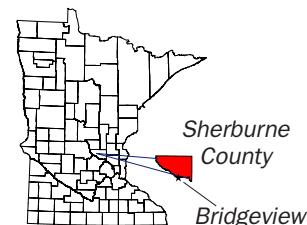


# PROTECTING MINNESOTA'S NATURAL TREASURES

One of a series of case studies showing how Minnesota communities have used ecological information to protect their natural heritage

## Bridgeview Park Reserve

SHERBURNE COUNTY



### SUMMARY

A developer agreed to help protect an oak woodland along the Mississippi River after local concern was raised about the woodland's potential demise. The DNR's ecological information helped confirm local officials' sense that this scenic site had a good deal of conservation value, and helped bring in grant money for acquisition. The land next door was developed, and the woodland was preserved for future generations as the Bridgeview Park Reserve.

### Division of Ecological Services

The Ecological Services Division of the Minnesota DNR houses over 20 programs that collect and deliver ecological data on Minnesota's native plant and animal populations and their habitats. Four of these programs survey, map, interpret, and protect locations of significant native plant communities, rare plants, and rare animals. Local governments, landowners, and resource managers are among the many Minnesotans who have used this information to guide planning and land use policy and to protect some of the state's best natural areas. The four programs are:

- Minnesota County Biological Survey
- Natural Heritage and Nongame Research Program
- Nongame Wildlife Program
- Scientific and Natural Areas Program

These case studies provide detailed examples of how these programs work with partners to accomplish important conservation projects throughout the state.



### Local Concern Leads to Action

It was a meeting that brought together people who had never before shared a room. State Representative Mark Olson presided over the discussion, which included Becker and Big Lake township boards, Sherburne County's planning commission and county board, and the Monticello city council. Monticello's presence at the table was based not on political jurisdiction — the city is in neighboring Wright County — but on a keen interest in protecting the oak-forested bluff that for centuries had been its view across the Mississippi River.

At the heart of the discussion, held in November of 1997, was a proposed 213-acre development for single-family homes to be known as the Bridge View Addition. An

Environmental Assessment Worksheet completed as part of the plat review process had indicated that the project would indeed have some adverse impacts.

Sherburne County Forest Resource Specialist Tim Edgeton was among those who assessed the site. "When reviewing plats, I routinely check to see whether the

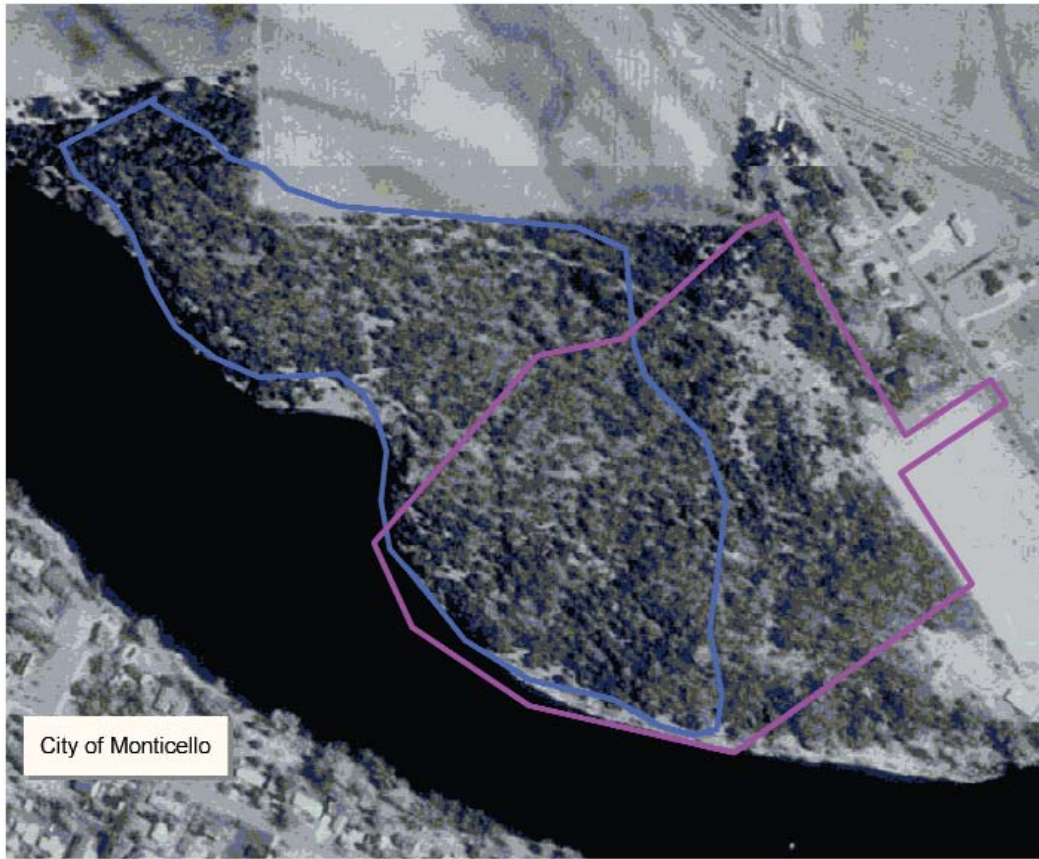
**Minnesota County Biological Survey (MCBS)** documented any rare features for the area. In this case, it had; the map identified the forest as a high quality oak woodland-brushland. I noted it in my

report, expressing concern about fragmentation of the site, and its significance as one of the few natural areas remaining in Sherburne County that typify what this area once looked like."

