



Application for Community Assistance

The National Park Service Rivers, Trails and Conservation Assistance program supports successful partnerships with communities across America in achieving their conservation and outdoor recreation visions.

Please follow the [application steps](#) on our website and then submit this completed application along with a map of your project site, at least three letters of commitment, and any other supplementary information that helps us learn more about your project to your National Park Service [Regional Program Manager](#) by August 1.

Date: July 17, 2015 **Project Name:** St. Louis River Water Trail Improvement Plan

Project Location Description (provide a location/site map):

City and State: Duluth, Minnesota

Congressional District(s) Number (s): Minnesota 8th Congressional District

Applicant organization(s): The City of Duluth

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Project Description:

A.) The City of Duluth its partners, and its stakeholders are moving forward on making the St. Louis River Estuary a paradise for paddlers of all types. To make that goal a reality it means undertaking a planning process that inventories and assess the challenges and opportunities that paddlers face in enjoying the St. Louis River. This plan will directly inform the City and its partners on where investments should be made to make the St. Louis River a friendly place to paddle for all types of paddlers and all the diverse walks of people who can engage in those activities.

An established Water Trail Improvement Plan will also allow the City of Duluth and its Partners to Apply for a National Water Trail Designation in the future.

B.) By establishing a plan to invest in improving access for paddling on the St. Louis River the following tangible outcomes are possible. Initially, the process of planning would pull together all the relevant land managers, agencies (both State and Federal) and stake-holders in an atmosphere of cooperation and opportunity to visualize the full potential of the St. Louis River estuary as a paddle sports destination. Recently the lower St. Louis River Corridor has become a very dynamic place. Millions of dollars have been spent successfully in the past 30 years by State and Federal agencies to restore and clean up the waterway. As these restorations efforts proceed there will be a need to re-introduce the local population to the once impacted, but now clean waters of the St. Louis River. By planning and then implementing a destination quality water trail it will be possible to positively rebrand recreation on the St. Louis River. However, as the St. Louis River is restored to health the acres of green space on its shores are becoming more valuable. It will become crucial sooner than later to conserve the land that supports fish and wildlife habitat and recreation. Effective planning would create a road map for the City of Duluth to invest in those critical areas and establish a Water Trail that helps protect a valuable resource while also allowing economic improvement of the St. Louis River Corridor.

A successful plan will help Duluth's West End Community youth groups envision how to bring a different set of river travelers to the Estuary's waters. By thinking strategically about access, it will be possible to create connections to disadvantaged youth, minority populations, people of color, and non-traditional users of all ages.

An established Water trail plan would also allow the City of Duluth and its partners to invest in physically improving access to the river itself. Improved signage and way finding would let paddlers; birders and fisherman find the best spots to access the river and

then navigate them. Currently there are very few non-motorized river access points. A plan would help locate new, much needed canoe, kayak and SUP put in spots as well as focus funds on restoration of existing put in spots.

A well executed master plan would have also have benefits in helping market and brand the water trail itself and allow both Duluth and Superior to promote the river as a place to visit. Improved mapping would also have both navigational benefits as well as marketing benefits. Camping is challenging when paddlers travel the existing water trail today. A plan would help locate and create new campsites within the Estuary.

Of course with a plan and the addition of these tangible outcomes, it is conceivable that an application for a National Water Trail would follow.

C.) Project accomplishments to Date:

To date, the project has undergone some preliminary planning and visioning by the City of Duluth and the Duluth paddling community. A concept was framed and that concept presented, along with 24 other projects in the St. Louis River Corridor, to the Duluth Parks and Rec Commission.

The Water Trail concept was voted on and approved unanimously by the Duluth City Council. That approval resulted in a \$150,000 commitment by the City of Duluth, with a required \$150,000 match by private, in kind or grant funds from the paddling community. This process has spurred a new paddling club in the City called The Duluth Paddling Association.

D.) Support: The project is supported by the City of Duluth. The Mayor of the City Don Ness is especially committed to the project as he sees it as a direct link in getting Duluth's citizens to return to seeing the St. Louis River in a positive way and to once again recreate and live on its banks and waters.

The Water trail project was passed by unanimous vote by both the Duluth Parks and Rec commission and the City Council. St.

