

Greater Minnesota Regional Parks and Trails Commission

Designation Application

General Section

Designation Application #: 15-023D Date Submitted: 06/30/2015

Park or Trail Name: Big Falls Campground & Horse Camp

District #: 1 Map Coordinates (Latitude and Longitude): Latitude: 48.1948 Longitude: -93.8016

Location Description:

Big Falls Municipal Campground and Horse Camp, 123 Whispering Pines Drive, Big Falls, MN 56627. We like to say that we are located "In the Heart of the Wilderness," which is 40 miles south of Voyageurs National Park, 50 miles northwest of Scenic State Park and 100 miles north of Itasca State Park. Our city is at the junction of State Highways 71 N and 6. It is in the center of Koochiching County. The existing park runs along the banks of the scenic Bigfork River. It is at mile 53 of the established MN State Water Trail, and has easy access to the Blue Ox ATV Trail.

Lead Applicant Organization: City of Big Falls

Lead Contact First Name: Joan Last Name: Nelson

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Joint Applicant #1 Organization:

Joint Applicant #2 Organization:

Joint Applicant #3 Organization:

Joint Applicant #4 Organization:

Describe other project supporters:

Koochiching County Board of Commissioners, City of Bigfork, City of Littlefork, Mn State Representatives David Dill and Tom Bakk, Bigfork River Board

Description Section

Regional Significance Statement:

Classification: Special Recreational Feature Park

Total proposed acreage:

Overview/Description of Park or Trail:

The existing Big Falls Campground, Horse Camp and wayside rest is the only one of its kind on the Bigfork River. It is situated alongside the rapids and falls, in a setting of lofty pines and surrounding woods. It is a pristine, natural setting that changes with the seasons. The rapids range from wild and roaring in early spring, to calm and lazy in mid to late summer. The rock ledges and outcroppings make for a natural landscape alive with large and small waterfalls that provide for a unique swimming and wading experience. A Bigfork River Massage in the small rapids, with the historic train bridge in the background, is an experience like no other around the area. Diving into the "Deep Hole" is an adventure for the brave that will not be forgotten. Photo opportunities abound. "Love this Place", "Beautiful Park", "We will be back" are frequent comments found in our drop box. There simply is no other place in the region that rivals the Big Falls Campground for its unique location, natural beauty and access to endless outdoor activities. Our connection to the Blue Ox ATV Trail, surrounding forests and county trails make our park a popular tourist destination for hunting, fishing, ATV and horseback riding activities. We are also connected to the Bigfork River State Water Trail. Whether traveling by canoe, kayak or motor boat, we offer a modern rest area and campsites at the portage before heading to primitive landings downriver. You can travel all the way to the Rainy River. Campers and day visitors from all over the state, country and Canada stay here. We get many repeat guests from regional communities. In 2014 50% of all guest stays were from the tri-county region of Koochiching, Itasca and Beltrami, with similar statistics thus far in 2015. Every year we are full to capacity over the 4th of July holiday, and have to turn potential guests away. We are the only scenic campground of this type providing modern hookups and shower facilities in approximately a 50 miles radius. We also provide the only scenic roadside rest and picnic area on Highway 71 between Bemidji and International Falls and on Highway 6 south to Effie, which are main tourist routes to Voyageurs National Park and Canada. Day use is also very popular, with two pavilions available for weddings, family gatherings, reunions and other group meetings from around the region. Improvements would include acquiring an additional 9.8 acres that has recently become available for sale. Handicap accessible bathroom and shower facilities, accessible pathways, and new riverside camp sites could be added to the park. If possible, the master plan will include restoration of an historic spillway on the river, to return the river to its natural course. Natural setting playground equipment would be added to provide more outdoor recreation opportunities for campground guests and visitors.

What is the Acquisition and Development Status?