Other voices called for careful consideration as well. DNR Area hydrologist Larry Kramka spoke out at the meeting, articulating his concerns. "Hydrologists don't look just at water. Changes in aquatic systems usually begin on the land. Here, there was the significance of the large, undisturbed woodland on the site," says Kramka. "Also, there were real concerns about the riparian area. The closer you get to those steep slopes with development, the more opportunity there is for all kinds of impacts — things like bank destabilization, and changes in drainage patterns that can increase the energy of run-off. Some



Tim Edgeton of Sherburne County and DNR local grants staff inspecting the Bridgeview Park Reserve



### Bridgeview Park Reserve

This figure shows the oak woodland (within the blue line) mapped as a significant native plant community by the Minnesota County Biological Survey. An understanding of the rarity of this community in Sherburne County contributed to the decision by the landowners and local community to protect the site as the Bridgeview Park Reserve (shown within the purple line).

 Bridgeview Park Reserve  
Oak woodland mapped by MCBS 

controls are in place because the Mississippi corridor there has a Wild and Scenic designation. But attention is still needed to avoid disturbance to those near-shore habitats that are so important to the great fisheries there: smallmouth bass in particular.”

### The Ecological Context

Also present at the meeting, DNR regional plant ecologist Hannah Dunevitz displayed the Sherburne County MCBS map, providing a regional context for the importance of the site’s native plant communities. Jeff O’Neill, Deputy Administrator for the city of Monticello, gave an audio-visual presentation that sought to portray what the area meant to the people of Monticello. “It’s not only the scenic aspects,” says O’Neill. “It’s an appreciation for the

rarity of the natural community. It just seemed that there should be some alternative to carving it all up into five-acre lots.” Mindful of Sherburne County’s right to make its own land use decisions, O’Neill notes: “I guess we just hoped that there were certain values that could supercede political boundaries. We were grateful to Sherburne County that they allowed us the opportunity to have our perspective heard.”

The task of looking for ways to address these concerns fell to the Sherburne County Zoning department. How might the development plan be altered to allow for preservation of the native plant communities present on the bluff? How could impacts on the scenic values of the riverway be minimized? From a practical standpoint, who would pay for it? A search for alternatives led to the county’s receipt of



*Prairie larkspur, a spring-blooming wildflower, continues to bloom in the prairies of Bridgeview Park Reserve since the area was protected as a park.*

Photo by Fred Harris, MN DNR

\$180,000 from the DNR's Natural and Scenic Areas grant program — a grant that was matched by a donation of land of equal value from the developer. The county also received a \$5,000 grant from the Central Minnesota Initiative Fund's Scenic Area Land Preservation Program. Together, these funds allowed for the creation in 1999 of a new Sherburne County park, the 29-acre Bridgeview Park Reserve.

In the years hence, the development was completed on the acreage adjacent to the park reserve. But today, within the boundaries of the park, open-grown bur oaks continue to spread their gnarled branches above the Mississippi. Patches of sand-gravel prairie occupy the south-facing slope of the river bluff, providing habitat for wildflowers such as the prairie larkspur, with its showy white flowers arising on long spires, and for grasses such as sand-reed grass and little bluestem. The shoreline along the Mississippi remains unchanged.

**“In other places, people are spending thousands and thousands of dollars trying to put things back, whether it’s a wetland or a prairie — things that we still have here. If each family chips in the cost of a Big Mac, fries and a shake once a year, we’ll have a beautiful county park system.”**

**— Dave Anderson  
Chair, Sherburne County  
Park Commission**

“About half of the area mapped by the MCBS program at the site is now part of the park,” says Regional Plant Ecologist Dunevitz, who served on a committee established by the county to put together a management plan for the area. The five-member team had representation from Sherburne County’s Park Commission, Historical Society, and Zoning Department,

## Acting Fast to Save a Special Place



Photo by Carmen Converse, MN DNR

Brian Benson was Zoning Administrator for the county when the issue of the Bridgeview Addition first arose. “Here in Sherburne County, we have some 34,000 acres in the Sherburne National Wildlife Refuge and Sand Dunes State Forest that people think of as parkland. For us to protect more land, it has to be pretty special. The site at Bridgeview caught people’s interest because of the scenic aspects along the river, and because of the significant natural area there. The DNR really came through on this one. They not only told us how important the site was, they helped to fund the acquisition. Especially important, they did it in a time frame that made it work for the developer. Delays can be a deal-breaker on this kind of thing.”

