Feet
1 inch = 250 feet

2022-10386 3/24/2022

Floodplain & Floodway

Preston Historic Campus and Riverfront Master Plan





300' River Setback

Preston Historic Campus and Riverfront Master Plan



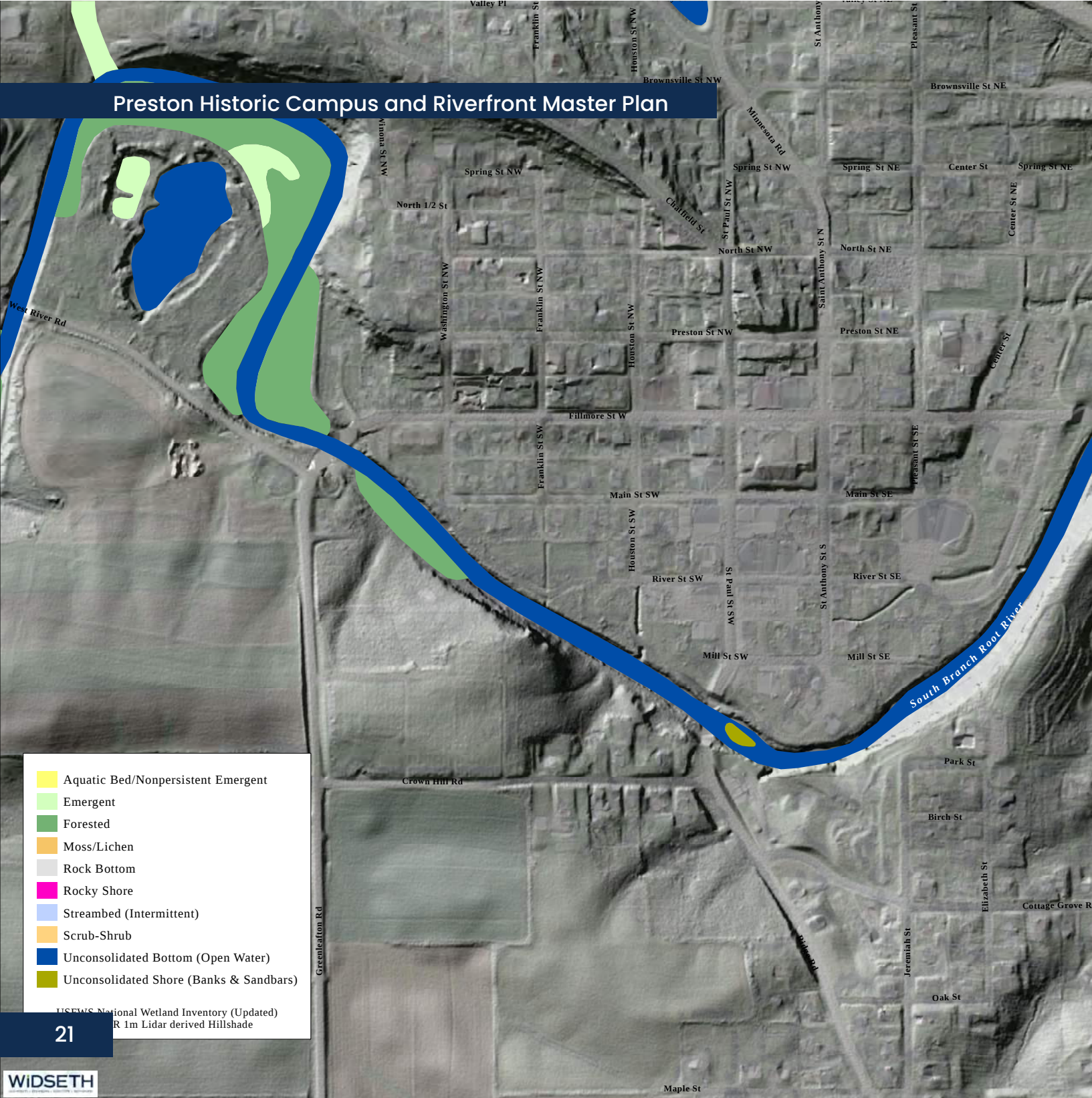


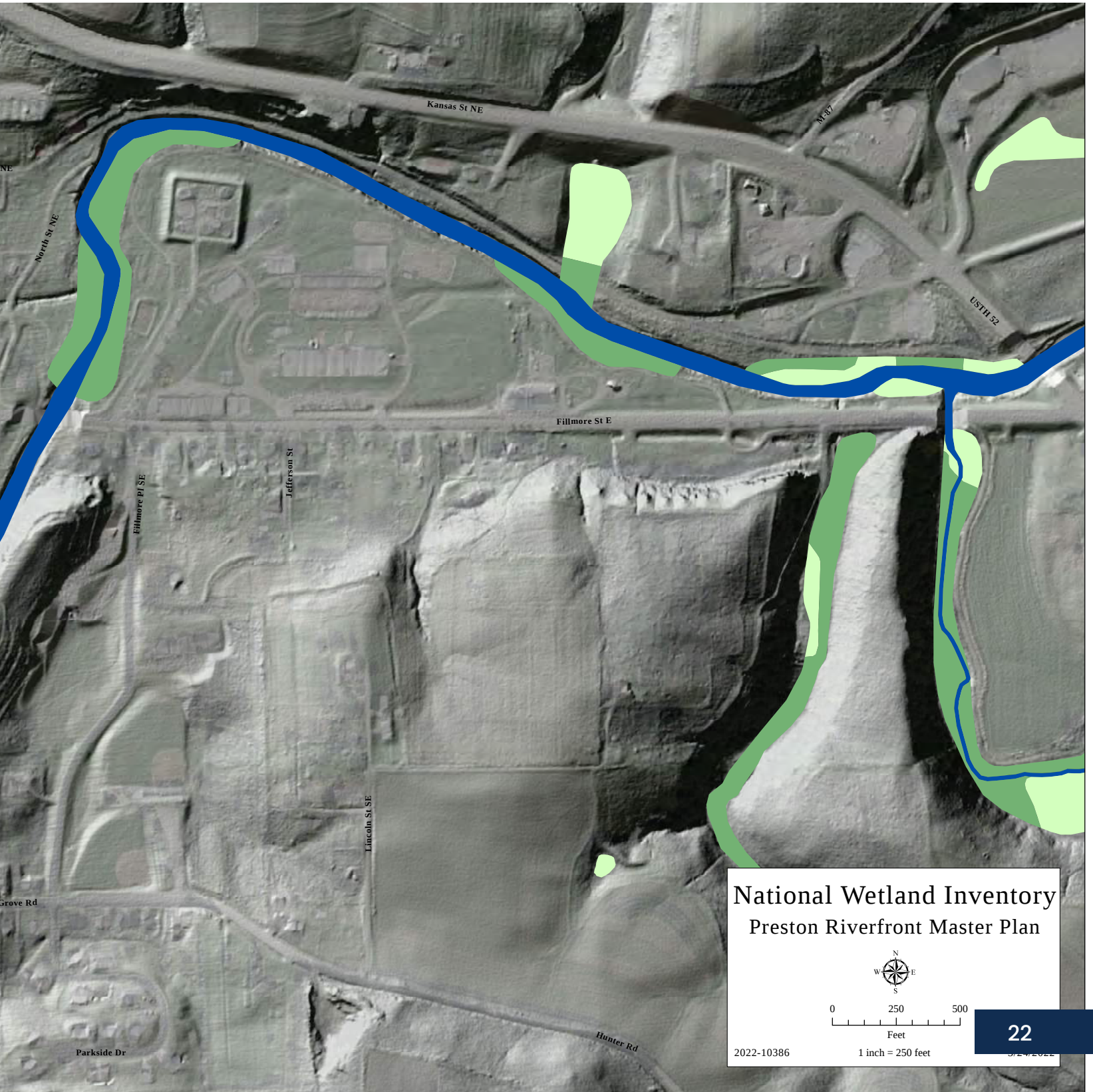
300' SETBACK
Preston Riverfront Master Plan

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Feet
1 inch = 250 feet

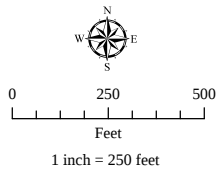
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Wetland Inventory





National Wetland Inventory
Preston Riverfront Master Plan



2022-10386

case study

Analysis

In our analysis, we examined the existing maps and site conditions to identify areas for improvement. What was missing from the site that could benefit the community? What were other communities of similar size and geography doing to enhance their spaces?

