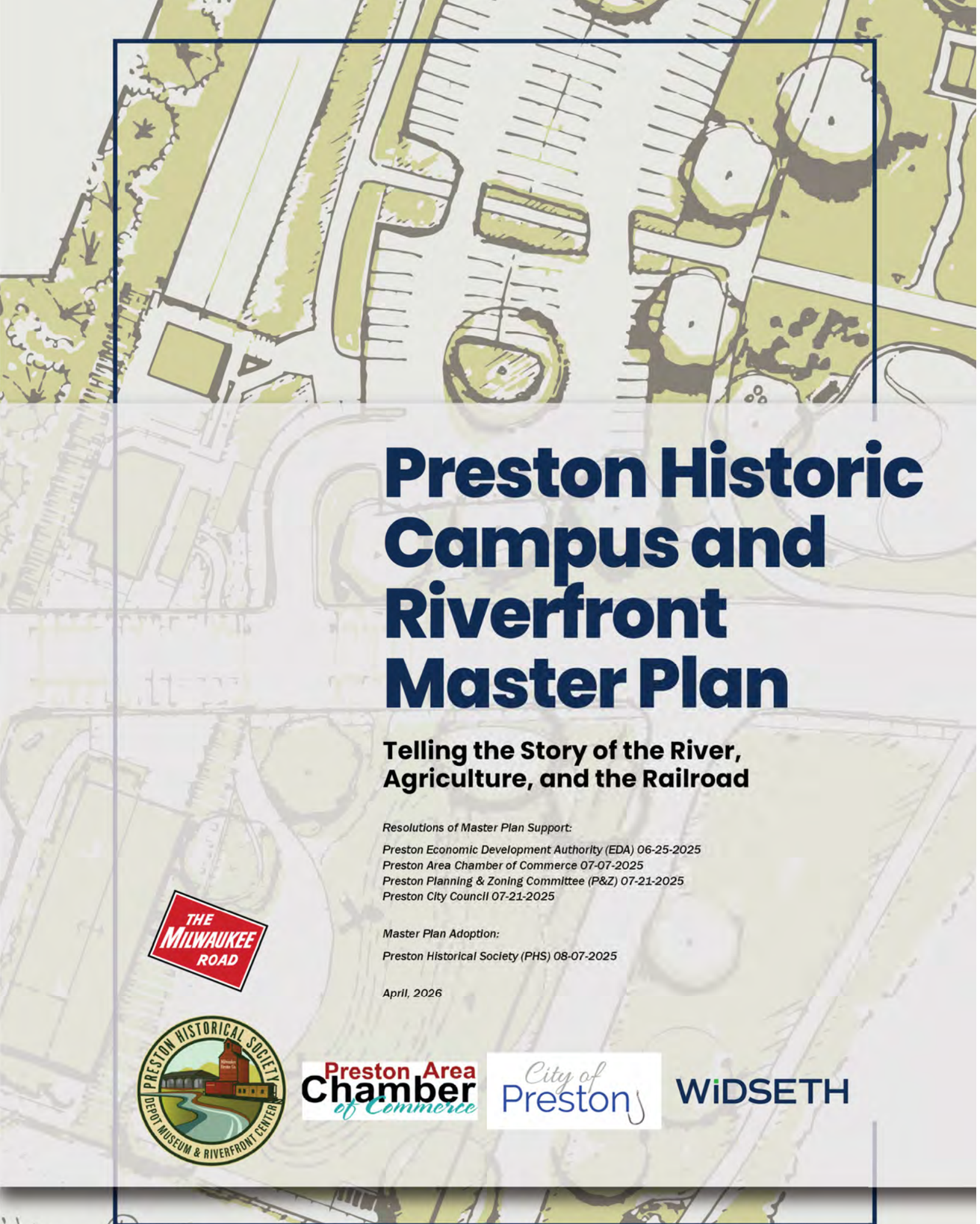


Preston Historic Campus and Riverfront Master Plan

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

THE MILWAUKEE ROAD

PRESTON HISTORICAL SOCIETY DEPOT MUSEUM & RIVERFRONT CENTER

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!!

Table of Contents

"The overall goals of the project are to showcase the cultural, historical, and ecological aspects of Preston's precious river front in order to draw residents and visitors to the river, community, and each other."

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

01 **preface and identified needs**
pg. 1-2

02 **inventory and analysis**
pg. 3-24

03 **master plan**
pg. 25-32

04 **depot museum**
pg. 33-36

05 **conclusions, recommendations and acknowledgements**
pg. 37-40

06 **appendix**
public survey results

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.



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.



