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STATE OF

MINNESOTA

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DEPARTMENT OF NATURAL RESOURCES

# DEVELOPMENT & ACQUISITION STATUS

Afton State Park

December 28, 1989



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## MINNESOTA STATE PARK SYSTEM

The mission of the Division of Parks and Recreation is to provide a state park system that perpetuates Minnesota's scenic beauty and its natural and cultural resources, while being responsive to public needs and expectations, and providing a diversity of recreational opportunities.

The Division of Parks and Recreation manages 64 state parks across Minnesota. The state park system is vital to Minnesota's tourism, an industry that is becoming the backbone of many economies in greater Minnesota. Our most unique and valuable cultural and natural resources are found within state park boundaries. It is the Division of Parks & Recreation's responsibility to acquire, protect and interpret these unique resources.

Prior to the 1989 legislative session, funding constraints and increasing visitor use seriously eroded the Division of Parks and Recreation's ability to provide quality recreational experiences and services. Since then the Governor and state legislators have responded to the need for increased funding for the operations budget. However, financing the maintenance of existing facilities and new development in the face of increasing visitor use remains a problem. This will be addressed during the 1990 legislative session when a capital bonding bill is considered.

The state park system has the Department of Natural Resource's (DNR) largest physical plant with over 2,800 major facilities requiring major rehabilitation. The Division of Parks & Recreation has identified more than \$55 million in capital budget needs. These projects include land acquisition, resource management, major rehabilitation or replacement of existing facilities and a few new facilities. Legislative funding requests to meet this need will be spread throughout future bienniums.

A recent study conducted by the Minnesota Historical Society identifies 515 historic structures located in the state park system. These structures are listed on the National Register of Historic Places. Most of these structures are of Civilian Conservation Corps (CCC) and Work Progress Administration (WPA) vintage. These CCC/WPA structures were constructed in the 1930's. These facilities are over 50 years old and many are in need of major rehabilitation which includes the electrical, sewage, and water systems associated with these buildings.

Many years of intensive use is also a consideration when looking at the current condition of campgrounds, picnic areas, group camps and trail systems. Lack of development and rehabilitation of these and other state park facilities will reduce park use. A reduction in state park use will adversely impact the economic development of adjacent communities and Minnesota's effort to improve tourism.

As capital development funds have become available we have completed the highest priority projects. As additional needs are identified, they are reviewed and placed on the statewide priority list for future completion.

In 1991 Itasca, Minnesota's oldest state park, will be 100 years old. For 100 years Minnesota has had a park system to be proud of. The present challenge is to manage the park resources and recreational development to ensure that Minnesotans will be proud of their state park system for another hundred years.

## AN OVERVIEW OF AFTON STATE PARK

Afton State Park is located in extreme eastern Washington County on the west shore of the St. Croix River, approximately 15 miles north of Hastings. The statutory boundary encompasses 1698.72 acres. Of these 168.72 acres are privately owned. County roads #20 and #21 provide access to the park.

By the late 1960's, heavy development pressure from the Twin Cities had impacted this area and opportunities for preserving representative segments of scenic state landscapes such as the St. Croix River Valley were generally assumed to be nonexistent. Local citizens discovered a largely underdeveloped area along the St. Croix. They then worked with park planners to convince the state legislature to establish Afton State Park in 1969.

Three major geologic processes were primarily responsible for the park's landscape; sedimentation, glaciation and erosion.

The first process took place hundreds of millions of years ago when vast shallow seas covered much of North America including Minnesota. Over time sediments accumulated on these sea floors. As the thickness of the sediments increased the lower layers were compressed to form sandstone which underlies much of the park.