as well as the adjacent Bridgeview housing development and the DNR. “It brought together people with differing interests and areas of expertise, and was a small enough group to be efficient,” relates Dunevitz. “The

county also offered strong administrative and facilitative support as the plan was developed.” Site management will emphasize protection of natural features and low-impact public use with a primary focus



Photo by Hannah Dunevitz, MN DNR

*Oak forest near the Bridgeview Park Reserve showing fall colors*

Photo by Tim Edgeton, Sherburne County



C. Perry Schenk and Vance Ellis are local citizens who helped write the management plan for the park.

on environmental education. County Forest Resource Specialist Tim Edgeton also served on the committee and will be involved in ongoing management of the site. “The educational focus is a good use of the site,” Edgeton notes. “Local school and civic groups can learn about the value of the natural features that have been protected within the park.” The plan calls for management activities to include a wildlife inventory, water quality monitoring, removal of exotic plants, and work with adjacent landowners to assess their interest in providing vegetative screening on a voluntary basis to serve as a buffer to the park’s forest communities.

The Bridgeview Park Reserve is the second of Sherburne’s county parks. The first, the 120-acre Oak Savanna Land Preserve in Becker Township, was estab-

lished through a donation from a private landowner, the Cox Family. Like Bridgeview, the Oak Savanna Land Preserve protects natural features documented by the MCBS program, including oak savanna, oak woodlands, and sand-dune blowouts that offer habitat for a number of rare plants. Although not yet developed for trail or park purposes, the county also owns some abandoned railroad grade where native prairie was documented by MCBS ecologists.

**Neighborhood Approval**

Dave Anderson, chair of the Sherburne County Parks Commission, cites the value of protecting MCBS sites as part of park acquisitions. “The existence of MCBS sites on a property is an important criterion. It’s something that local governments respect and recognize as significant. In any park system, you’re going to have to have different kinds of parks to meet different needs; for example, you need a certain type of park to serve youth athletic needs. That’s great for a community. But you don’t put that in a prairie. You need other parks — local, neighborhood places — that give people a chance to get out into these unique natural areas. People want that, too.”

Vance Ellis can stand on his land’s southern boundary and look out at the oak woods protected within the Bridgeview Park Reserve. Ellis participated on the committee that put together the natural resources management plan for the site.

“I think it was a great idea for the county to create this reserve,” says Ellis. “Any time a development is done, I think there should be some land left undisturbed. The key here, as far as the neighbors are concerned, is that it’s not intended for intensive use. You won’t be seeing picnic tables and that kind of thing. It’s a reserve, and the management plan is designed to protect the ecological value.” Ellis describes neighbors as “overall, very positive” about the park reserve. “I don’t know that there is necessarily a great awareness of the significance of the site’s native plant communities,” says Ellis, “but that’ll come in time. For now, for a lot of people, it’s just good to see that those trees are still there.”

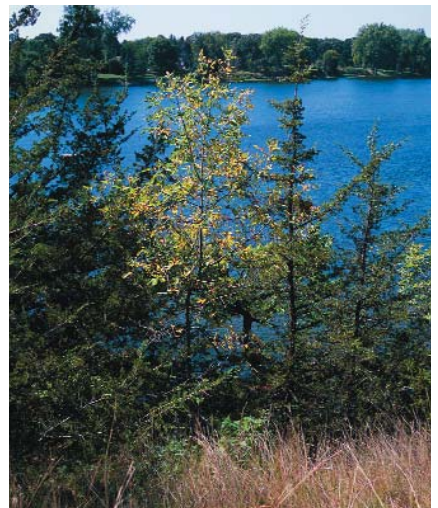


Photo by Hannah Dunevitz, MN DNR

Prairie and eastern red cedar at the top of a Mississippi River bluff in the Bridgeview Park Reserve

**CONTACT INFORMATION**

**Department of Natural Resources  
Ecological Services Division  
Regional Plant Ecologists**

*Northwestern Minnesota*  
Janet Boe – 218-755-4421  
*Central Minnesota*  
Hannah Dunevitz – 651-772-7570  
*Southeastern Minnesota*  
Ann Pierce – 507-280-5076

**Web site: [www.dnr.state.mn.us/ecological\\_services/programs.html](http://www.dnr.state.mn.us/ecological_services/programs.html)**

**Local Bridgeview Park contacts**  
Tim Edgeton, Sherburne County  
(763) 241-2939

**Department of Natural Resources  
Central Office  
500 Lafayette Road  
St. Paul, MN 55155-4040  
(651) 296-6157 (Metro Area)  
1-888-MINNDNR (646-6367) (MN Toll Free)  
[www.dnr.state.mn.us](http://www.dnr.state.mn.us)**

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