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



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











community



existing conditions





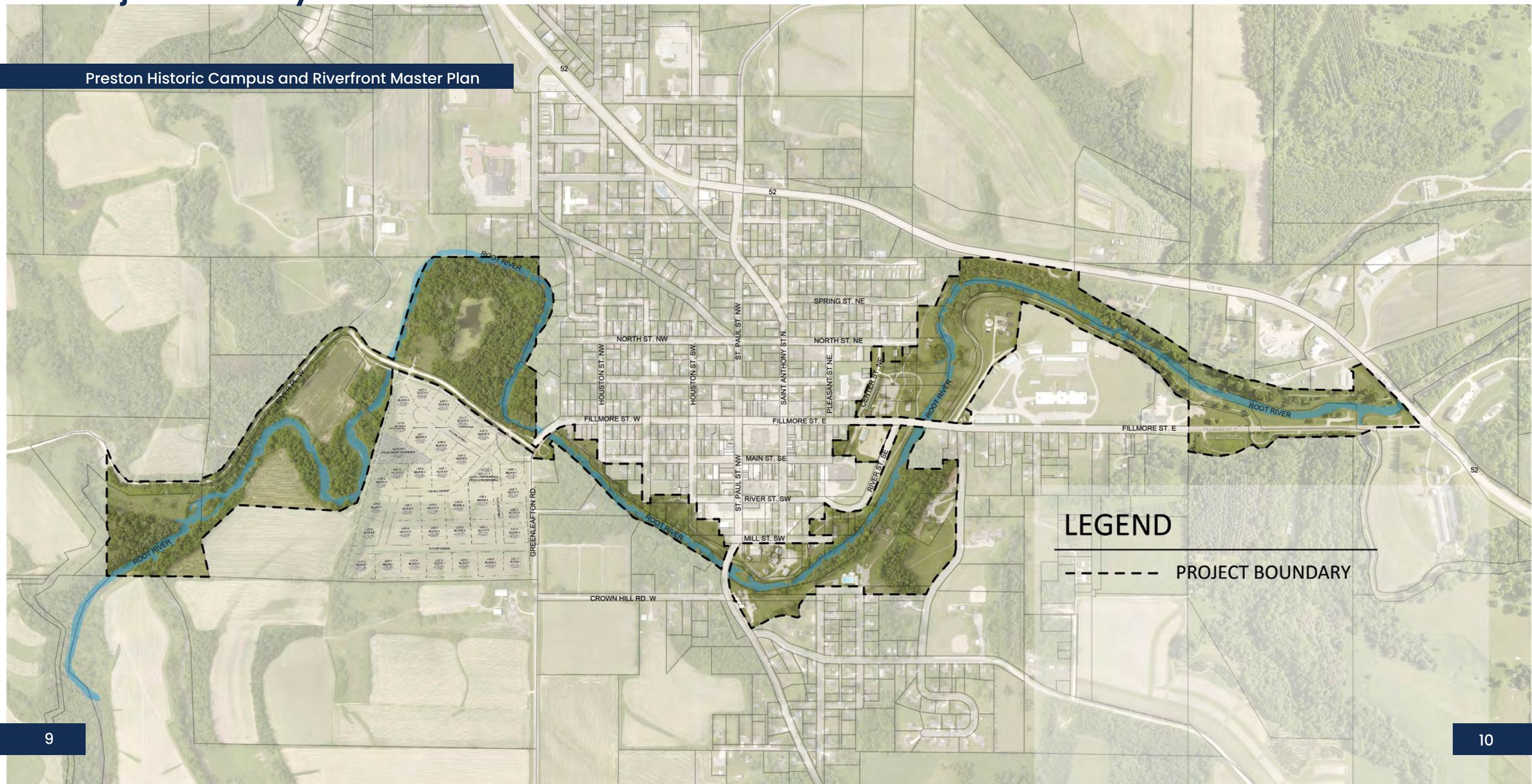




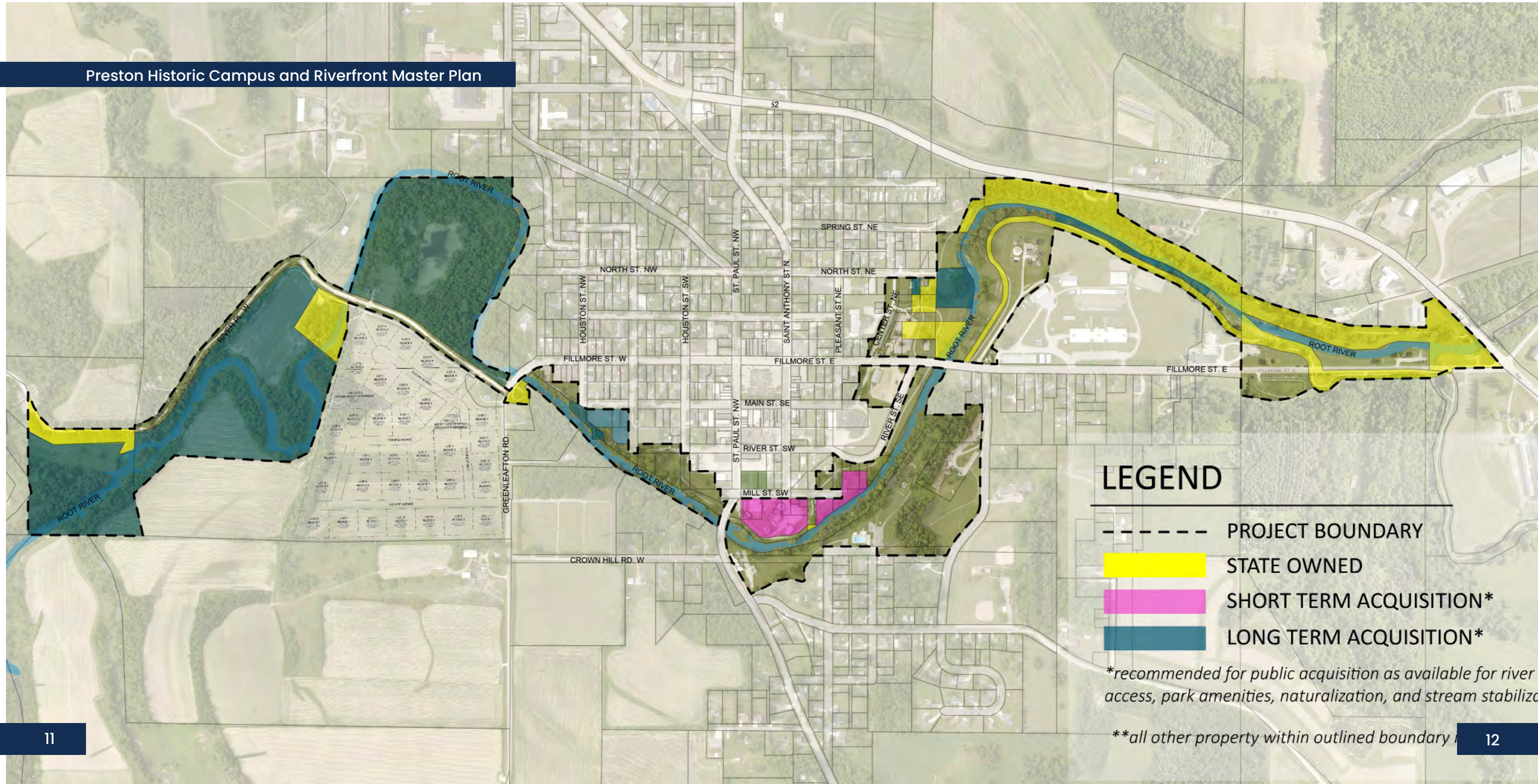


community

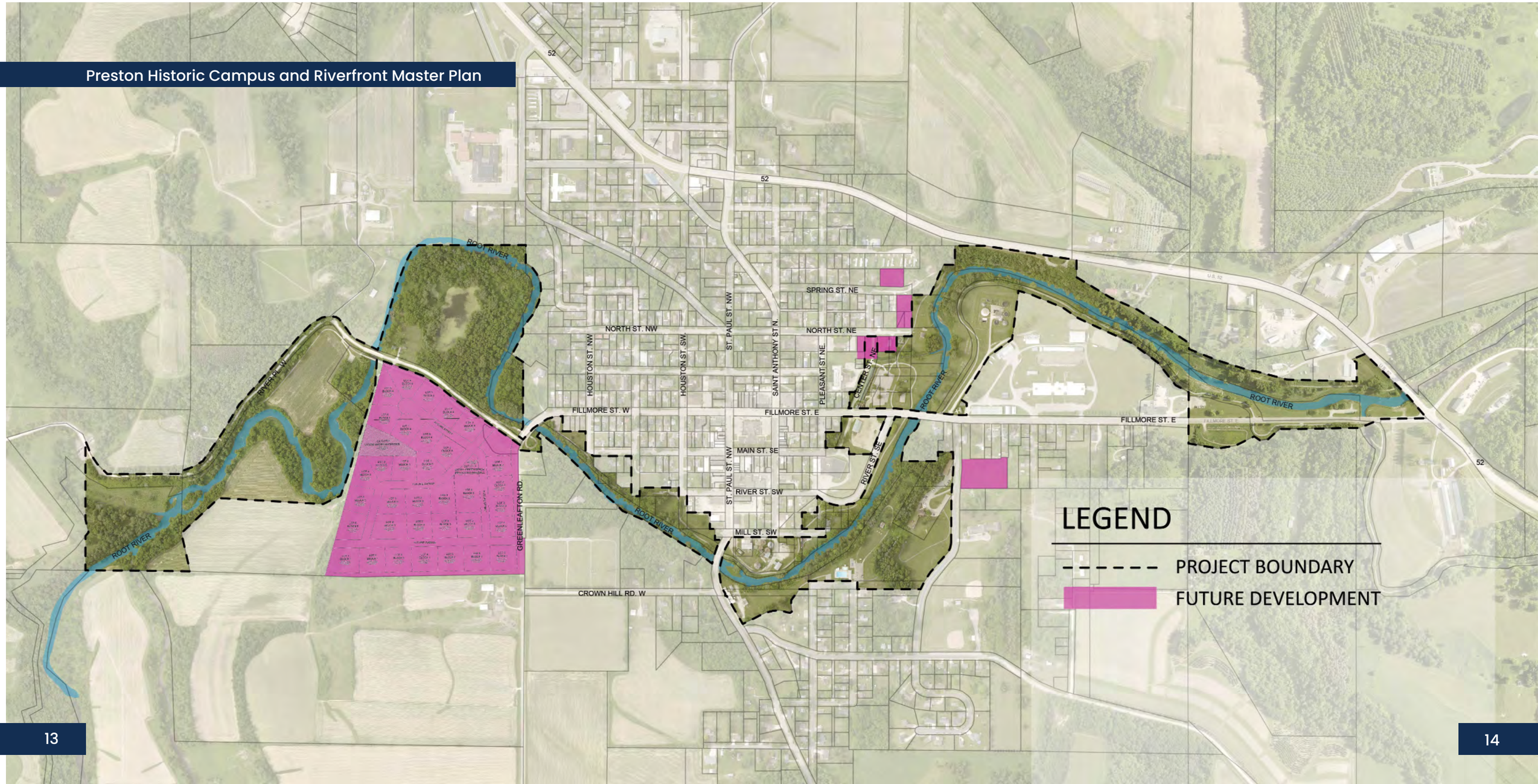
Project Boundary



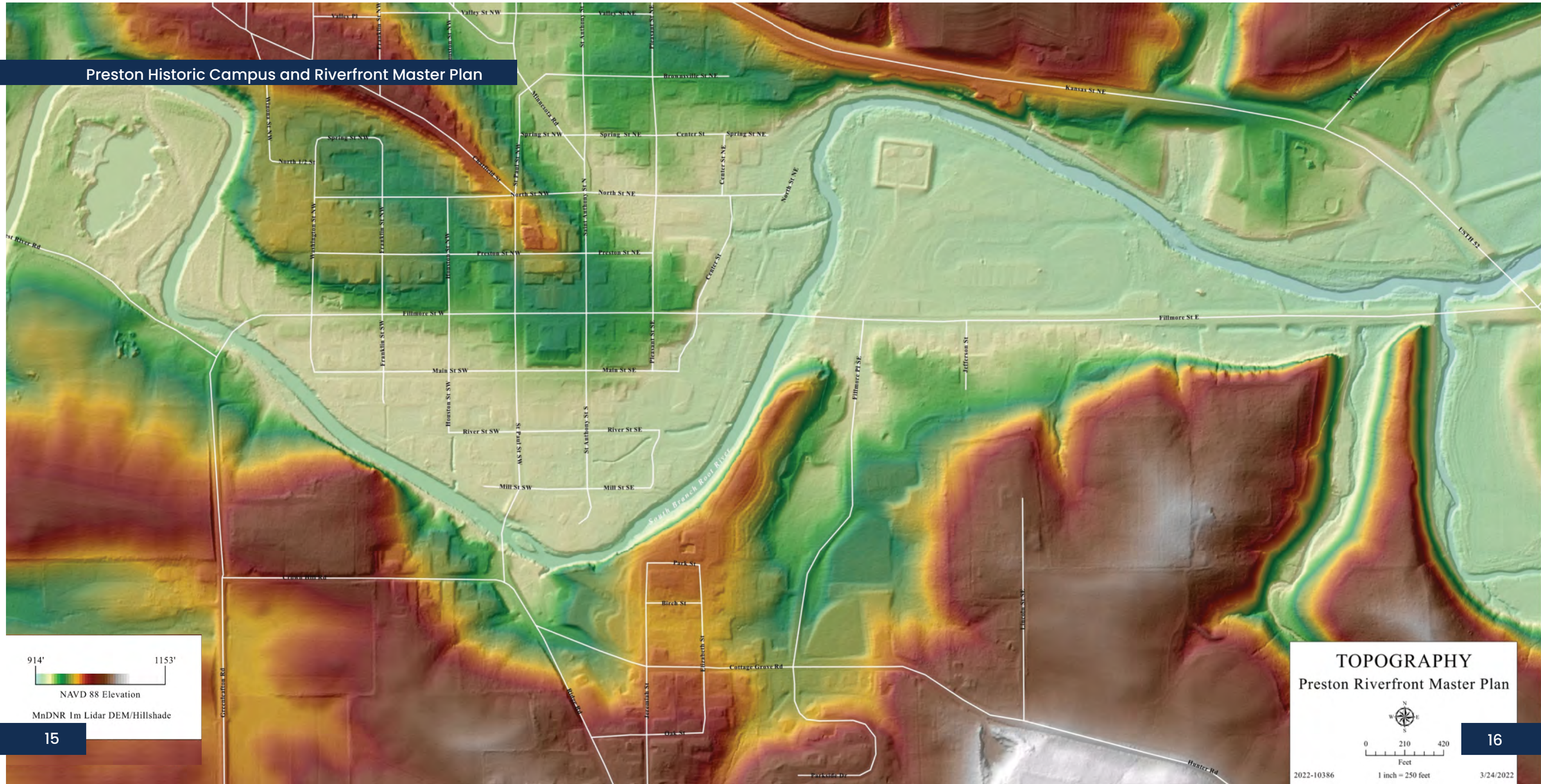
Parcel Ownership



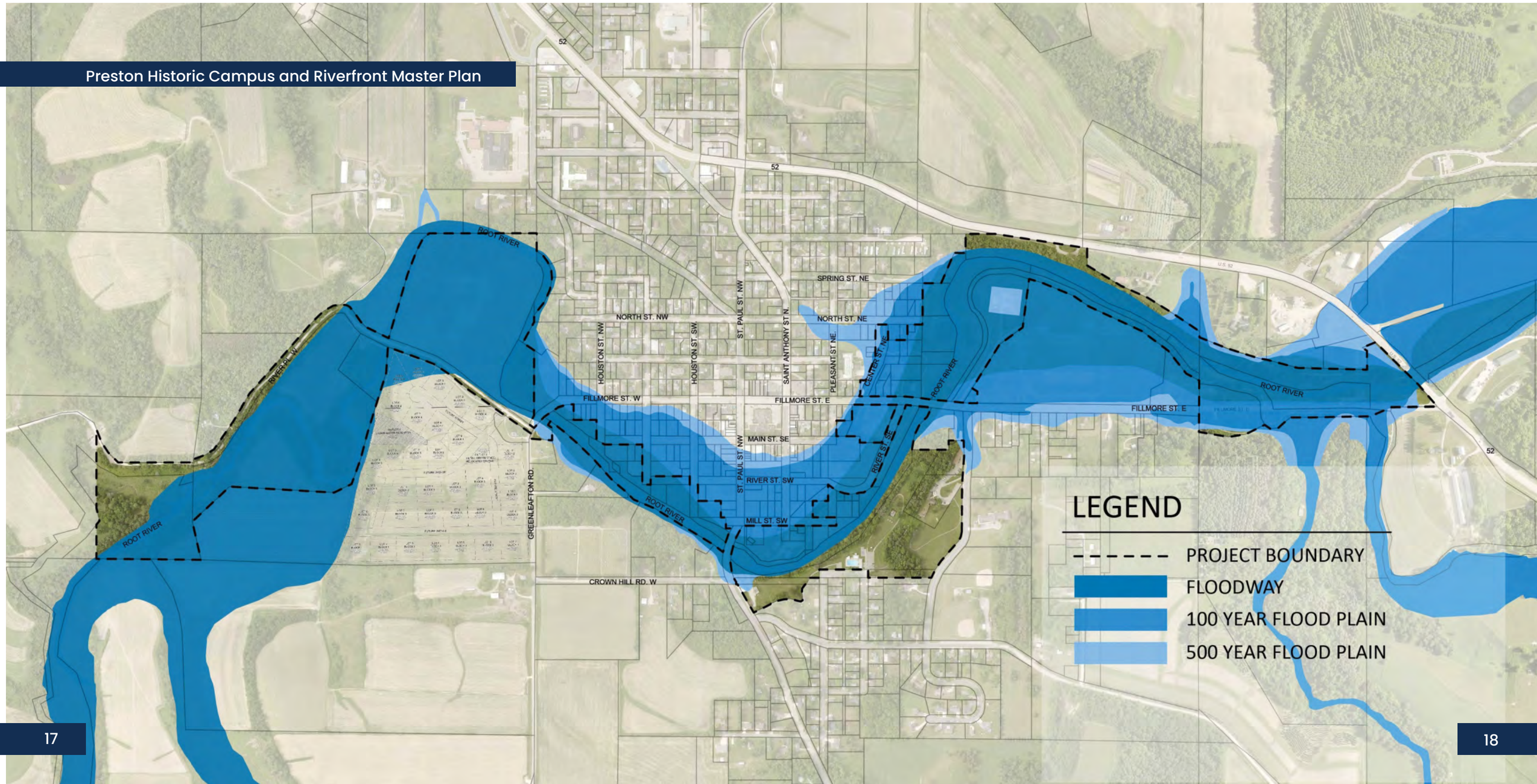
