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Where nature gets nurtured

By **JOY POWELL**, Star Tribune

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The Dakota County commissioners rode in a small caravan of trucks over the wild land in Empire Township, crossing the Vermillion River where trophy brown trout swim in the cool waters, their rainbow hues bright.

On a bumpy, rarely traveled route they went, up a steep hill to a grassy knoll where they got out and looked across a vista being restored from farmland to native grasses and oak savannas.

It's part of roughly 4,000 acres of wilderness and agricultural research areas owned by the University of Minnesota, the state Department of Natural Resources, Dakota County and local governments, and now being prepared for greater public access.

Public agencies and government have united to create a major complex of natural areas for the region. It's all public now, but access needs to be improved.

Twelve years ago, Commissioner Will Branning joined a University Advisory Research Council and since then has seen five different master plans. But the powerful new collaboration has forged an alliance that's already providing recreational opportunities -- while retaining the University's agricultural research areas -- in a complex that's a short drive from where millions live in the metro area.

"My prayers are that it just keeps going this way," Branning said. And with the partnerships now in place, the commissioner said, he believes the millions of dollars in taxpayer investments, and the visions long held, are coming to fruition.

Commissioner Kathleen Gaylord had her own thoughts as she gazed over the land. The cicadas were singing, the sun shining, and pheasants and other wildlife roaming in their natural cover, where the pressures of urban sprawl are held at bay.

"It's a beautiful and expansive piece of property, central to Dakota County, that will be preserved for generations to come," she said.

The commissioners toured lands where the University is experimenting with plants that can help prevent disease, and also a small lake, trailheads and gravel quarries that will become more lakes.

Now, they stood on a 475-acre parcel along the Vermillion River, on land managed by the Department of Natural Resources. Former Control Data magnate James Miles once

ran a farm there. He and his family carried out Miles' vision to establish the State Aquatic and Wildlife Management Area, open to the public. The \$2.4 million price for the acquisition in 2005 was below market value.

To the north are more than 2,800 acres in Vermillion Highlands, managed by the University of Minnesota and Department of Natural Resources, in conjunction with Dakota County. And just north of that is the 5,000-acre site where UMore Park, under University auspices, is to be developed in coming decades into one of the nation's most energy-efficient and sustainable communities.

Also in the nature area are hundreds more acres owned by Dakota County, Farmington, Empire Township and the Metropolitan Council.

Last April, the Met Council authorized a grant of \$1.7 million, matched with \$566,666 from Dakota County, to finance the purchase of a 456-acre area within a tract known as the Butler Trust parcel. The Butler property includes an additional 360 acres now managed by the DNR.

No turfdom here

This sprawling complex of wilderness and farmland rented to tenant farmers represents a model partnership, perhaps unique in the world, said Al Singer, director of Dakota County's land conservation program.

In addition, there's hundreds more acres of private land along the meandering Vermillion River that the partners hope to someday buy from willing owners, he said.

There are "inherent conflicts," Singer said, between those who want to kayak and anglers, for example. So officials are working on a master plan to enable those involved in recreation, hunting and research to coexist, he said.

Leading the University's efforts is Charles Muscoplat, who spoke in a separate interview about UMore Park and how officials from various agencies are collaborating. He pointed to a site where the federal government ran an ammunition plant during World War II. The ordnance plant had left behind contaminants, including arsenic and asbestos.

The last partnership, Muscoplat said, is with the Minnesota Pollution Control Agency to help with environmental studies and remedial efforts.

"That is really going well," he said. "They are helping us to negotiate with the Army Corps of Engineers, and they really have become a wonderful partner in that effort for the cleanup."

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