We observed that many of the current amenities on the site were areas that visitors simply passed through, but few stayed for extended periods. To address this, we focused on establishing new and unique attractions along the Preston Riverfront, creating places that would encourage visitors to linger and explore.

Attractive, engaging elements not only contribute to a more vibrant, lively park but also enhance safety and security. Furthermore, these improvements can drive economic benefits for local businesses as both residents and visitors are more likely to return and stay longer.

While every aspect of the site was considered, three key areas emerged as focal points for improvement.

PEDESTRIAN ACCESS SEPARATION

Trailhead Park and the DMRC site location are separated by busy Fillmore Street which is an unsafe intersection to cross and does not feel like one site/ park. Enhanced safety measures are needed for crossing Fillmore Street.

LARGE FIELDS OF TURF GRASS

The riverfront currently houses large fields of turf grass which is not native or beneficial to the area. Certain areas were determined to remain as turf grass for recreational uses, but other areas that are less utilized or are between destinations along the Root River could be re-naturalized. Re-naturalizing the riverfront not only celebrates its natural history but also reduces maintenance and restores habitat.

ADA ACCESS

Improving accessibility throughout the campus and riverfront areas is important to Preston and PHS. New direct ADA access points to the river for fishing and recreational activities are needed. The design of the historic campus elements including elevator, rail display, and reconstructed depot will also need to incorporate full ADA access.



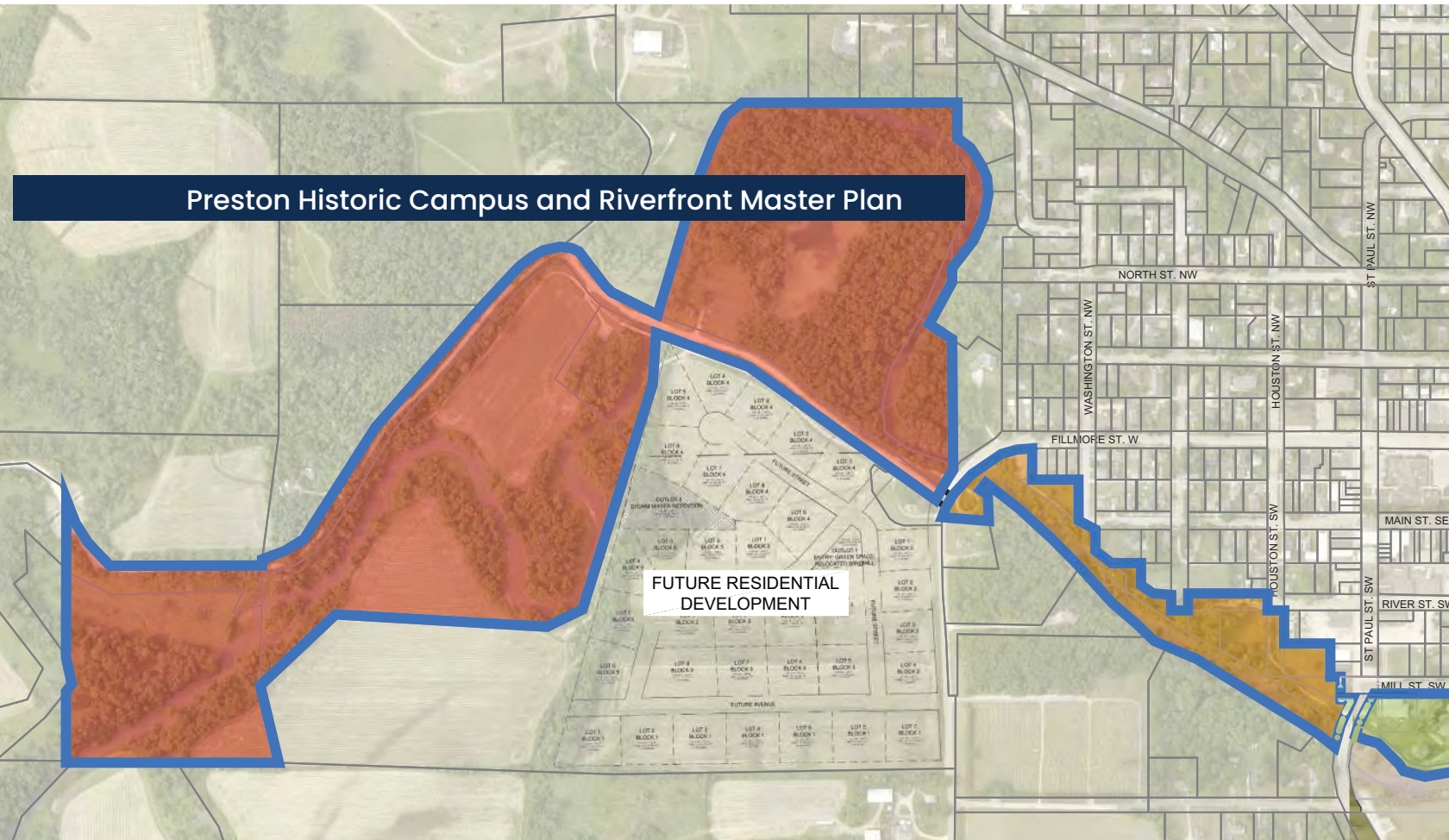


DEPOT MUSEUM & HISTORIC CAMPUS

RIVERFRONT AMENITIES & PARKS

**RIVER STABILIZATION, ENHANCEMENT, AND
PUBLIC/ ADA ACCESS**

Preston Historic Campus and Riverfront Master Plan



RIVER WEST

Trails, fishing areas, lake/ nature preservaiton, parking

West Bridge - Pines - “Trout Unlimited” - Phase III

Landscaping, paved parking, Kayak launch, lighting, restrooms

Add missing riverfront segment - River Road/ “Oxbow Site” for trails/ park and riverfront improvements.