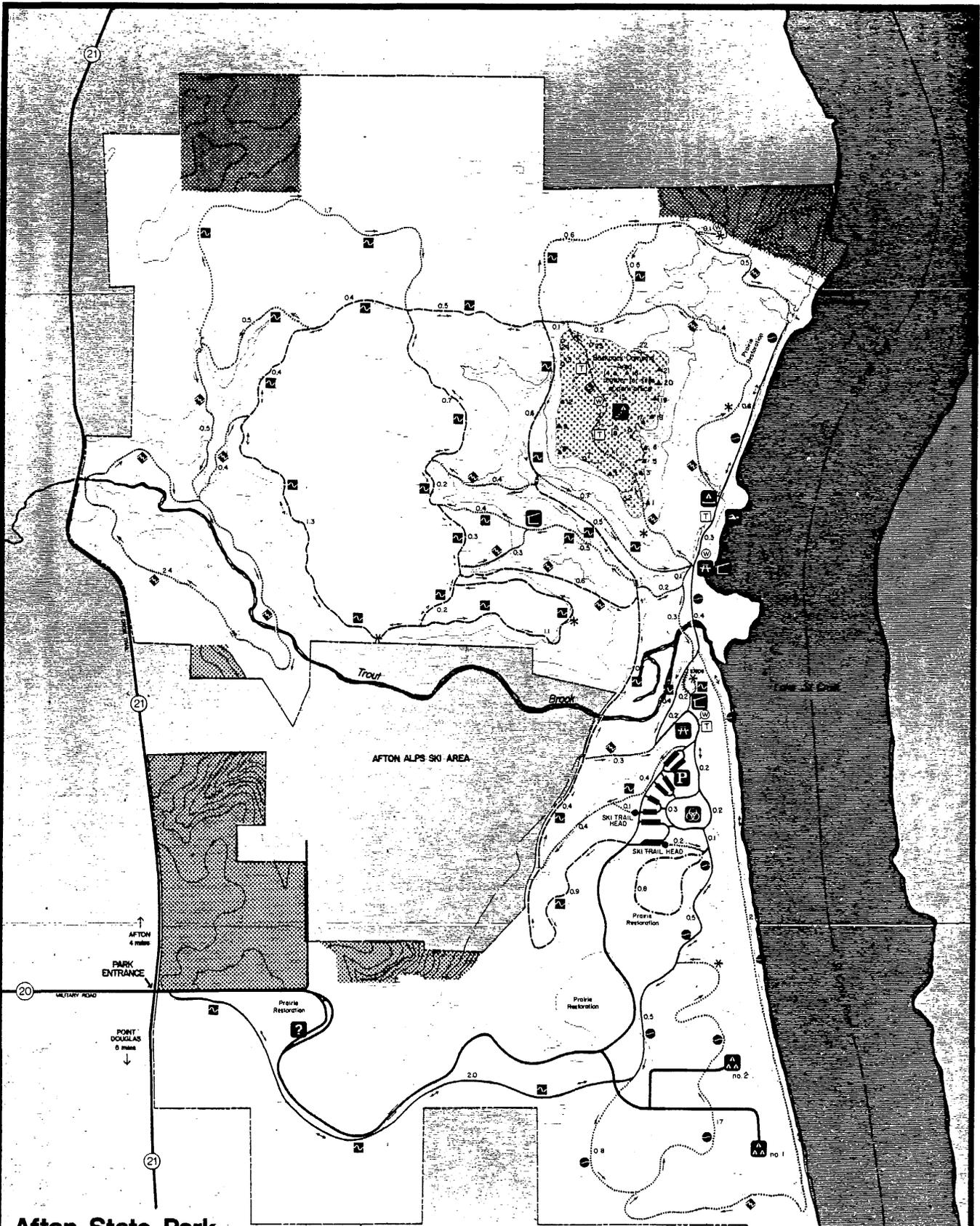
The second process, glaciation, occurred between two million and 10,000 years ago. During this time glaciers advanced and retreated across Minnesota four times. These glaciers laid down a series of deposits consisting of sand, gravel, and rock debris.

The third and most visible force creating the landform in this area has been stream and river erosion. This process has strongly dissected the land, creating a variety of ravines, the longest being the St. Croix Valley. Enormous volumes of meltwater from glacial lakes Grantsburg and Duluth provided the energy needed to cut through the glacial deposits and sedimentary layers creating the St. Croix River Valley.

Original park vegetation was predominantly oak savanna characterized by scattered oak trees and oak groves mixed with tall grass prairie. Tree species in this community primarily included red, white, and pin oak with some jack pine and maple. The tall grass prairie/oak community boundaries fluctuated with the intensity and frequency of prairie fires. When fires were severe the oak died and prairie grasses encroached upon their range. During other periods, especially during moister climates the oaks flourished at the expense of the prairie grasses.

Very little of the original character of the vegetation remains today. Logging and agricultural uses removed most of the original tree cover and tall grass prairie. In spite of these former land uses the park retains a high degree of ecological diversity. There are 16 existing ecological communities including upland and lowland brush, oak savanna, pine groves, pioneer hardwoods, bottomland hardwoods, sand beaches, dunes, wet meadows, aspen conifers, wooded pastures, streams and rivers.