New Park or Trail (no land acquired or developed)

Existing Park or Trail

Land Acquisition

Status: 9.8 acres are for sale

Percentage of Land Acquired: currently own 18.75 acres 66% of project

Development Status

No Development

- Some Development, but more Proposed
 - New Facilities Proposed
 - Existing Facilities to be Upgraded
- Fully Development

Facility Listing Section

Classification: Special Recreational Feature Park	
Existing Facility List	Proposed Facility List
Camping-cross-section of camper types, Electric/water/sewer RV sites, Electric campsites, Non-electric campsites, Group campsites, Horse camp sites ATV parking allowed, Picknicking and picnic shelters, Hiking Trails (natural), Horseback Riding Trails (natural), Swimming, Canoeing Facilities, Restrooms/sanitation building, Roads and Parking Areas	Camping-cross-section of camper types, Electric/water/sewer RV sites, Electric/water campsites, Electric campsites, Non-electric campsites, Group campsites, Picknicking and picnic shelters, Hiking Trails (natural), Cross-country Skiing Trails, Horseback Riding Trails (natural), Swimming, Canoeing Facilities, Play Areas, with an outdoor theme, Restrooms/sanitation building, Roads and Parking Areas, Upgrade existing restroom and shower facilities to comply with ADA handicap accessibility.

Master Plan Status Section

Master Plan Status: No Master Plan is Available

Describe Other Supportive Information:

Photos of our campgrounds, river views and some of the surrounding trails have been attached to show the truly unique, pristine setting in which we are located. The attached DNR map demonstrates our ideal location along the Bigfork River State Water Trail, an interactive version can be viewed at <http://www.dnr.state.mn.us/watertrails/bigforkriver/index.html>. This map also gives a great history and some background information about the river. A map of the Blue Ox ATV Trail is also attached, which shows our connection to this popular trail. In the region, the campground is the perfect location to gather for an ATV ride, because in Koochiching County the county road are open for ATV use, unless posted as closed. Photos of our horse camp are also attached. Guests at the horse camp can make use of over 30 miles of marked multi-use trails, or explore other areas on their own. The guest data for the entire 2014 season and 2015 thus far is attached. This data shows the various cities throughout the region from which our guests travel to stay at our facility. This data does not include the numerous wayside rest users or day visitors, for which no fee is charged. Please note that the number of stays in 2014 was lower than normal, due to a very late arrival of spring, and substantial flooding. This flooding created an unusually high number of day visitors though, just to see the sights. Even Representative Rick Nolan stopped to see the amazing flood waters. Photos are attached of the waters at their highest. Letters of support from Koochiching County, the Bigfork River Board and the nearby cities of Littlefork and Bigfork are attached. As you can see from the letters, there is a very strong connection to, and

support for the Big Falls campground from the region. A letter from State Representatives Dill and Bakk is also attached. Cost estimates for improvements have not yet been completed, as the land has just recently come up for sale. Gathering data for reliable cost estimates in time to meet this submission deadline simply was not feasible with our limited staff and resources. Upkeep and maintenance of the expanded park would be done by existing city staff as part of their normal duties, as only minimal mowing and cleaning would be required for the additional land and facilities.

Classification Details Section

Classification: Special Recreational Feature Park

Criteria #1 Provides a High-Quality Outdoor Recreation Experience: The Bigfork River Rapids are truly unique to the region. From roaring and rushing in the spring to slowly flowing later in the year. The ultimate swimming adventure for the brave is to swim the "Deep Hole", or for a more relaxing dip in the river try a "River Massage" in the smaller rapids. Exploring rocks and waterfalls are a favorite pastime for visitors. The picturesque historic train bridge in the background offers a unique attraction. Camping underneath the towering pine trees in a tent or RV is a very serene experience that draws guests back time and time again. Picnicing in one of the pavilions or on the island is a great day activity. The park has access to miles of marked ATV and horse riding trails, with many more miles to explore on your own. It is a needed stop for canoes, kayaks and boats at the portage on the existing State Water Trail. It is a sportsman's paradise to set up camp for fishing, or a fall deer, grouse or bear hunting trip. Pictures are attached, as words cannot do justice to this beautiful, natural treasure in the heart of the wilderness. Remote and peaceful, yet just a short walk to our small quaint business district. The campground has a large pavilion that hosts many group events and gatherings. Improvements to our park are needed to increase handicap accessibility, provide more sites and picnic areas and add more outdoor recreational opportunities by constructing a natural themed playground. Additional sites would be put to good use, as there are several times each year when the campgrounds are full to capacity, and potential guests must be turned away.