Native plant areas - trees, floral, grasses

Direct ADA river access

TOWN RIVERFRONT

Bridges, parking areas, walkways

Handicapped & other viewing/ fishing access points

Signage - all types - historic, access, natural features

Native plant areas - trees, floral, grasses

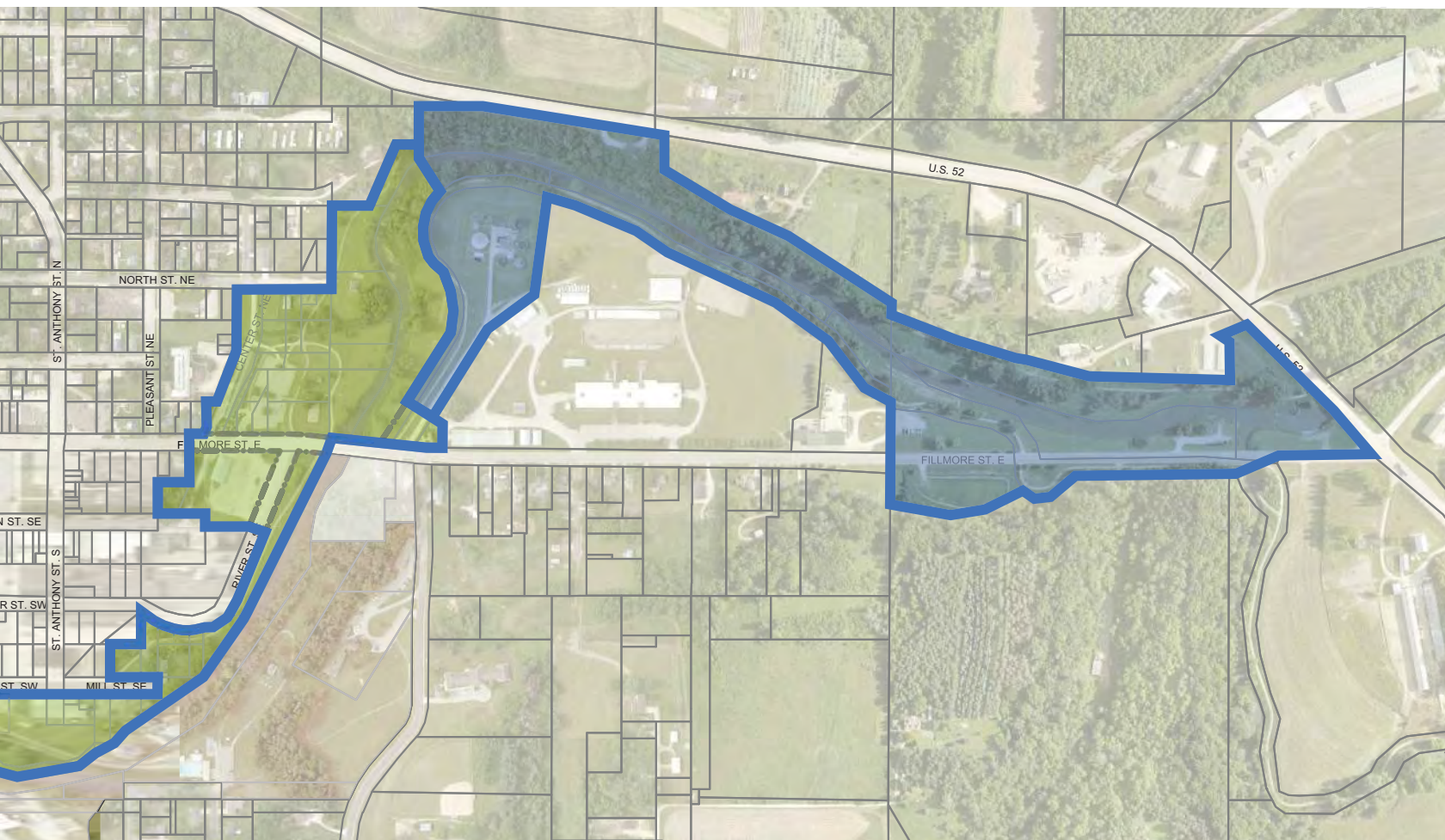
Rest stops, bike racks & seating along riverfront

St. Paul St. - West Bridge - “Trout Unlimited” - Phase II

Upgrade West Bridge Kayak Launch - restrooms, etc.

Possible Dog Park

Direct ADA river access



HISTORY CAMPUS/ RAILYARD

Milwaukee Elevator preservation and enhancement

Reconstructed “depot” and museum (DMRC)

Parking, pedestrian/ handicap access, landscaping

Historic business/ rail structures/ natural features/ signage

Wayfinding to downtown and riverfront amenities

Rest stops, bike racks & seating along riverfront

Enhanced “natural” playground - all age groups

Frisbee Golf & other outdoor recreation areas

Sheltered gathering spots - riverbend, etc.

Highlighting natural features - wildlife, cliffs, etc.

“Story-Book” trail with Preston Public Library

Direct ADA access to river

Added safety crosswalk (railroad theme) for Fillmore Street

Covered patio/ performance stage at Depot (DMRC).

Fishing/ viewing/ gathering park at Riverbend/ Mill St. Site

RIVER EAST

Restroom, landscape, paved parking, signage, lighting

Handicapped and other pedestrian access points

Signage - all types - historic, directional, natural features

Bluebird/ Other bird houses

Native plant areas - trees, floral, grasses

Rest stops, bike racks & seating along riverfront

Upgrade Pooler Park

Direct ADA river access

Historic Campus Master Plan

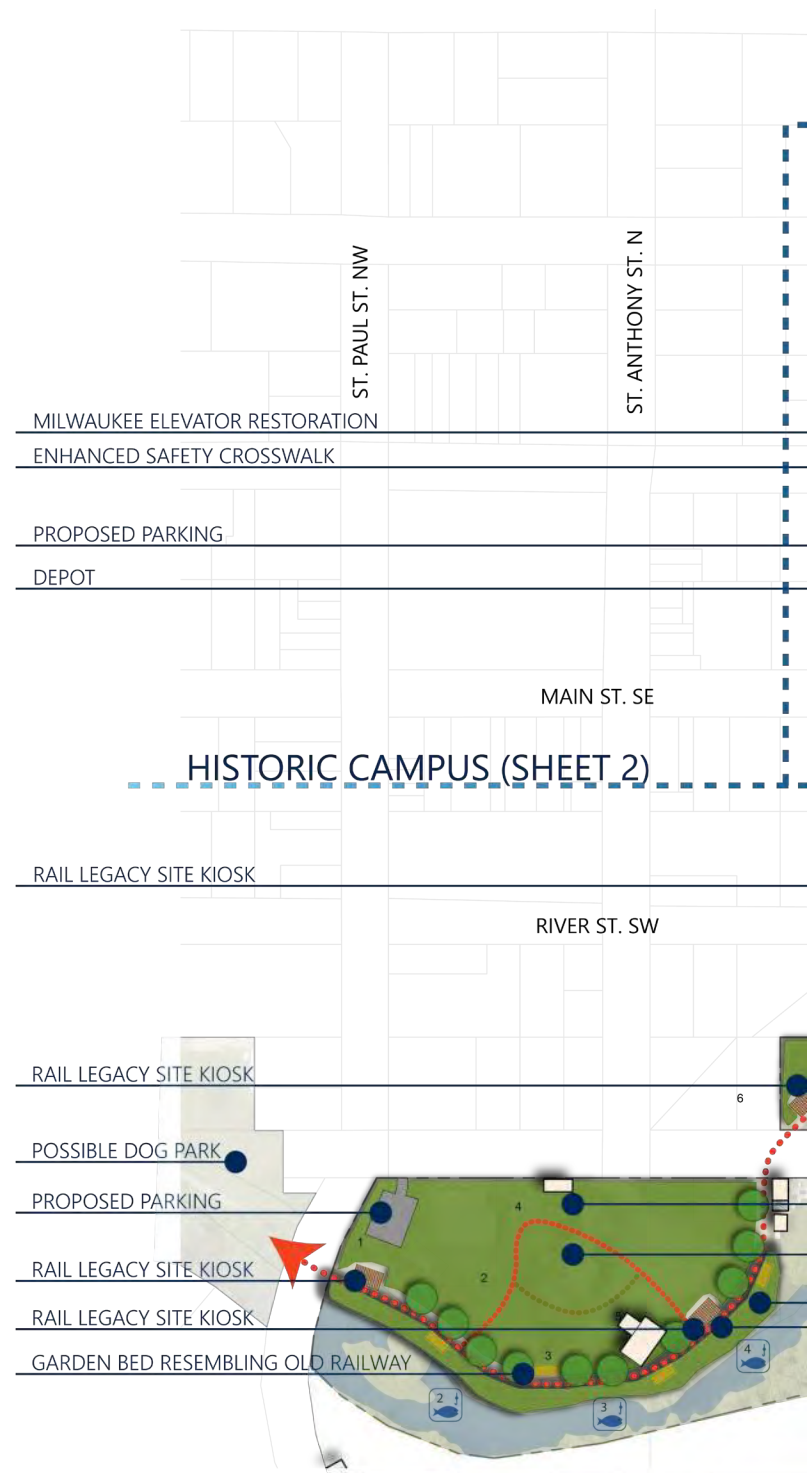
The historic campus begins at Trailhead Park and continues along the Root River trail Southwest towards the proposed Mill Street Park. It was important that no matter what one might be coming to the site to see, the trails would be enough of a reason to stay parked and walk or bike between both ends or through downtown.