The proximity of Afton State Park to the Twin Cities Metropolitan area offers excellent outdoor recreation opportunities within a forty-minute drive. Development within the park has been kept to a minimum to provide outdoor experiences in a quiet, natural setting. The campground, swimming beach and interior of the park are accessible only by trail.



# Afton State Park

| TRAILS                            | FACILITIES          | TRAILS                | FACILITIES     |
|-----------------------------------|---------------------|-----------------------|----------------|
| — Ski/Hiking                      | Park Office         | Shelter               | Drinking Water |
| easy                              | Parking Area        | Group Camp            | Toilets        |
| more difficult                    | Picnic Area         | Backpack Camping      | Overlooks      |
| most difficult                    | Interpretive Center | Canoe Camp            |                |
| --- Interpretive                  | Beach               | Open Campsite         |                |
| --- Ski/Hiking/Horseback          |                     | Wooded Campsite       |                |
| --- Ski/Hiking/Bicycle            |                     |                       |                |
| 2.0 Trail distances in kilometers |                     |                       |                |
|                                   |                     | PRIVATE PROPERTY      |                |
|                                   |                     | Public Use Prohibited |                |

SCALE 0 MILE

Because trails end within the boundaries of the park that are not under the jurisdiction of the D.N.R. check with the park manager if you plan to use them.

## EXISTING FACILITIES

The following is an inventory of the existing physical plant of Afton State Park.

Acres in Statutory Boundary - 1,699  
Acres of state land - 1,530

### Campsites

Back Pack - 24  
Canoe in - 1  
Self Contained Boats Camping - 11

### Miles of Trails

Self-guided Interpretive - .5  
Hiking - 18  
Horse - 5  
Bicycle - 4  
Cross Country Ski - 18.0

Beaches - 1

### Miles of Road

Asphalt - 2  
Gravel - 2

### Enclosed and Open Picnic Shelters

Number of Picnic Tables - 90

### Number of Buildings

Over 100 sq.ft. - 7  
Under 100 sq.ft. - 8

Miles of Posted Boundary - 9

Year Round Visitor Center

### Park Utilities

Number of Septic Tanks - 4  
Number of Wells - 6

## PROBLEMS FACING AFTON STATE PARK

There are many public recreational facilities in Afton State Park to maintain. Some are in need of replacement or major rehabilitation. Many new facilities are needed to meet growing recreational demands.

Eighteen miles of year-round, multi-use trails and the consistent increase in annual visitation must be considered when looking at development and rehabilitation.

Most important is the protection and restoration of the natural and cultural resources in the park. This includes restoring and maintaining the oak savanna/prairie areas along with a balance of vegetative types that typifies pre-European settlement times. Within Afton there are several original goat prairie (bluff-top) prairies that especially need protection and management. Due to years of neglect, these areas are being lost to encroaching woody vegetation. Moreover, the large prairie restoration efforts that were so successful in Afton in the late 70's and early 80's have come to a standstill due to erosion of resource management funds. Resource management projects are needed to provide a more natural setting for recreational activities, to mitigate the effects of past disturbances and to continue Afton's tradition of integrating interpretation and resource management in a natural park setting.

Resource management also includes finding, documenting and interpreting the cultural resources of the area. In the past, facilities were developed in prehistoric and historic use areas. These areas deserve to be protected and interpreted.

There is an unmet demand for naturalist programs and more selfguiding interpretive materials. Organized groups and individual park visitors regularly request interpretive programs and information on park resources. Prairie wildflowers, birds of the park, star watching, and resources of the St. Croix River are all attractions that visitors enquire about. The park often gets requests for environmental education programs.

## RECENT DEVELOPMENT IN AFTON STATE PARK

A demand for outdoor skills programs like back-pack camping and orienteering has been expressed, partly due to the unique opportunities provided by the park. A naturalist staff position, more interpretive materials, displays, and outdoor signs are needed to meet public requests.

The St. Croix is one of the most highly used scenic rivers in the nation. The 2.5 miles of river frontage provides uncontrolled access by numerous boaters contributing to park management problems.

Important improvements have been completed at Afton State Park in recent years. However, the goals identified in the ten year old management plan have not been achieved.