Criteria #2 Provides a Natural and Scenic Setting Offering a Compelling Sense of Place: The Bigfork River connects regional communities from the city of Bigfork in the south to Loman and the Rainy River in the north. The natural rapids, waterfalls and rock formations are a draw for campground guests, travelers and day visitors. The river provides a natural waterpark for swimming, and a great place to hike, fish, launch your canoe or kayak or relax. The attached photos tell our story best. One goal of the master plan would be to restore the historic spillway on the river that was destroyed by an ice flow in 1980. The spillway was a major tourist attraction, and it provided another unique swimming opportunity. This restoration would return the flow of water to its natural course by directing more water to the main channel. This would also reduce current island erosion, which is becoming a problem. Wildlife is abundant at the park and in the surrounding wilderness, including white tail deer, moose, black bears, timber wolves, beaver, fox and more. Bald eagles, cranes, herons, ducks, grouse and countless other birds are plentiful. Walleye, northern pike, bass, muskies and sturgeon are species found in the river. Our state flower, the Lady Slipper, is found in the area, as well as many other species of orchids and wildflowers. People come from all over the region to enjoy picking our bountiful wild blueberries. We are proudly Wi-Fi free, as there is so much to do here without it. For those that truly need to stay

connected Wi-Fi is available at local businesses a short walk or drive away. Acquiring the adjoining 9.8 acres with river frontage would allow more people to have access to the river and the surrounding activities, and create an enjoyable environment for future generations.

Criteria #3 Well-located to Serve a Regional Need and/or Tourist Destination: The campground is located on two established regional trails, the Bigfork River MN State Water Trail and the Blue OX ATV Trail. DNR maps of both trails with information about each are attached. The park is in the center of Koochiching County with a 20 minute car drive to Littlefork, 30 minutes to Northome and 40 minutes to International Falls and Bigfork. For those of us living in this region, a drive time of an hour or less is normal, an everyday occurrence for many. A 30 mile drive in this rural area, with no traffic lights and few stop signs takes much less time than it would in a high traffic area. The park is situated at the junction of State Highways 6 & 71, which is along a well established route to the tourist destinations of Voyageur's National Park and Canada. On any given day, multiple travelers stop at the wayside rest for a needed break, with opportunities for a quick hike along the river. Our wayside rest offers the only shower facilities for the owners of rustic cabins in the surrounding area. For residents of our region it's a destination close enough to home for a quick weekend get away, without driving long distances with their RVs or camping equipment. With less driving time to reach a camping destination, many families are able to have a much needed "screen free" weekend together, without having to take time off from work or school. And less time on the road means more time to enjoy all that the heart of the wilderness has to offer! Guests from urban areas travel here for a true Northern Minnesota experience. The attached guest data sheets demonstrate the diverse areas that we serve.

Criteria #4 Fills a Gap in Recreational Opportunity within the Region: As seen by the attached MN State Park map, there is only one State Park in Koochiching County, and that park, Franz Jevne, provides only rustic tent facilities. The map clearly demonstrates the lack of State parks in the region north of Bemidji. The Bigfork River is a scenic, natural environment that should be able to be shared by everyone in the region. There is currently no state or national park that offers more than primitive facilities along these 170 river miles. Our municipal park currently tries to fill that void, by providing modern camping and rest stop facilities, but is limited in what it can offer by the park's size and the lack of municipal funding resources. Access for all to river activities such as fishing, canoeing and kayaking could be greatly enhanced by expanding the park and adding accessibility features. The surrounding woods and trails are a paradise for the sportsperson or naturalist. The campground is located in the ideal place to headquarter for a fall grouse, deer or bear hunting trip. In addition to the Blue Ox Trail, Koochiching County provides miles and miles of trails available to ATV riders, with all trails classified as "open unless posted closed." Horse back riders can also enjoy the multi-use trail system. As there are only a small number of motels rooms available in a 30 mile radius, camping is sometimes the only option for many visitors looking to enjoy all the heart of the wilderness has to offer. At times, our current park is full to capacity, or does not have enough electric sites, or large enough sites to accommodate all requests.

Attachment List Section (only lists up to 10 documents)

Type	Description
site_characteristic_images	Scenic River Overlook
public_involvement_photos	Public Input Mail Card
development_plan_overview_uploads	West Side Development Plan
acquisition_plan_overview_uploads	Land Acquisition Plan
site_map_uploads_2	Existing Site Map
Photo	2014 Raging Flood Waters
site_characteristic_images	View from Highway 71 Bridge
site_characteristic_images	Campers at the Big Falls Campground
public_involvement_photos	News Release
site_characteristic_images	Mist rising from the Big Fork River falls area