



Vision and Implementation Program for the **Blue River Greenway**

May 2023

Developed by Heartland Conservation Alliance on behalf of
its many Partners and the community, with generous funding
from The Conservation Fund and the Nature Conservancy.

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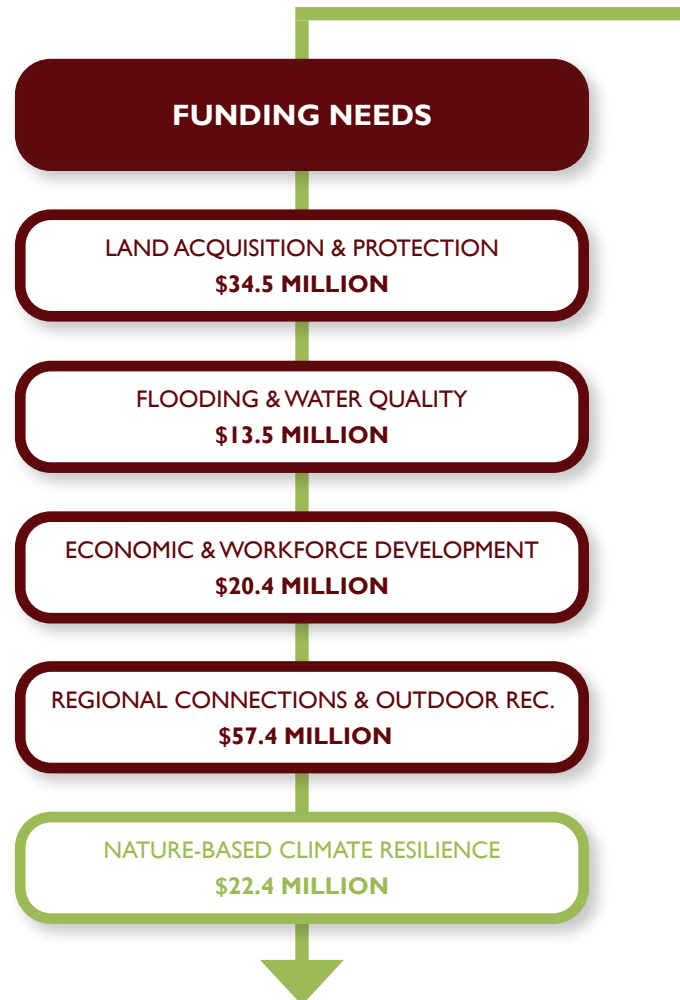


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PARTNERS

The Blue River Greenway Vision and Implementation Strategy presented in the following chapters is the culmination of decades of collaboration among numerous regional Partners to serve the residents, businesses, and visitors of the Blue River Watershed by protecting, connecting, restoring, and ensuring equitable access to the Blue River and its many fantastic community benefits. Key Partners are listed below, with the support of many additional community members and organizations. It is the shared Vision of the partners for the partnership to grow as the Blue River Greenway realizes its full potential.

- Black & Veatch
- Blue River Steering Committee
- Bridging the Gap
- City of Overland Park, Kansas
- Clement Waters
- Palestine East Corridor Project
- Economic Development Corporation of Kansas City
- Foundation for Regeneration
- Hoxie Collective
- Jackson County Parks + Rec
- Johnson County Parks & Recreation District
- Johnson County Stormwater Management Program
- Kansas City Port Authority
- Kansas City, Missouri Office of Sustainability
- Kansas City, Missouri Parks & Recreation
- Kansas City, Missouri Water Services Department (KC Water)
- Marlborough Community Coalition
- Mid-America Regional Council (MARC)
- My Region Wins!
- Nature-Based Climate Solutions Initiative
- Neighborhoods represented in Water Equity Road Map Workshops
- The Conservation Fund
- The Nature Conservancy, Missouri and Kansas Chapters
- University of Colorado – Boulder
- University of Kansas – Edwards Campus
- University of Missouri – Kansas City Center for Neighborhoods
- Vireo
- Wichita State University Environmental Finance Center