The Minnesota DNR, Parks and Trails are also supportive of the project. The Duluth Paddlers Club, a chapter of the ACA supports the National Water Trail effort. The Duluth Area Outdoor Alliance supports a National Water Trail Designation for the St. Louis River as well.

e.) Community Benefits from the Project:

Before Duluth was famous for its Lift Bridge and Lake Superior it was known as a river town. That identity was lost due to the negative impacts of heavy industry on the rivers ecosystem.

The success of the clean ups and restoration of habitat on the St. Louis River in recent years has given Duluth the chance to return to the river. A well planned and implemented water trail would be one effective way to signal to Duluth's population and to visitors that the River is once again open for business.

For the past decade the housing market on the East side of Duluth as become expensive and saturated.

Meanwhile the communities on the west side of the City, along the St. Louis River have seen a stagnant housing market. The population on the West side is aging and those folks are starting to sell their homes and are having a hard time getting a good price in doing so, if they can even find a buyer. Part of this challenge is because of the stigma of living near the polluted St. Louis River. A Water Trail challenges that stigma in proving the river is livable, but also by attracting young families that want to live in affordable housing and near destination class recreation.

The conservation value of the water trail is also a significant Community Benefit. The river corridor is habitat for many different species of fish, birds and mammals. By planning and implementing an improved water trail on the St. Louis it will be possible to use the trail to preserve and protect these sensitive lands as well as remove invasive species and re-plant native species.

Paddle sports are a healthy activity that promotes health and wellness. By planning a water trail we can bring the sports of kayaking, canoeing and stand up paddle boarding to underserved communities that have not had access to them in the past. There is a well-documented health disparity in West Duluth versus the rest of the City. A water trail would allow Youth groups like the YMCA and

Valley Youth use the St. Louis River as a way to promote swimming, paddling and self confidence and safe and sustainable outdoor recreation.

f.) Geographic Location:

The Saint Louis River is a river in the U.S. states of Minnesota and Wisconsin that flows into Lake Superior. The largest U.S. river to flow into the lake, it is 192 miles (309 km) in length[1] and starts 13 miles (21 km) east of Hoyt Lakes, Minnesota. The river's watershed covers 3,634 square miles. Near the Twin Ports of Duluth, Minnesota and Superior, Wisconsin, the river becomes a freshwater estuary. The total length of the proposed Water Trail is 21 Miles. All 21 miles are located within the City Limits of Duluth, as well as Superior, Wisconsin. The water trail would also exist completely in the St. Louis River Area of Concern (AOC).

Starting at Fond Du Lac the river has a wild feel and there is very little on shore development and green space dominates the paddlers sight lines. The second half of the river enters into a more urban/industrial setting.

The West side of Duluth is primarily based on the rivers existence and while West Duluth benefited from the heavy industry the river supported, once that industry left the neighborhoods have been struggling to survive. However the river once again through tourism and quality of life could revive these neighborhoods.

g.) Important Demographic Characteristics:

The Neighborhoods that lay within the project area are economically depressed. Property values are declining and the population in the project area is aging.

There is also a documented health disparity on the West side of Duluth. Folks of all ages are in need of access to healthy food and activities in the west side neighborhoods.

By having improved access to the river we give youth groups opportunities for programming on the river. By establishing a successful water trail we also have the opportunity to impact property values in the corridor and attract young families to live, work and start businesses there.

The St. Louis River corridor is also lacking healthy food options. There are not many healthy choices for groceries or restaurants once you cross the highway 35 overpass. Improved recreation amenities could drive more folks to choose to live in West side and stimulate an improved business climate there. Obviously improved recreational amenities could also create tourism as well and drive more dollars to entrepreneurs on the west side of Duluth.

Applicant and Partner Roles:

The City of Duluth and its Parks and Rec Department are committed to matching funding to plan the water trail, to help facilitate inter-agency and stakeholder meetings and to fulfill an application for the National Water Trail Designation. This means committing significant staff time as well as investing in outside consultants to make this happen.

The Hoisington Koegler Group is assisting in the project as an outside planning consultant and will be dealing creating the final Master Planning product that results from the effort.

It should also be noted that the City of Duluth positioned \$150,000 of tourism tax money to invest in the water trail itself once the plan is completed and can be implemented.