Future Development



Topography


914'
1153'
NAVD 88 Elevation
MnDNR 1m Lidar DEM/Hillshade
TOPOGRAPHY
Preston Riverfront Master Plan
N
W
E
S
0
210
420
Feet
2022-10386
1 inch = 250 feet
3/24/2022
Valley St NW
Valley St NE
Spring St NW
Spring St NE
Center St
Spring St NE
North St NW
North St NE
Preston St NW
Preston St NE
Fillmore St W
Fillmore St E
Main St SW
Main St SE
River St SW
River St SE
Mill St SW
Mill St SE
Brownsville St NE
Kansas St NE
Minnesota Rd
St Anthony St
St Paul St NW
Franklin St NW
Washington St NW
Houston St SW
Pleasant St SE
Center St NE
North St NE
Fillmore Pl SE
Jefferson St
Park St
Birch St
Elizabeth St
Cottage Grove Rd
Hunter Rd
Greenbriar Rd
South Branch Root River
USTH 52

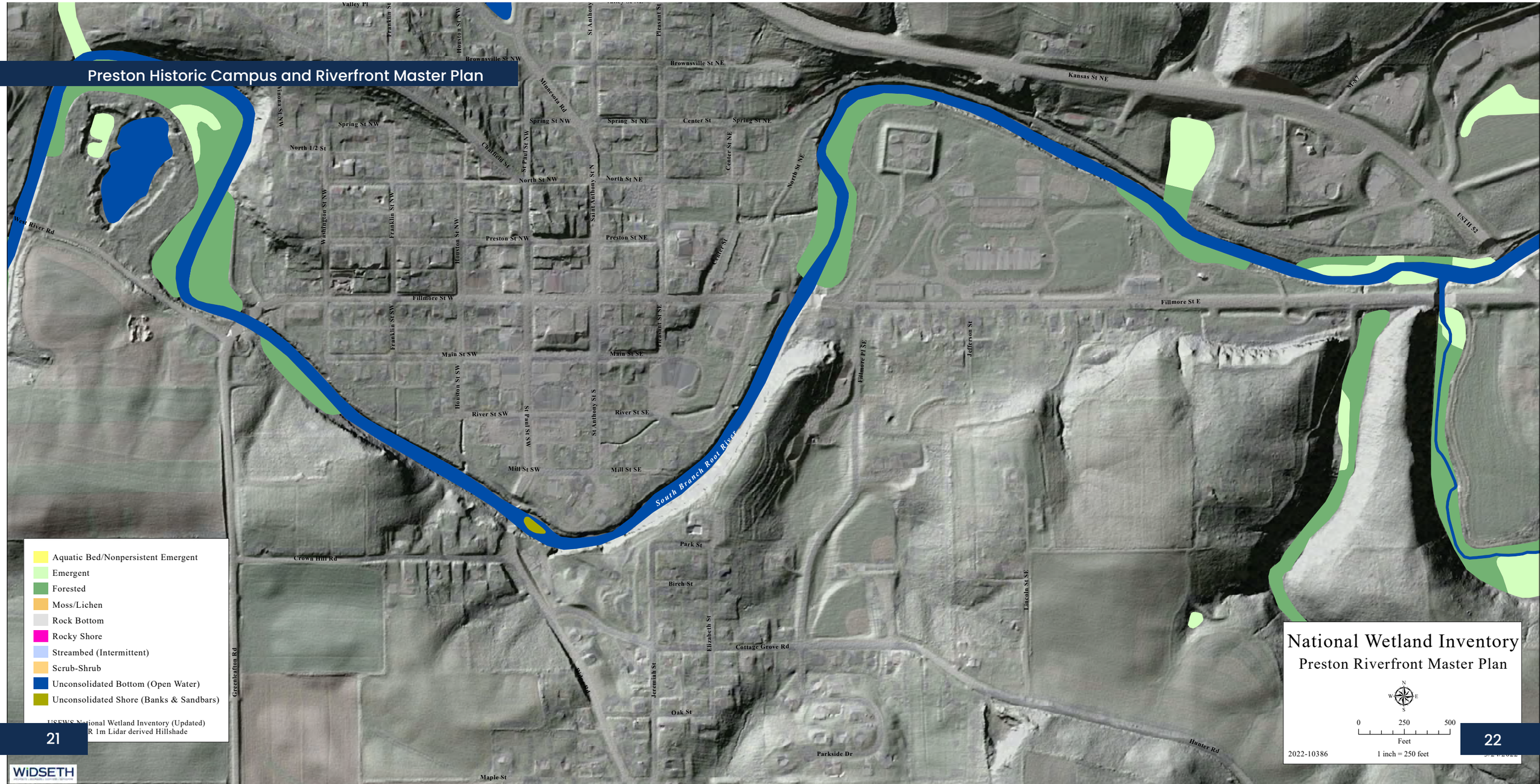
Floodplain & Floodway



300’ River Setback



Wetland Inventory



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.