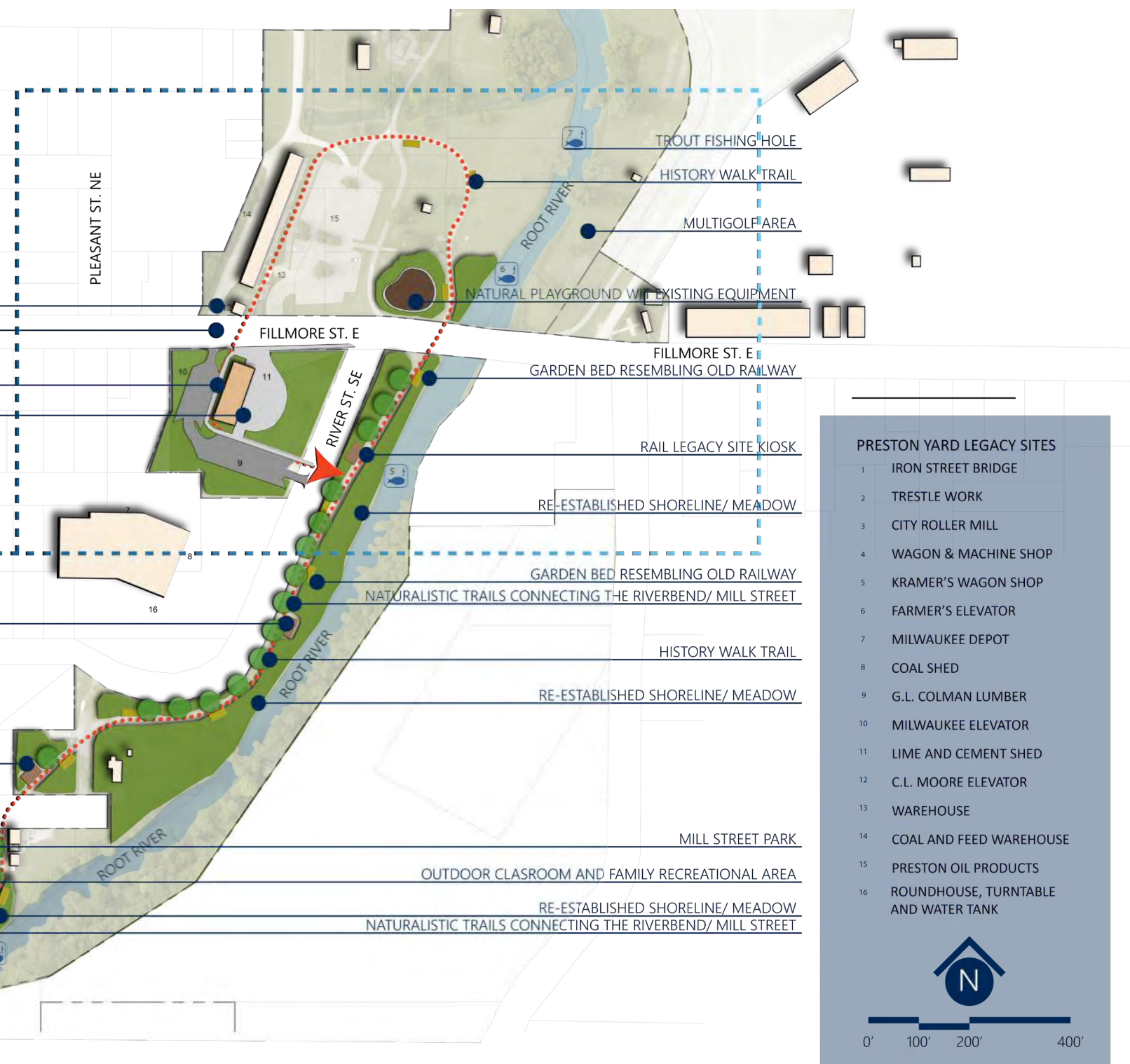
Parking was added so visitors can go to either end of the Historic Campus and easily walk along the naturalistic paths connecting Mill Street Park to the historic campus. Along this section of the trail, accessible benches were added as well as rail industrial inspired kiosks highlighting the different legacy sites that once played key roles in the rail industry here. Some of these kiosks would be educational signs, while others could be interactive to engage younger ages in learning about the history of Preston.

Vegetation would frame the pathway along a riverfront creating a naturalistic park setting. The proposed Mill Street Park will serve as a great location for future events and family activities, capitalizing on the views of the existing bluffs as a backdrop.



rail legacy site kiosk





Trailhead Park/ Depot Site Plan

The Historic Campus through this design becomes the recreational and historical hub of Preston, Minnesota. This space needs to be one that the Preston Historical Society could use for generations to come for meetings, cataloguing and displaying historic artifacts, hosting events, and much more. Providing a space that is exciting to work in and be in drives participation for current members as well as future members. History is not just what happened in the pre- 20th century, but what is happening now as well. It is recognized that the space needs to be one the Preston Historical Society can use, but also needs to be one the general community can enjoy and use as well.

The depot or DMRC space replicates elements of the old depot that once stood a block South and in the same orientation to the historic railyard tracks. The DMRC would face the river with views of the cliff sides and large open plaza space. The covered patio and plaza serves as an event space. People can bring chairs or stand in the plaza while the mound behind the plaza creates a natural seating berm (site of the two previously demolished buildings).

With the DMRC on the South side of Fillmore Street and the Milwaukee elevator, playground, and recreational area on the North, safe crossing becomes vital to connecting these two areas, so it feels like one park. Different methods are proposed in this design from large decorative signage on both ends getting vehicles attention as well as flashers and digital crossing signs. Markings in the pavement help to connect the two plazas so it can begin to feel like one park ignoring the feeling of a large road in-between.

The playground currently is slightly undersized for being a destination playground, so it is proposed that a large fully accessible natural playground be added, blending into the surrounding landscape.

With families visiting the playground, people coming to enjoy the world-renowned fishing at the new access points, visitors interacting with the preserved history of Preston, and reconnecting with nature, the Preston Historic Campus becomes a one-of-a-kind destination for tourists and residents alike.