Public Support:

The level of public support is very high for this project in the City of Duluth. The concept of the project was put forth in several public stakeholder meetings and was also vetted by the City Parks Commission and was approved by the City Council by a majority vote. These approvals not only gave the go ahead for planning but also allotted \$150,000 for investment for improving the water trail itself.

The project was also green lighted by several community groups in the region of the city in which it will exist. The Duluth Paddlers and the Duluth Area Outdoor Alliance and the UMD Outdoor Program are also supportive organizations of this project.

The City of Duluth does expect to have more public input into the water trail as that will be one of them main focus points of the

project we are asking assistance for.

b. Provide letters of support from three stakeholders.

Letters have been requested from

The St. Louis River Alliance
The River Corridor Coalition
The Minnesota DNR
The Minnesota Land Trust
The Ski Hut
UMD Outdoor Program

National Park Service Assistance:

4. a. What are the major challenges and overall needs of the project?

The major challenges of the project are in bringing together the many land managers and agencies that will need to commit to an improved water trail that exists on an interstate river, especially if an application for National Water Trail status is tendered.

Another major challenge will also be gathering all the information and data needed to create a truly effective master plan and vision for a world class-paddling destination.

Stakeholder and public input will also be highly critical to the success of this project and making sure the process is open and transparent will be priority.

b. What type of assistance are you seeking from National Park Service staff? Please include a short description of the specific project need(s) for each of the boxes checked. Prioritize the project's top needs in the description.

- ☐ Defining project vision and goals
- ☐ Identifying and analyzing issues and opportunities
- ☐ Assessing and engaging partners and stakeholders
- ☐ Inventory and mapping of community resources
- ☐ Priority setting and consensus building
- ☐ Identifying funding sources
- ☐ Organizational development
- ☐ Designing community outreach and participation strategies
- ☐ Planning (trail, park, open space, greenway, etc.)
- ☐ Other **Marketing and branding input.**

5. Describe how your project advances one or more key National Park Service strategic initiatives. Projects that contribute to one or more of these strategic initiatives are given emphasis in the project selection process.

a.) **Builds Partnerships with health and wellness organizations:** This project will help build partnerships with many organizations that are looking to promote healthy and active living in the City of Duluth.

b.) **Engages Youth or youth organizations:** Already the areas youth groups are starting to see paddling as a viable summer time activity that promotes moving and exercise in a low impact way. However, paddling also promotes learning to swim and water safety.

Paddling is a great way to connect the underserved community to the natural environment and to the St. Louis River which in the past, before the extensive AOC clean up was considered a polluted no go zone.

c.) **Develops or improves Local Connections:** The River has long been seen as a negative and while that may have been true in the past, the efforts of the State and Federal cleanups have restored many of the healthy activities on the river like boating, paddling, swimming and fishing. A National Level Water Trail will send the message in a big way that the river is back, thriving and open for business.

d.) **Improves Public Access:** In addition to the youth groups we are also seeing the paddling community itself taking more interest in the St. Louis River and having a mapped and signed water trail would help them grow membership and also bring people to the area who will value the resource and help steward it.

e.) **Advances the Conservation and Stewardship of natural landscapes:** Currently many citizens of Duluth itself have no real understanding of the river and how it interconnects the West side of the City. A water trail will help tell the narrative of how neighborhoods like Riverside, Morgan Park, Gary and Fond Du Lac are all connected by the river and celebrate its history. Indeed, the Water Trail would create both literally and figuratively in the minds of Duluth's citizens a new recreational green space the length of the West side of Duluth.

While the massive effort of eliminating the AOC is underway, there is a very real need to reach out and engage the public and let them know that the river has been revitalized. What is the point of cleaning up the river if nobody is going to move back to its neighborhoods or utilize its recreational assets? The water trail is also a mechanism to clean up shorelines, improve access points and also deal with invasives and old industrial sites.

f.) **Expands Public Access to water resources:** Currently there are many access points to the St. Louis River, however most of them are motorized access points. An improved water trail would clean up the few existing human powered access points as well as add additional access points. It would also add way finding on the river itself, which would allow more folks to feel comfortable in accessing the waterway. The water trail would also allow improved access to spots like Fond Du Lac and Chambers Grove, Morgan Park, Gary and Spirit Mountain and Indian Point Campground.