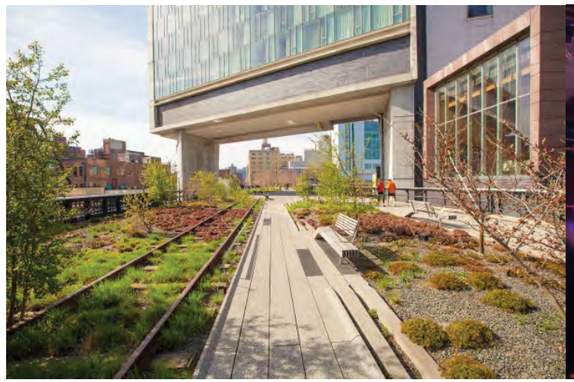
ADA ACCESS

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.









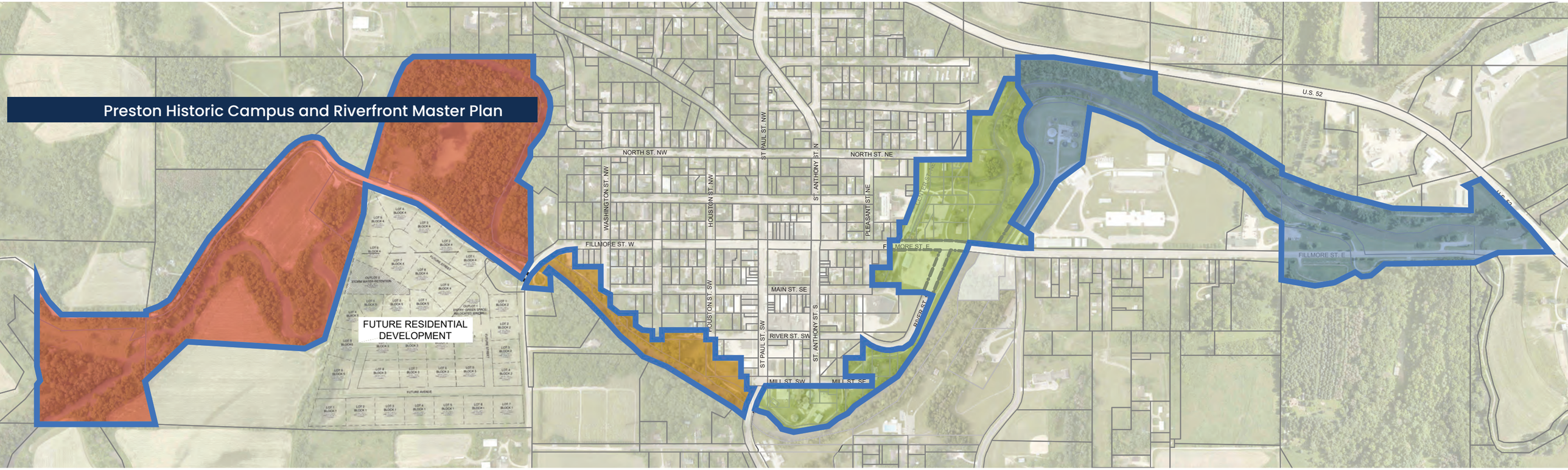


DEPOT MUSEUM & HISTORIC CAMPUS

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

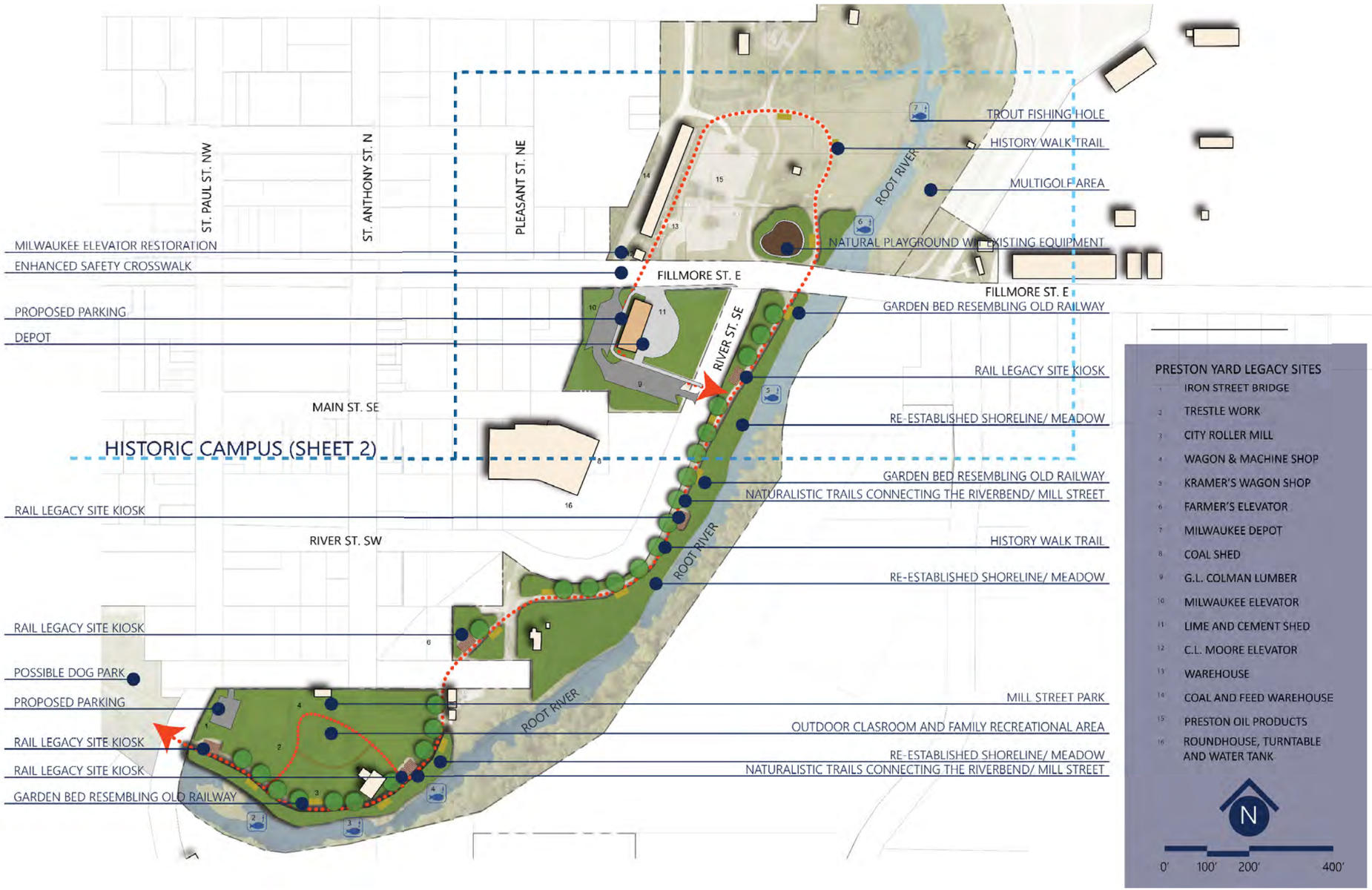
The historic campus begins at Trailhead Park and continues along the Root River trail Southwest towards the proposed Mill Street Park. It was important that no matter what one might be coming to the site to see, the trails would be enough of a reason to stay parked and walk or bike between both ends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