SCREENING/ BUFFER

RAILROAD PATHWAY

RESTORED MILWAUKEE ELEVATOR

ADDED PEDESTRIAN CROSSING SIGNALS

PROPOSED DIAGONAL PARKING

RAILROAD PATHWAY



Preston Historic Campus and Riverfront Master Plan

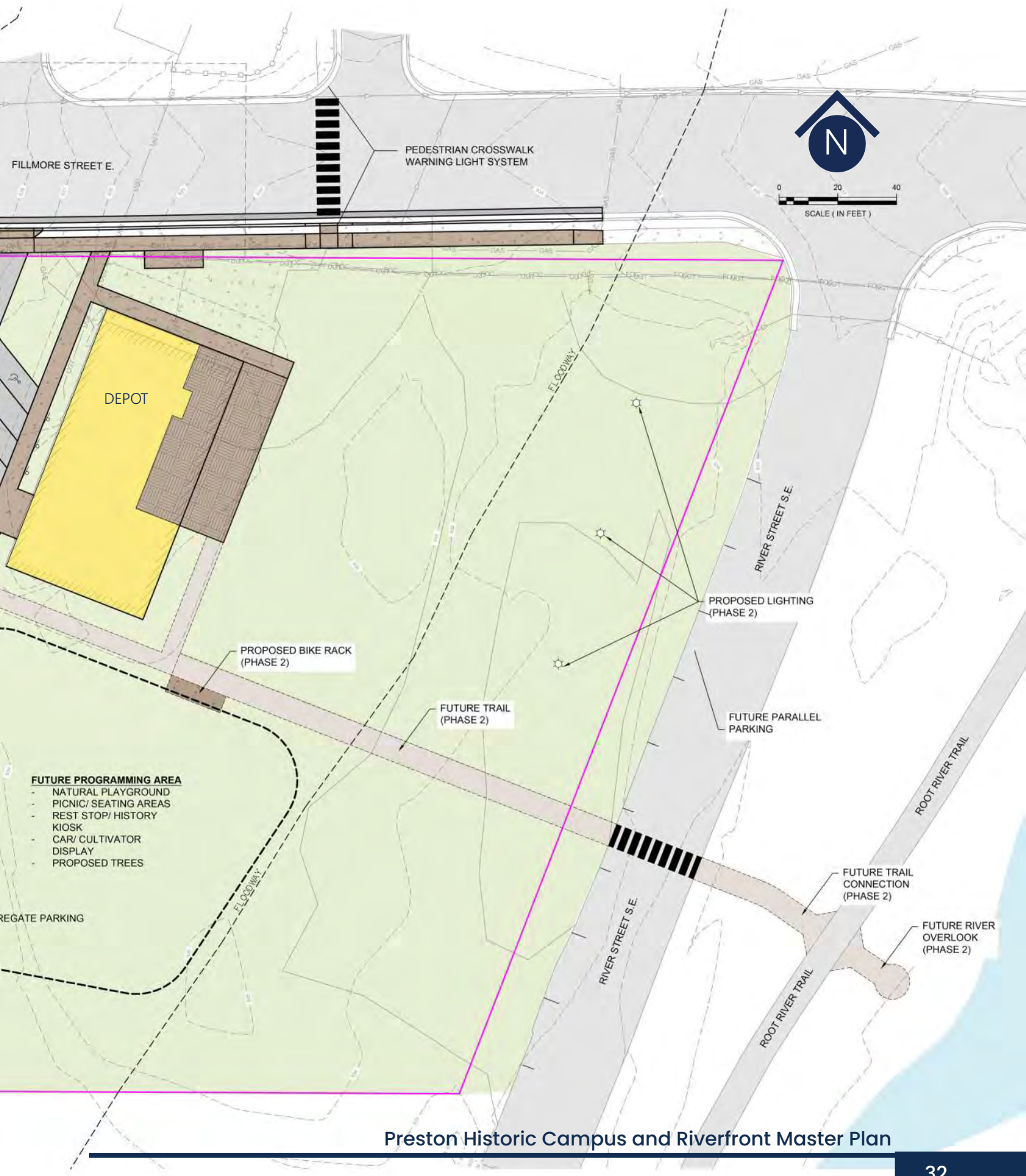
Preston Historical Society Depot Site Plan

The Historic Campus (which at the time of this master plan report includes the Milwaukee Elevator and railroad display) is now adding the depot museum (DMRC), public parking and walkways South of Fillmore Street. The Depot/ DMRC will transform the area into a hub for both the Preston Historical Society and the community, offering a space for meetings, events, and the display of historical artifacts. The goal is to create an inspiring and accessible environment that encourages participation from both current and future members.

The new depot will be located in the same orientation as the original, with views of the river and cliffs. The adjacent grass plaza, future berm, and covered patio will serve as an event space, with a natural seating berm formed by the site of two demolished buildings. A designated crosswalk will connect the South side of Fillmore Street (depot) to the North side (playground and recreation), with pedestrian activated signals. Future ADA river access is to be added along the Root River Trail.

As construction progresses, the Historic Campus will become a unique destination, offering visitors a chance to explore Preston's history, enjoy nature, and take part in recreational activities.





Depot Museum

Preston Depot, Combination Passenger and Freight, 1897–1980

Chicago, Milwaukee, St. Paul and Pacific Railroad (CMStP&P)
known as the “Milwaukee Road” (reporting mark MILW)



Photo Credits: Walter Dunlap, John C. Luecke, Ted Schnepf & Public Domain



Depot Floor Plan

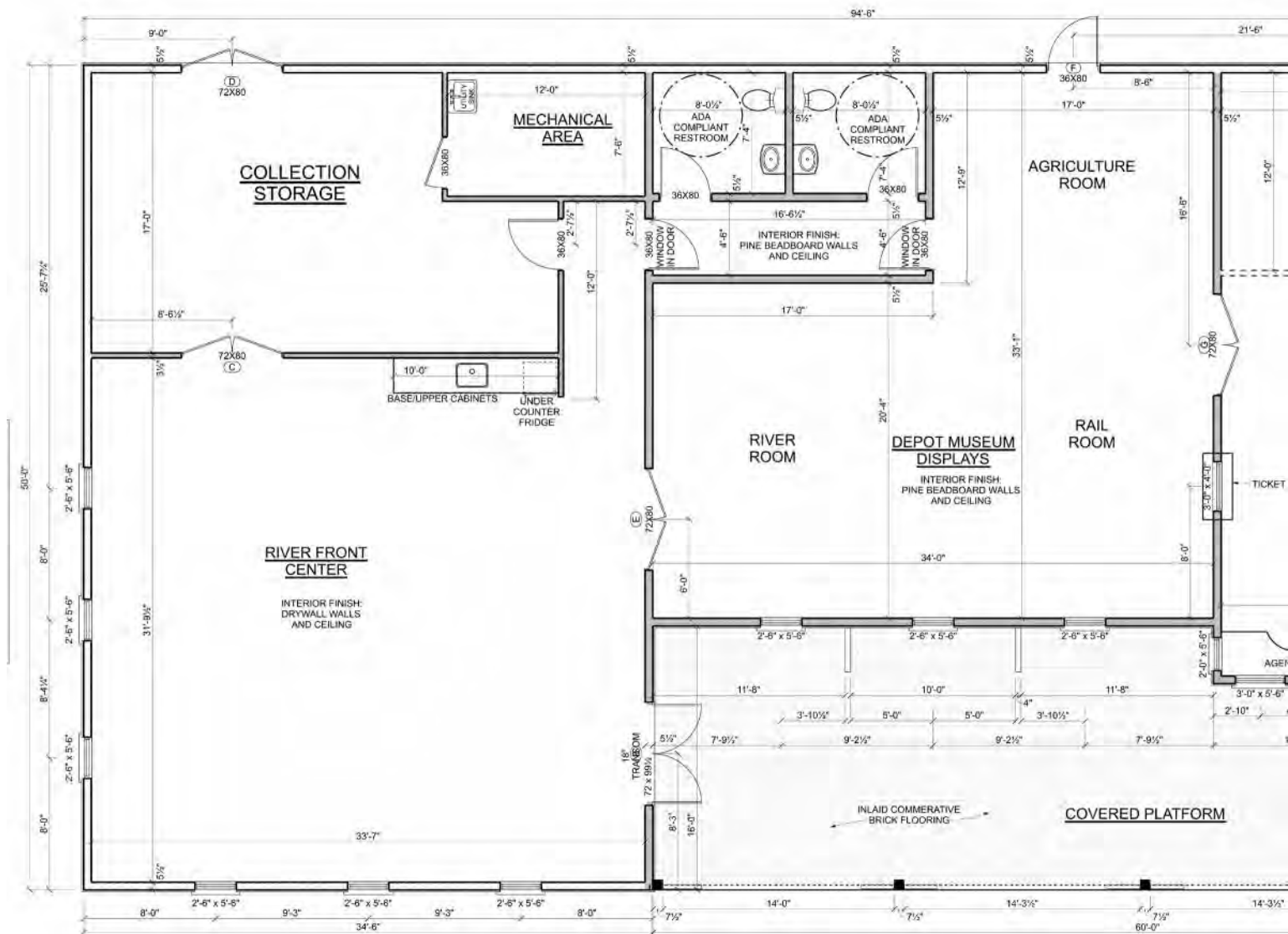


Photo and Plan Credit: Shawn C. Saltou Owner/ Designer MIDWEST Drafting & Design.