EXECUTIVE SUMMARY

Originating from headwaters surrounded by natural wetlands, forests, grasslands, pasture, and cropland, the Blue River flows through economically, racially, and ethnically diverse suburban neighborhoods and heavily industrialized areas. Marquee regional and local parks are strung along the river like green pearls. But repeated floods decimated its industrial base and neighborhoods, urban runoff pollutes its waters, habitat loss threatens native species, and a lack of physical access prevents Kansas Citians from using it. Some do not even know it exists. This diversity is a challenge and a tremendous opportunity for the river corridor to restore physical, environmental, ecological, ethnic, socioeconomic, and political connections.

When completed, the Blue River Greenway will be the backbone of a healthy, prosperous, connected, and resilient region. Numerous municipal and not-for-profit partners (Partners) are collaborating to fully protect, connect, and restore the Greenway from the Overland Park Arboretum in suburban Johnson County, Kansas, to Corrington Park in urban Kansas City, Missouri, near the confluence with the Missouri River. The completed Blue River Greenway will:

- Become a regional destination to live, work, and play
- Complete the linchpin of our regional greenways
- Strengthen natural, transportation, social, economic, and political connections
- Reduce flooding & improve water quality
- Draw down CO₂ and help achieve carbon neutrality
- Improve air quality
- Cool the urban heat island
- Provide equitable access to nature and healthy outdoor recreation
- Promote zero-waste (“circular”) economic development and provide green-collar jobs
- Connect residents and workers to local jobs
- **Create a model and catalyst for revitalizing our region’s waterways**

This Vision and Implementation Strategy is based on decades of collaboration, extensive neighborhood engagement, and the best available data. The program builds on our public lands and trails, identifying gaps and opportunities to secure land and public access, protect and enhance habitat, and fully connect trails and communities. The following pages: 1) Present the Greenway vision’s many community benefits; 2) outline the implementation program, key projects, and focus areas; and 3) document the funding and resources needed to achieve it.