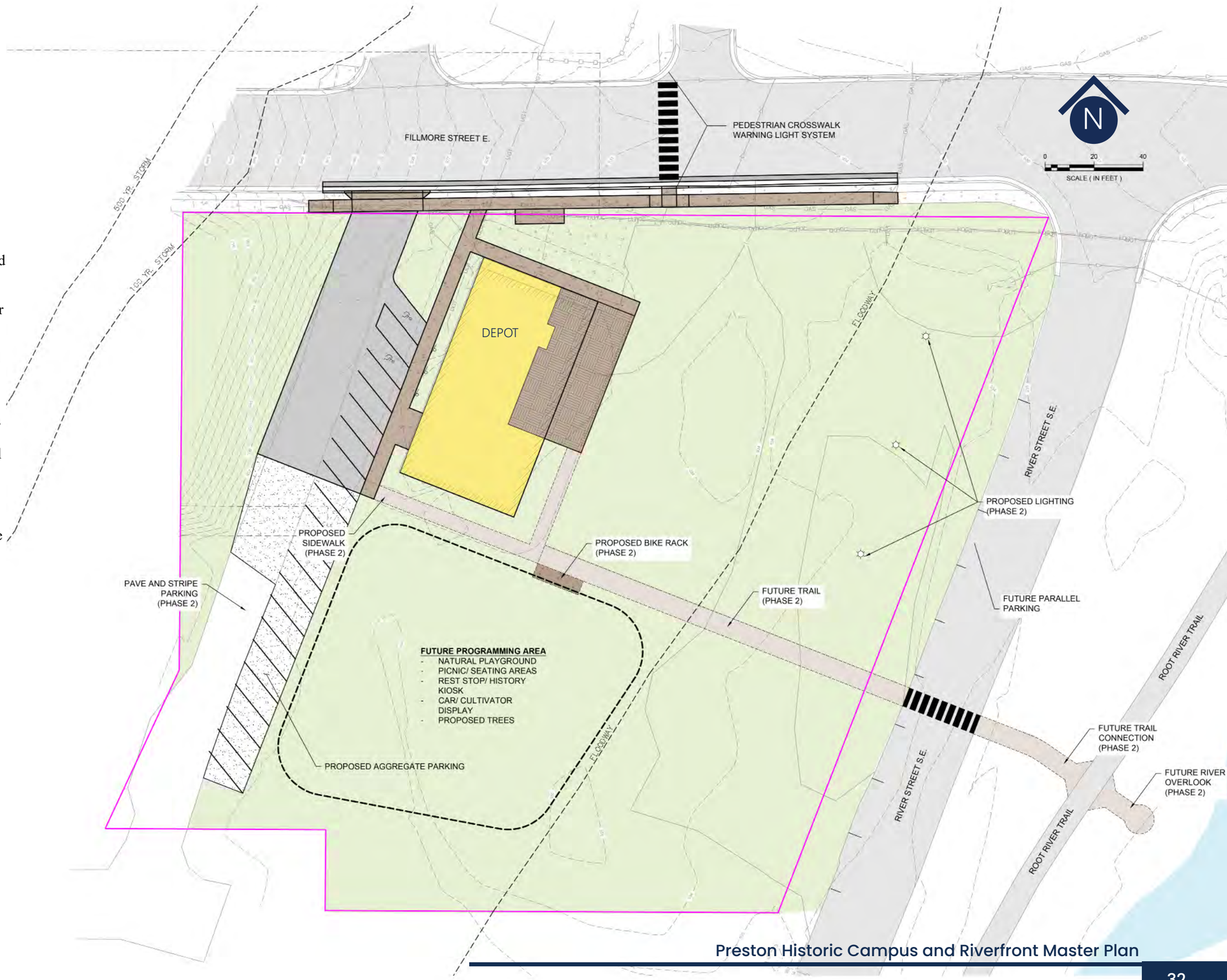


Preston Historical Society Depot Site Plan

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.



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

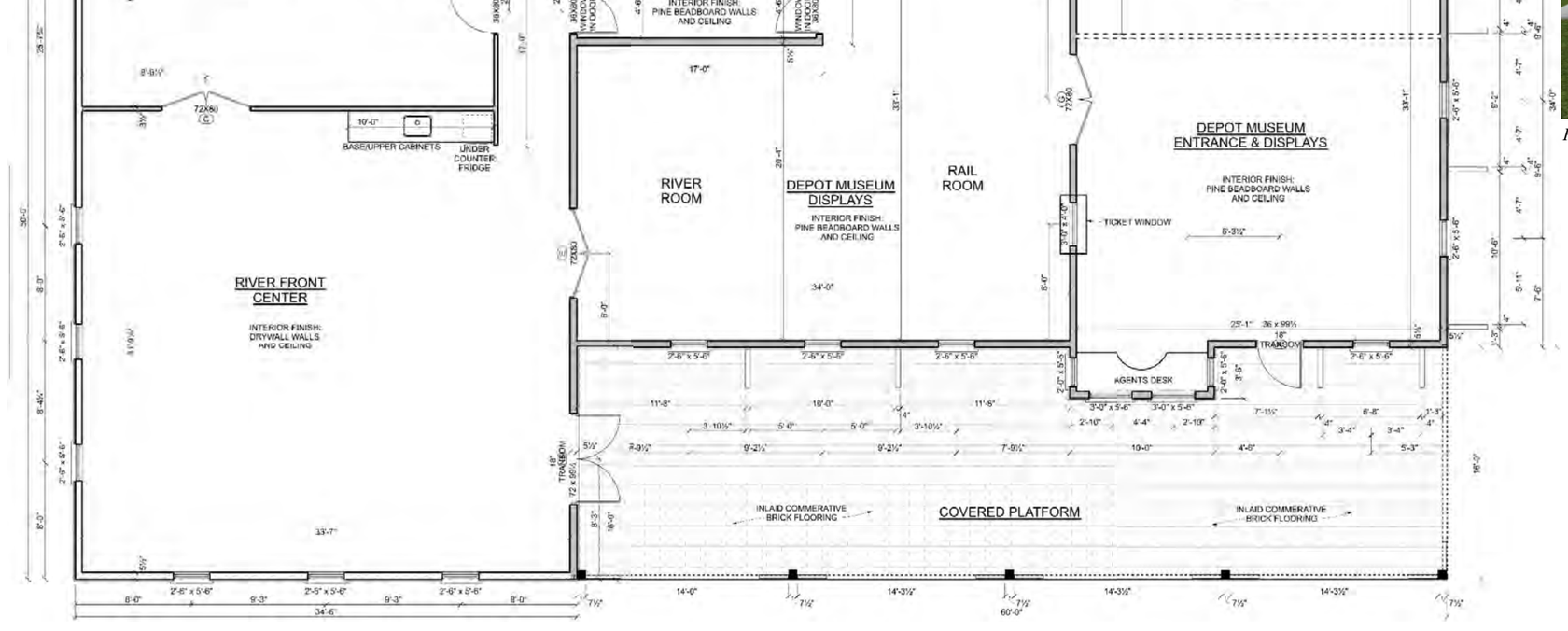
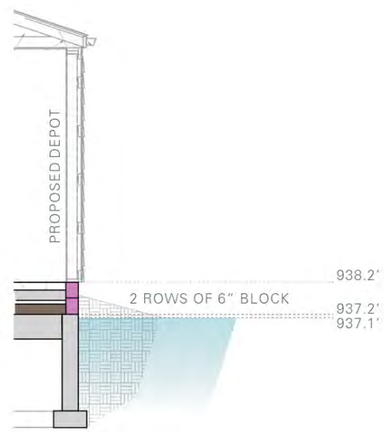