Major development projects since 1986 have included:

1. The development of a primitive canoe group camp on the St. Croix River.
2. The development of a primitive group camp.
3. The development of a accessible group camp containing 14 parking spurs, visitor parking lot and a hand pumped well.
4. The development of a river-front picnic ground.
5. The development of a self-guided prairie interpretive trail.
6. Major rehabilitation to the group camp access road.
7. The rehabilitation of 7 miles of ski trails to accommodate skate skiers.
8. Established an additional 20 picnic sites in main picnic ground.

## **AFTON STATE PARK CAPITAL NEEDS**

### **RESOURCE MANAGEMENT**

#### **Prairie restoration - \$20,000**

Complete restoration of presettlement prairie vegetation in abandoned agricultural fields adjacent to entrance road and bicycle trail.

#### **Prairie Restoration - \$20,000**

Complete prairie restoration in hike-in campground.

#### **Goat (bluff-top) prairie Restoration - \$10,000**

Identify and manage existing remnant prairies. This task potentially includes tree and shrub removal, interseeding, and prescribed burns.

#### **Cultural and natural resource inventory - \$10,000**

Identify cultural and natural resources within the park that should be preserved and managed for the use and enjoyment of present and future park visitors.

**Subtotal \$60,000**

### **MAJOR REHABILITATION**

#### **Hike-in Campground - \$20,000**

Improve existing campsites and access trails.

#### **Well Abandonment - \$60,000**

Seal and cap 21 old farm wells to protect groundwater.

#### **Bury Overhead Powerline - \$45,000**

Bury existing overhead power lines to promote safety and restore aesthetics of wilderness setting.

#### **Interpretive Displays - \$10,000**

Replace 10 year old displays. New displays to document changes at Afton State Park and to better interpret the natural features and history of the area.

**Subtotal \$135,000**

### **NEW DEVELOPMENT**

#### **Beach Area Toilet/Storm Shelter/ Change Building - \$275,000**

Replace existing pit toilets and old shed shelter to provide sanitary/safety building for public use near the river area.

**Subtotal \$275,000**

**TOTAL DEVELOPMENT NEEDS \$470,000**

## LAND ACQUISITION

There are approximately 20,000 acres of private land within the boundaries of Minnesota State Parks.

Acquisition of these lands is an ongoing process that occurs as parcels become available for purchase and funds are available. Present acquisition costs are averaging about a \$1,000 per acre across the state. It would therefore cost about \$20,000,000 to acquire all the private land within state parks at present values.

The park map shows the location of private holdings within the park. These properties should be purchased before private development increases within the park's statutory boundary.

The following issues highlight problems associated with private property within state parks.

- \* Private lands within state parks are being sought out by developers.
- \* Subdivision for residential use will cause such lands to be too expensive to acquire in the future.
- \* Land uses such as gravel extraction and clear-cut logging adversely impact state parks and adjoining public lands.
- \* Some private lands limit public use of existing park facilities and lands because of their location.

These issues associated with privately owned lands within state parks threaten existing public investment and limit public use.

### PRIVATE LANDS TO BE ACQUIRED IN AFTON STATE PARK

| Parcel # | Acres |
|----------|-------|
| 6b       | 5.20  |
| 11       | 28.08 |
| 19       | 18.40 |
| 19a      | 64.00 |
| 30a-1    | 12.70 |
| 30a-2    | 0.34  |
| 36a      | 40.00 |

**Total 168.72 acres.**

## PARK POTENTIAL

What efforts will the completion of resource management, rehabilitation and new development projects have on Afton State Park? These projects along with the acquisition of private lands within the park will assure the preservation of these unique resources and facilities for future generations. Active management will be required to maintain and regenerate existing forest stands. These will ensure that future visitors will be able to experience the diverse nature of Minnesota's forests.

Some improvements will not only increase park use but will greatly increase the quality of the visitors experience. Many of the rehabilitation projects will increase staff efficiency and cut the costs of maintaining facilities.

New facilities will improve customer service while giving the visitor a greater opportunity to learn about Minnesota's natural and cultural resources.

The acquisition of private lands within the park will assure that private and commercial development do not detract from the natural beauty of Afton State Park.

A stable funding source is essential for effective long term resource management and capital budget planning for the Minnesota State Park system and Afton State Park.

### SUMMARY

Currently, statewide capital needs for development and acquisition are **\$55,000,000**. The mission of the Minnesota State Park System can be achieved by funding support to meet this need over the next several bienniums.

Afton State Park acquisition needs will be determined by appraisals.

Afton State Park development needs - **\$770,000**.

**Help us celebrate the 100th anniversary of the  
Minnesota State Park System in 1991!**