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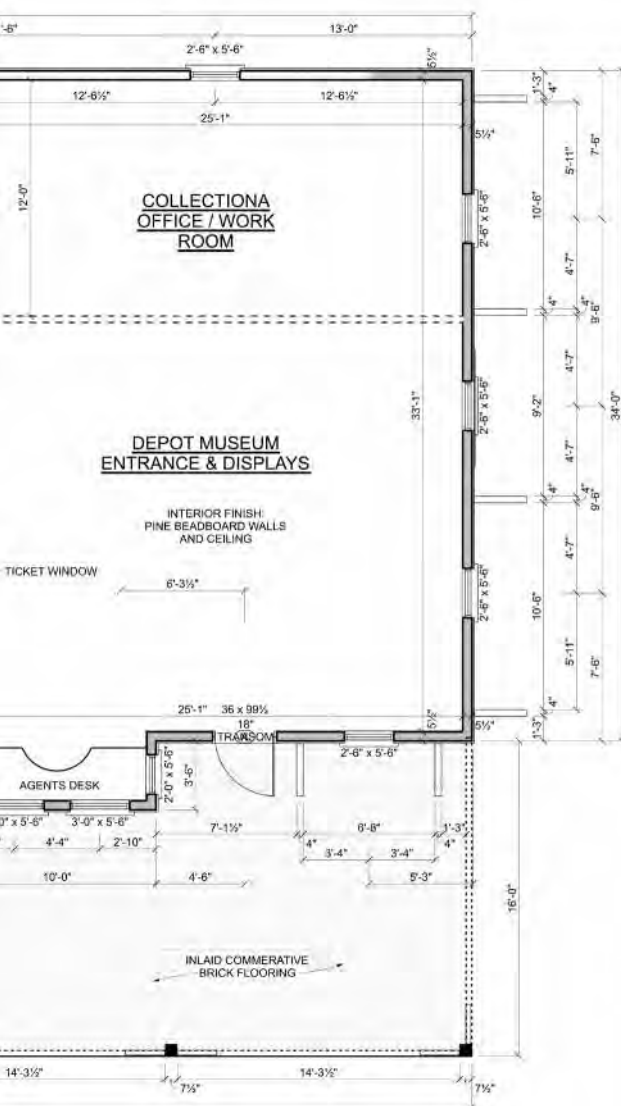
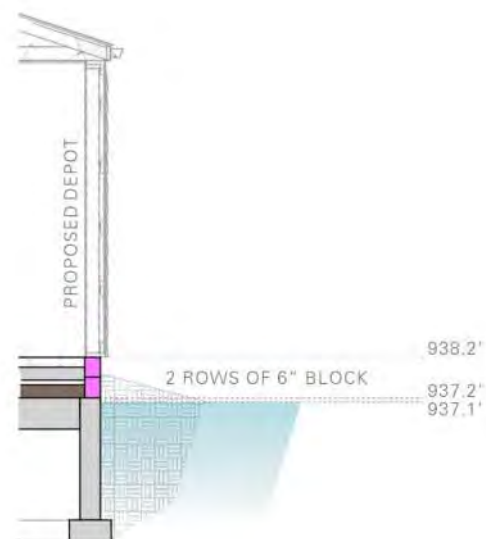


Photo and Plan Credit: Shawn C. Saltou Owner/ Designer MIDWEST Drafting & Design.





CONCLUSIONS & RECOMMENDATIONS

ACHIEVE public ownership, remediation, ADA & visitor access, seating, signage, and stream stabilization of entire 2+ mile riverfront within city.

ESTABLISH Preston as the “junction” of all S.E. Minnesota DNR trails: Root River, Harmony-Preston Valley, and Forestville State Park.

COMPLETE “HISTORIC CAMPUS”: Depot Museum & Riverfront Center, Milwaukee Road display, and restored Milwaukee Elevator.

PROVIDE a home for artifacts, displays, portico concerts, center events, and meetings of the Preston Historical Society (PHS).

NATURALIZE the riverside and parks with native trees and plants for climate control, environmental education, and public use.



PHOTO CREDIT: MILWAUKEE ROAD HISTORICAL ASSOCIATION (MRHA) CONVENTION PHOTO—JUNE, 2024

ACKNOWLEDGEMENTS

special thanks to all:

**DEDICATED TO ILA MAE OLSTAD & ALL THE MILWAUKEE ROAD FAMILY
DESCENDANTS IN PRESTON & ENVIRONS**

Historic Campus & Riverfront Master Plan Committee:

Sheila Craig	President, Preston Historical Society (PHS) & Committee Co-Chair
Barb Mielke	Preston Area Community Foundation & Committee Co-Chair
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Daniel M. Christianson	F&M Community Bank
Jon B. DeVries	PHS Facilities Committee & Preston EDA
Ilene Edwards	Preston Area Chamber of Commerce
Steve Hall	PHS & Preston City Council
Gabby Kinneberg	Previously Preston EDA
Alison Bunge Leathers	PHS & Preston EDA
Dean Schumacher	Preston Planning & Zoning Committee
Kerry Soiney	PHS Facilities Committee
Charles Sparks	PHS & Preston City Council
Joanne Hall	PHS Collections Committee

Funding Sources and Donors

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Preston Area Community Foundation (PACF)
POET Bioprocessing, Community Impact Grant, General Mgr. Chris Hanson, Lexi Pierce
Evelyn Christianson
Preston Historical Society (PHS)
Christianson Family Fund
City of Preston and generous citizens, school alumni, businesses, churches and organizations

Firms and Advisors

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Pathfinder CRM, LLC	Robert C. Vogel & Christian Hendrie
SJS Engineering	R. Arlen Heathman, P.E.
Susan Stone Research	Susan Stone
Minnesota DNR	Nicoile Lehman

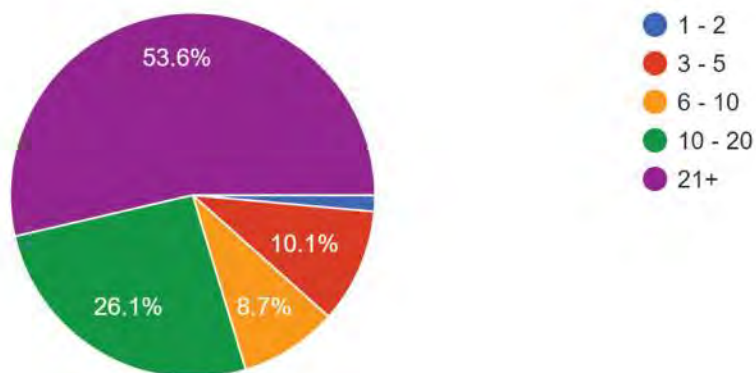
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[Facebook.com/prestonmnhistory](https://www.facebook.com/prestonmnhistory)
[prestonmnchamber.com/preston-historical society/](https://prestonmnchamber.com/preston-historical-society/)



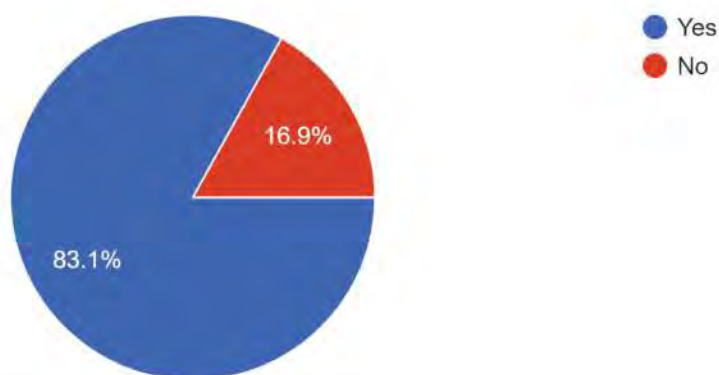
How many years have you lived in Preston?

