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9,000 acres in Dakota County could be a paradise for recreation, research and residents

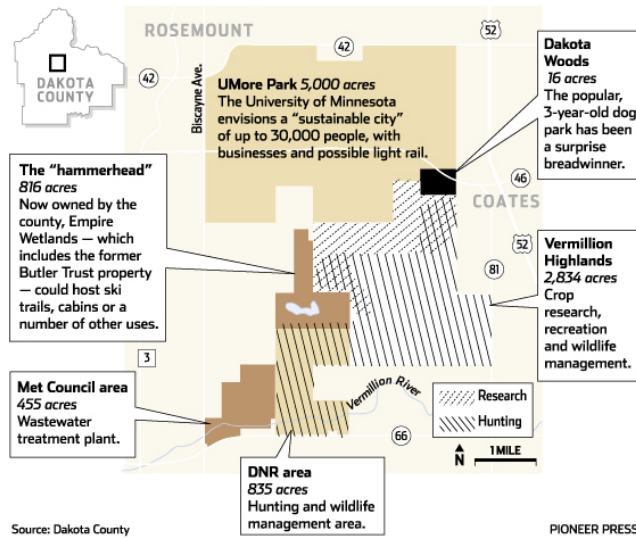
State, university, county all have a stake in 9,000 acres

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Empire Township Properties

South of Rosemount, Dakota County has partnered with the state and the University of Minnesota to create Empire Wetlands and Vermillion Highlands — a nearly 4,000-acre natural area, divided into a number of diverse uses. Just to their north, the university envisions UMore Park, a “sustainable city” of up to 30,000 people on 5,000 acres.



Private mining operations next to public ski trails. A bustling dog park, a popular trout stream and a small cattle farm. All bordering hundreds of acres set aside for prairie restoration and cutting-edge crop research within a stone's throw of open hunting grounds.

If that sounds like an avalanche of uses for one area, it is. State, Dakota County and University of Minnesota officials are making no secret of the fact that their wide-ranging plans for 9,000 acres of green space in Empire Township, south of Rosemount, are dizzying, ambitious and complex.

Some may even seem a bit contradictory.

Many negotiations have gone into moving the neighboring and overlapping projects forward, and some political trades even helped spawn the U's new stadium. But big challenges remain — ranging from questions over property lines and incompatible state and county park policies to how to remove munitions residue from contaminated parcels.

The county, the Metropolitan Council, the university, sand-mining operators and homeowners all have a hand — and a stake — in the outcome for an area that covers about 14 square miles. So do trout fishermen, gun enthusiasts, college athletes, scientists, hunters, conservationists and surrounding cities and townships.

Many proponents are overjoyed at the progress to date.

“We really have the opportunity to create something unique all the way around with this research, recreation and environment area,” said Forrest Izuno, the director of the U's College of Food, Agricultural and Natural Resource Sciences.

Umore Park / Just south of Rosemount, the 5,000-

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acre UMore Park could one day be its own city. The creation of a community of 20,000 to 30,000 residents who embrace values of "sustainable living" at UMore Park — the University of Minnesota Outreach, Research and Education Park — was officially proposed in November 2006.

The vision, which could take 30 years to execute, includes homes and businesses next to academic research and natural areas, and possibly light rail. But long before that happens, there are thousands of acres to mine.

The U finished test drilling in the spring, and environmental studies are under way to determine whether the site can be dug for sand and gravel.

A mining partner could be chosen before year's end, with mining to start as early as 2010. That could be delayed, however, by falling demand for concrete due to the slumping real estate market, said Charles Muscoplat, a university vice president of strategic development.

The revenue would be used for a university endowment benefiting scholarships, fellowships and academic research.

Environmental problems remain. About 10 percent of the land is known to be lined with contaminated soil from Gopher Ordnance Works, a World War II-era Army gunpowder plant, and there's concern the pollution may have spread.

Vermillion Highlands / When the 50,000-seat University of Minnesota stadium opens next year in Minneapolis, fans can thank a land swap south of Rosemount.