Photo and Plan Credit: Shawn C. Saltou Owner/ Designer MIDWEST Drafting & Design.



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
Charles Aug	F&M Community Bank
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

Southern Minnesota Initiative Foundation (SMIF)

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

WiDSETH – Lead Planner	Craig Britton, Ryan Hermes, Jillian Reiner
Eickhoff Construction	Philip Eickhoff
Curve Solutions	Dina Abo Sheasha
Midwest Drafting & Design	Shawn C. Saltou
Pathfinder CRM, LLC	Robert C. Vogel & Christian Hendrie
SJS Engineering	R. Arlen Heathman, P.E.
Susan Stone Research	Susan Stone
Minnesota DNR	Nicoile Lehman

Contact or Join Us At:

Preston Historical Society, P.O. Box 138, Preston, MN 55965

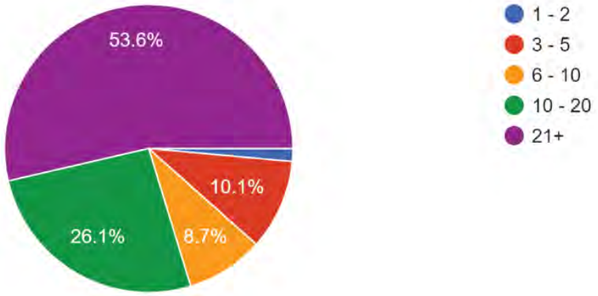
prestonhistoricalsociety@gmail.com

Facebook.com/prestonmnhistory

prestonmnchamber.com/preston-historical society/

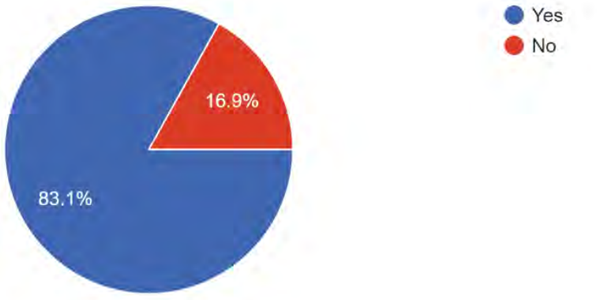
How many years have you lived in Preston?

69 responses



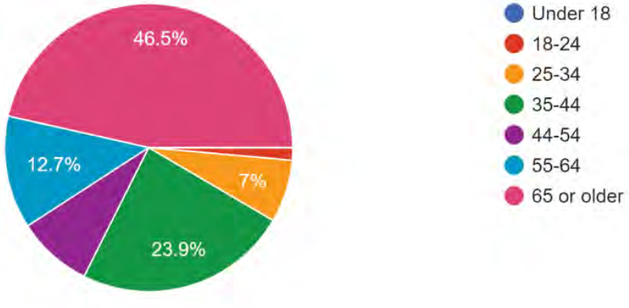
Do you live in or within 5 miles of Preston?

71 responses



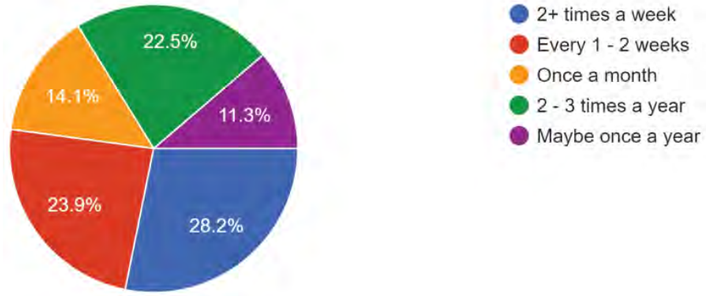
What is your age?

71 responses



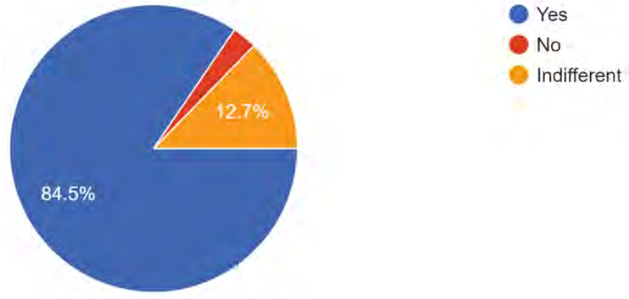
How often do you visit the trailhead park?

71 responses



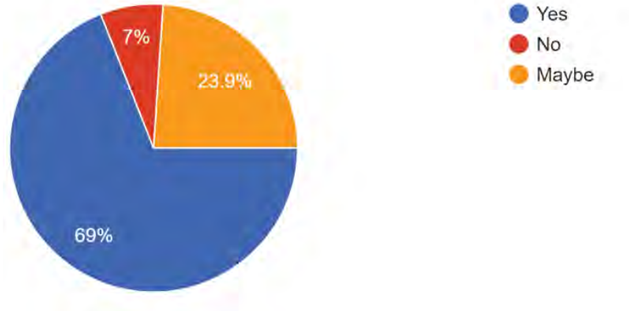
Should a new depot include a permanent space to host public events eg., concerts, speakers, & presentations?