69 responses



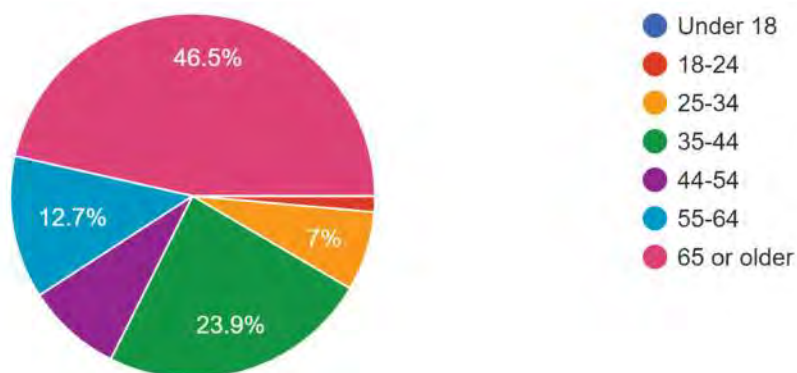
Do you live in or within 5 miles of Preston?

71 responses



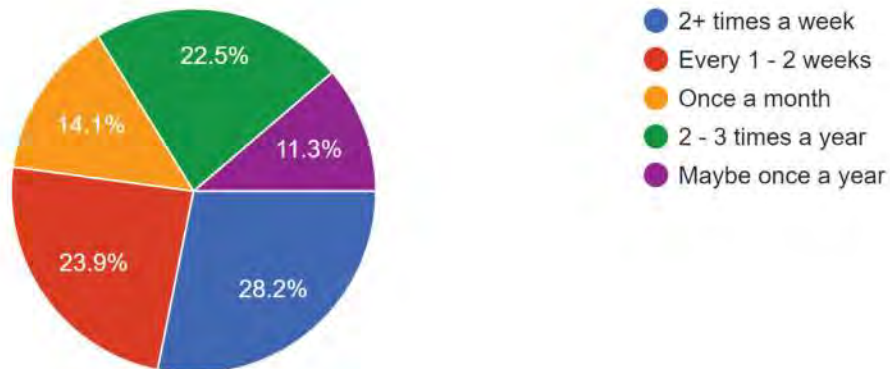
What is your age?

71 responses



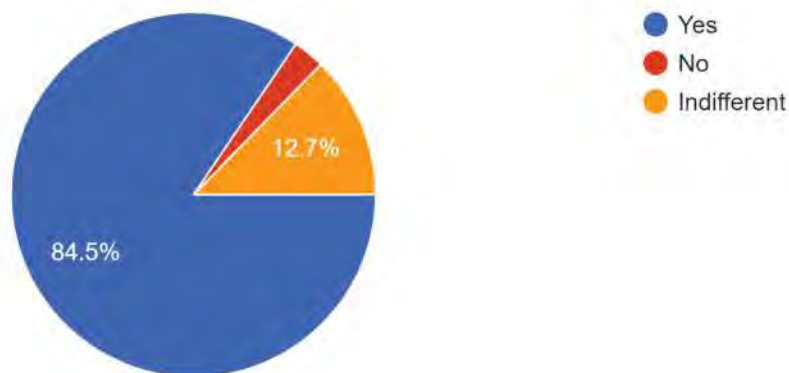
How often do you visit the trailhead park?

71 responses



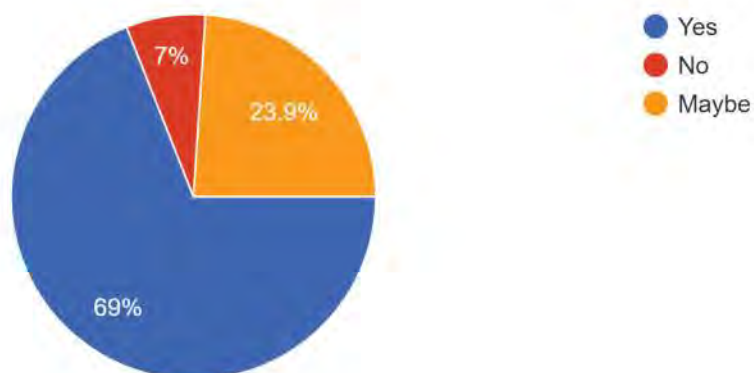
Should a new depot include a permanent space to host public events eg., concerts, speakers, & presentations?

71 responses

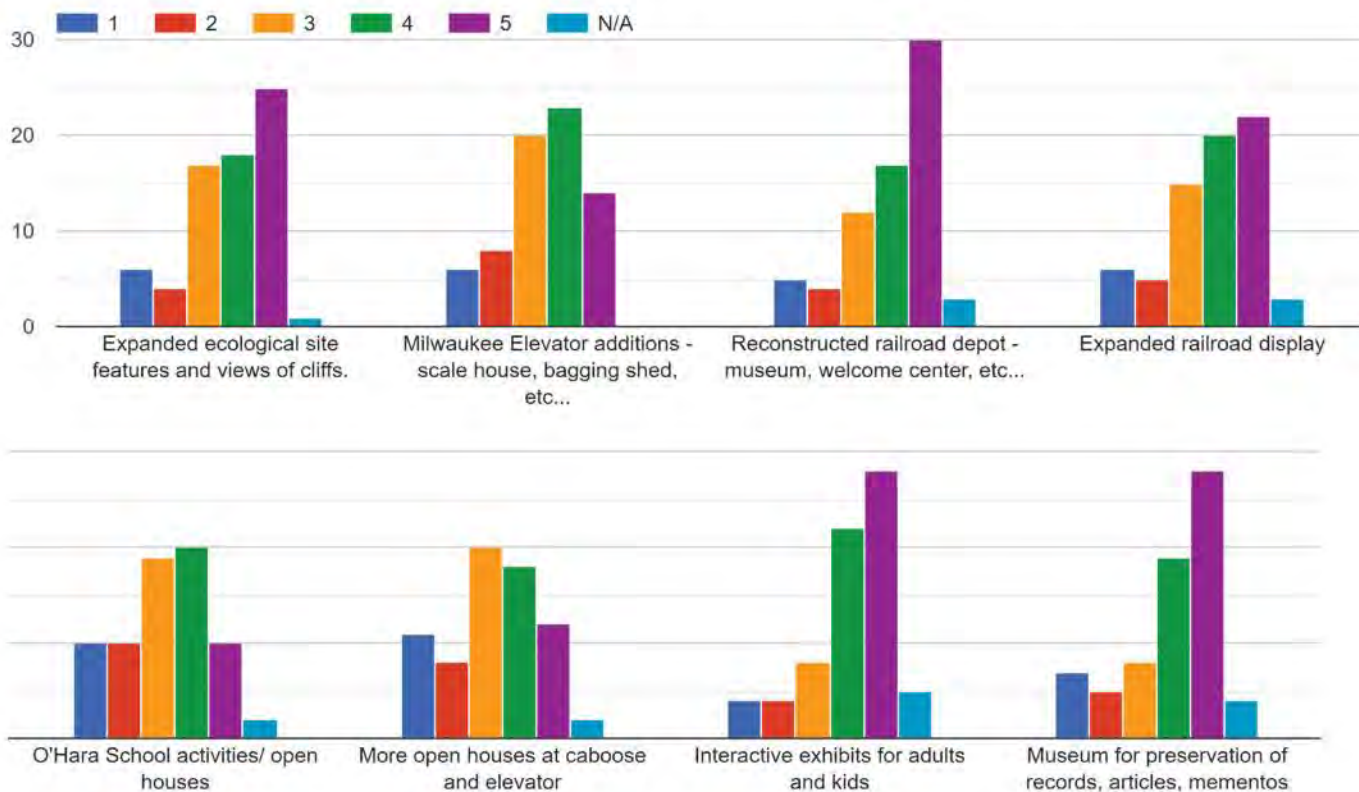


Would an improved historic campus attract you to visit the trailhead park and riverfront?