Located just south of UMore Park, the 2,834 acres on the eastern edge of Empire Township will be known as Vermillion Highlands — a research,

recreation and wildlife-management area owned by the U and co-managed by the state Department of Natural Resources.

Some acres will be open to the public for hunting, and the Dakota County Gun Club has leased an area for shooting sports. The Legislature has set aside \$300,000 to examine prospects for a state-of-the-art regional shooting facility on the site.

Traversing Vermillion Highlands is Lone Rock Trail — 10 miles of walking, equestrian and ski trails leading to the centrally located Lone Rock.

On the northern portion, the university is partnering with the Mayo Clinic to grow and experiment with healthful foods from ginger to turmeric, among other research projects. To the south, willows and prairie grass will be planted to create wildlife habitat that can also be harvested and used for biomass energy.

"We talk about having these 'living laboratories,'" said the university's Izuno.

In 2032, when the stadium bonds are paid off, the U will deed the parcel to the DNR.

Dakota Woods / The county's 3-year-old dog park, Dakota Woods, turned a profit virtually overnight. On 16 acres off Blaine Avenue, south of 160th Street West, the park began as an experiment. County commissioners voted in January to make it permanent. The park generated \$36,000 in revenue last year with expenses of \$16,000, according to the county, and sold 640 annual permits and 2,603 daily permits.

Empire Wetlands / County officials sometimes call Empire Wetlands "the hammerhead." On a map, the property — 816 acres of woods, hills, fields and wetlands surrounding a small, picturesque lake —

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looks more than a bit like a hammer. For nearly 30 years, the county's elected leaders and staff wondered whether the hammer would swing their way.

In February, it did. A \$14.8 million land deal ensured that prized property owned by descendants of Janine Butler ended up with the county and not with builders or gravel miners.

The northernmost 460 acres will become the new Empire Wetlands Regional Park, situated conveniently close to residents in the rapid-growth cities of Farmington, Lakeville and Rosemount. About 100 acres are wetlands.

Whether the park will host ski trails, cabins, campers or some other use is still up in the air, but a long-term goal calls for walking trails snaking from Farmington through the park and south to the Vermillion River.

Hidden in the property's belly is a 20-acre lake. Protecting the lake will be key. Private mining operations lie to the west, raising concern about water runoff.

Wildlife on the property includes bald eagles, turkeys, waterfowl, coyote, fox and deer — as well as protected species the Blanding's turtle and the loggerhead shrike, a colorful predator that could pass in appearance for a harmless songbird.

Dnr Grounds / The southern half of the Butler property will join with hundreds of acres once owned by the family of business leader James Miles to become something of a hunter's paradise.

Shaped like a block letter C, the 835 acres will be split between a public hunting ground and a wildlife conservation area owned and managed by the DNR.

"We do have inconsistent policies," said county parks director Steve Sullivan. "We have a parks ordinance that doesn't allow dogs off leash. My guess is the hunters aren't going to go along with that."

A mile of the Vermillion River flows through the site, curving along a scenic knoll.

Bob Fashingbauer, a wildlife area manager with the DNR, said prairie restoration is helping draw songbirds, increase pheasant habitat and ensure that the site continues to draw deer, turkey and goose.

The area is even home to a small aspen forest — rare in southern Minnesota.

To the west of the site, the Metropolitan Council owns 455 acres surrounding a wastewater-treatment plant.

The DNR is working with the Army Corps of Engineers to add bends to portions of the Vermillion River that had previously been straightened, increasing fish habitat by slowing the river's speed. Brown trout have been known to grow to more than 20 inches in length in the stream, a navigable waterway.

Fashingbauer said the DNR would like to restore some wetlands on the site, too.

Ongoing efforts to balance uses of the Empire Township properties will require cooperation among the county, the university and the DNR.

"I think it's good government," the county's Sullivan said of cooperative ventures throughout the properties. "It's a new way of doing business."

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