71 responses

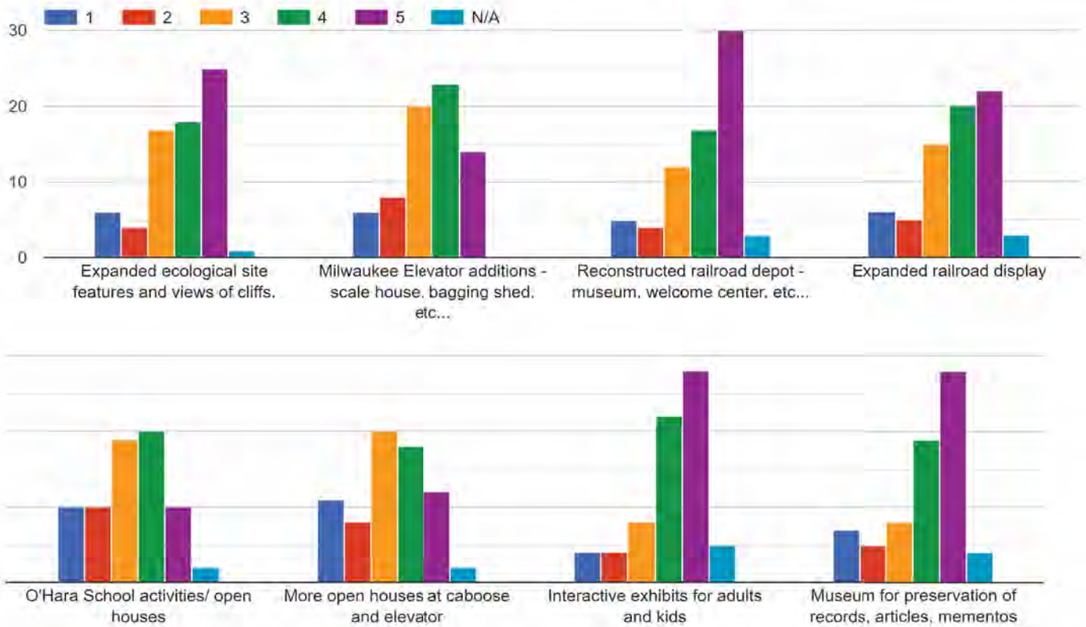


Would an improved historic campus attract you to visit the trailhead park and riverfront?

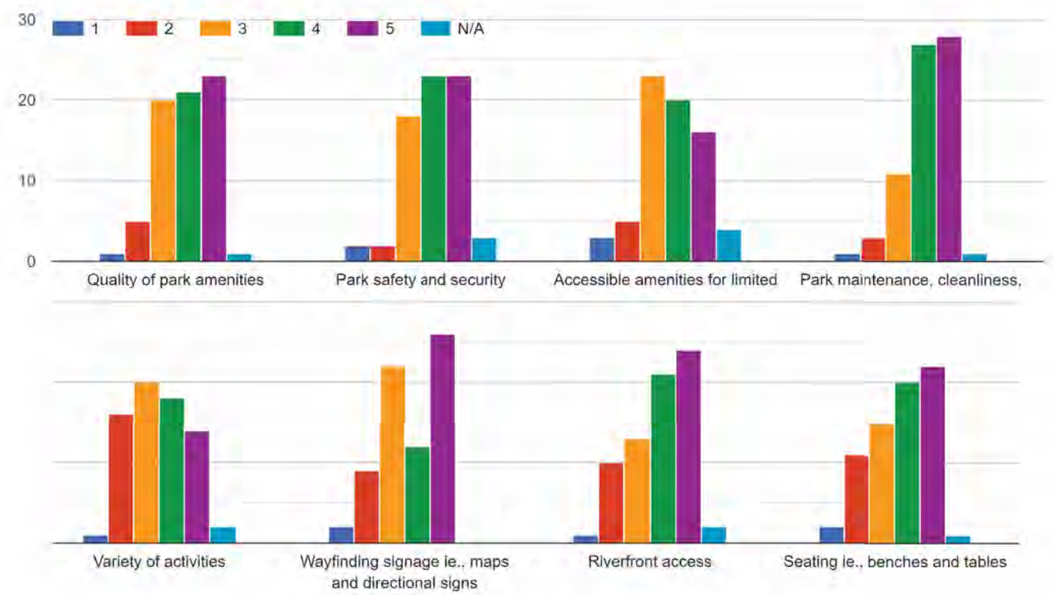
71 responses



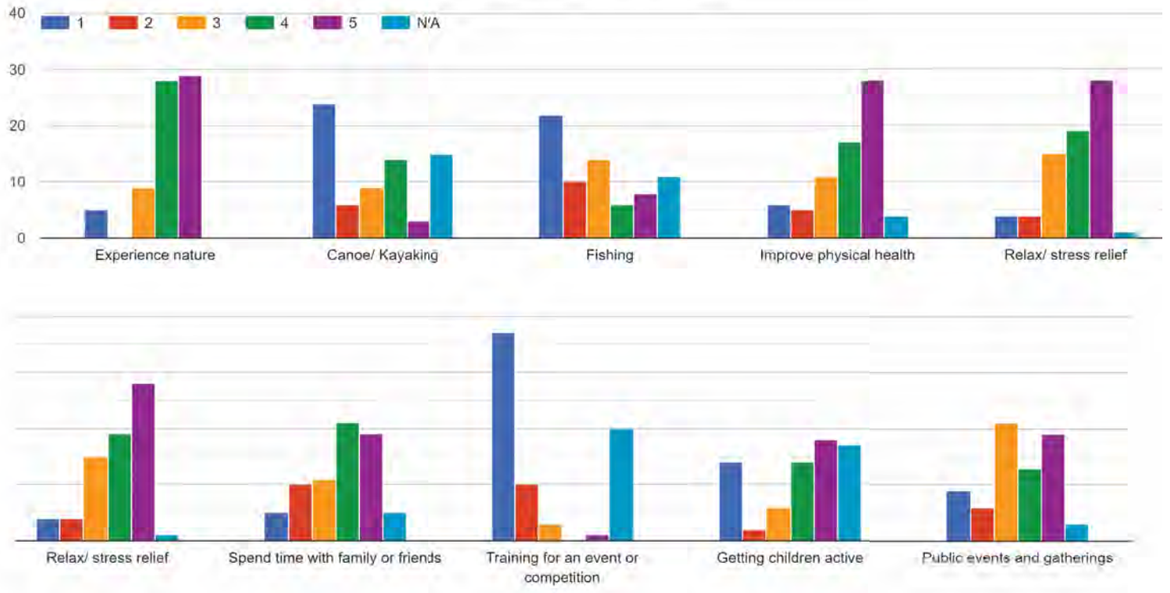
What will make the historic campus more attractive to visit for you and other visitors?



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

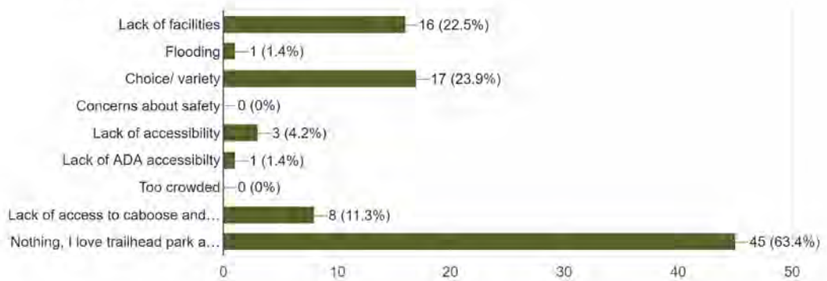


What is the most important reason you use the trailhead park and riverfront area?



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

71 responses



PRESTON HISTORICAL SOCIETY
DEPOT MUSEUM & RIVERFRONT CENTER

WiDSETH

ARCHITECTS ▪ ENGINEERS
SCIENTISTS ▪ SURVEYORS