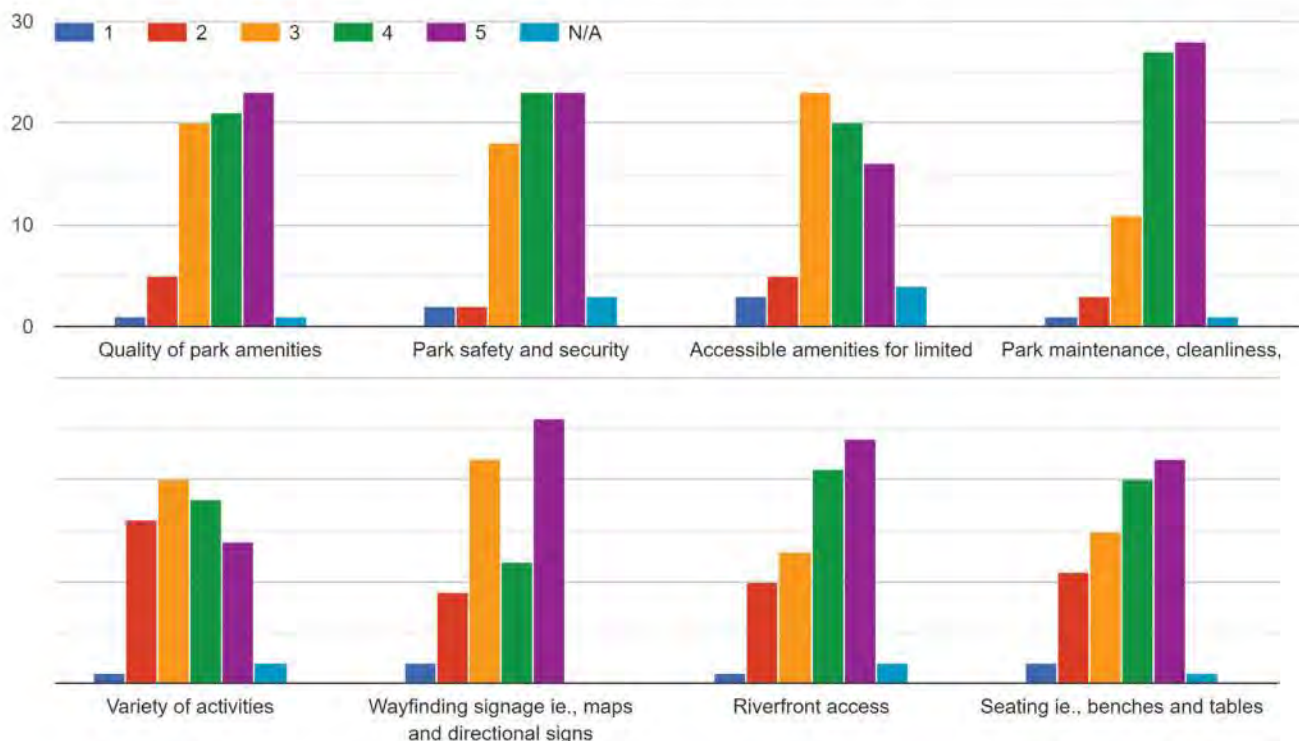
71 responses



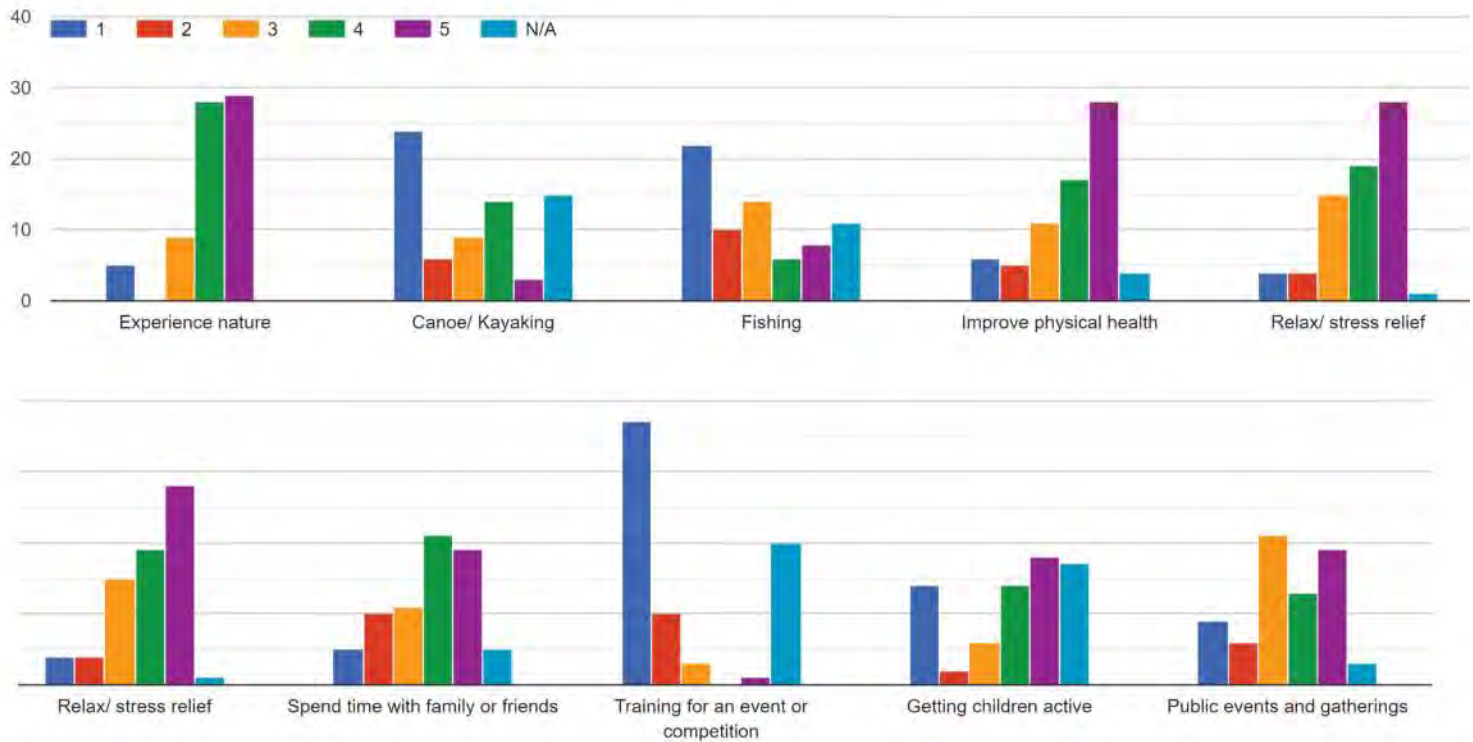
What will make the historic campus more attractive to visit for you and other visitors?



How would you rate the following for Trailhead Park and the riverfront area?

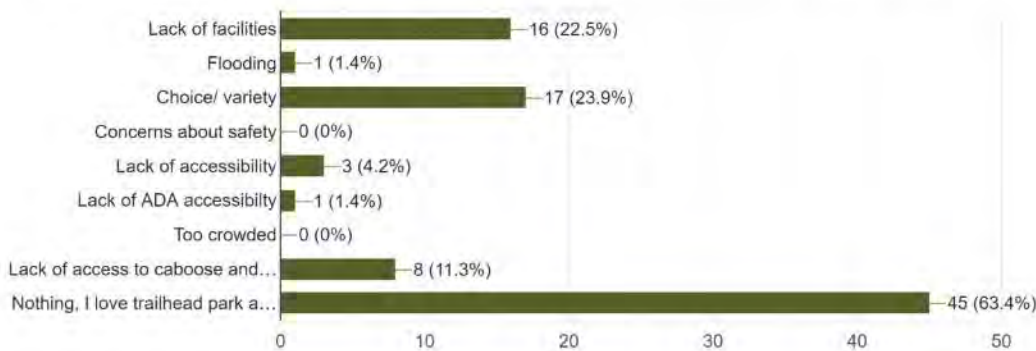


What is the most important reason you use the trailhead park and riverfront area?



What keeps you from using the trailhead park and riverfront area? check all that apply

71 responses





WiDSETH

ARCHITECTS ■ ENGINEERS
SCIENTISTS ■ SURVEYORS