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VISION

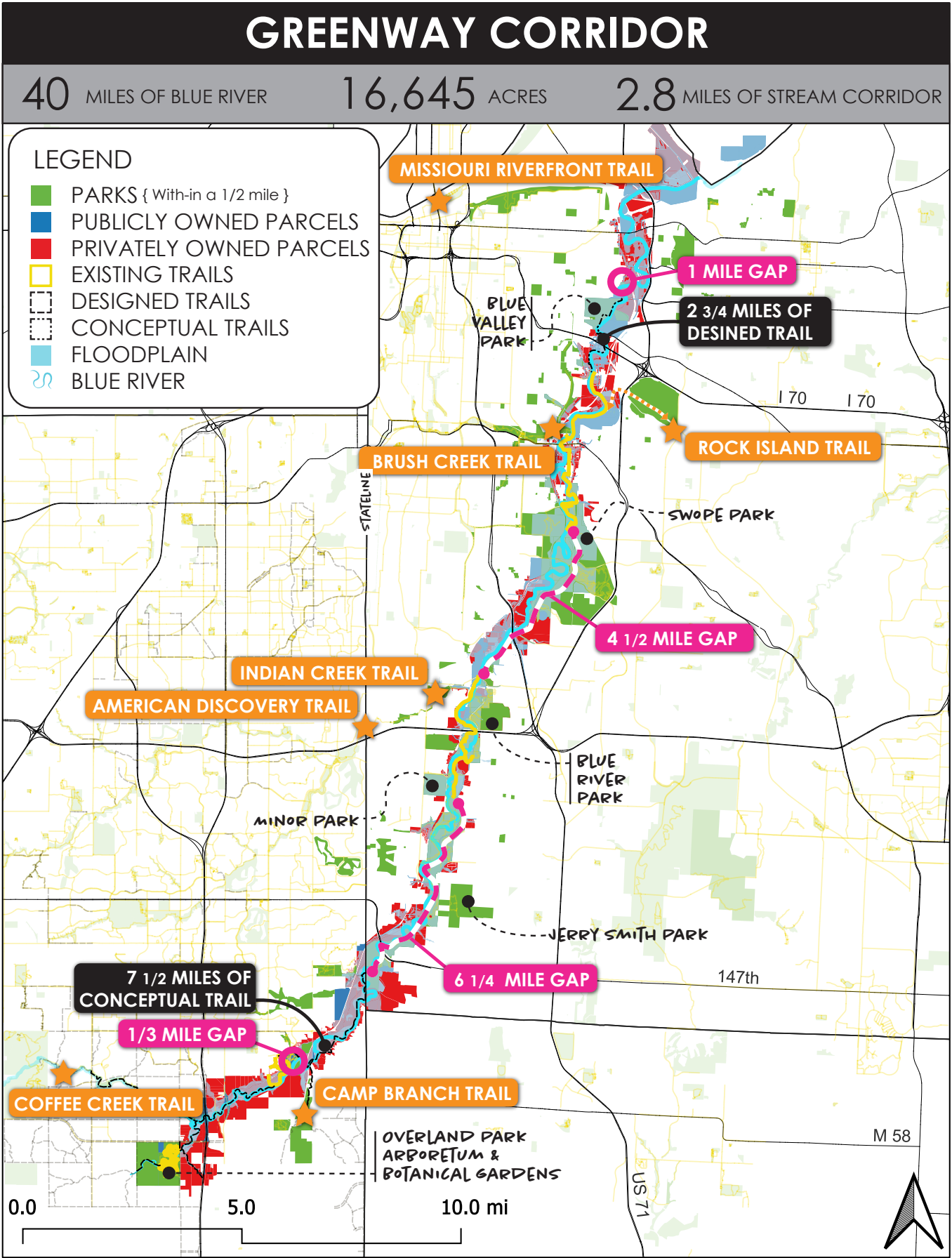


The Blue River flows 40 miles across Kansas and Missouri through 5 counties and 20 municipalities. Two-thirds of the rain that falls in the southern Kansas City area drains into the river, which feeds many tributaries throughout Kansas City and surrounding areas to flow into the Missouri River eventually. The Missouri River is the source of drinking water for the Kansas City area.

The Blue River Watershed is an economically, socially, and environmentally diverse place, encapsulating various types of communities, both urban and rural, and many natural habitats and ecosystems. The water the Blue River provides to people, plants, and animals is intrinsic to the greater watershed that stretches throughout the Great Plains and into the Western United States. Creating the Blue River Greenway, a 43-mile linear corridor within this watershed, creates opportunities to connect people and places while preserving greenspace and improving water quality.

The Blue River is a unique urban waterway. Johnson County, Kansas and Cass County, Missouri headwaters are a mix of natural wetlands, forests, grasslands, pasture, and cropland. The river alternately flows through affluent, upper-middle-income, and middle-income suburban neighborhoods, middle- to lower-income, racially and ethnically diverse urban residential neighborhoods, and heavily industrialized areas protected by a levee system. Several regional and local parks are located at various points along the river's pathway. This diversity is both a challenge and a tremendous opportunity for the river corridor to protect and restore physical, environmental, ecological, ethnic, socioeconomic, and political connections and serve as a model and catalyst for our region.

The Blue River Greenway will be the backbone of a healthy, prosperous, connected, and resilient region. Numerous municipal and not-for-profit partners (Partners) are collaborating to fully protect, connect, and restore the Greenway from the Overland Park Arboretum in suburban Johnson County, Kansas to Corrington Park in urban Kansas City, Missouri, near the confluence of the Blue and Missouri Rivers (Figure 1). The project builds on our considerable public lands and trails, identifying gaps and opportunities to secure land and public access, protect and enhance habitat, and fully connect trails.



On behalf of our Partners and the residents, businesses, and visitors to the Blue River Watershed, HCA has developed this concept paper to guide our collective efforts, document past progress and identify current and future needs to realize our shared vision fully. In doing so, we will show the way for our region to reclaim, reconnect, and restore its precious greenways and blueways for the benefit of all.

The Vision draws from and builds upon the Blue River's unique setting within the greater Kansas City region, with its rich and often chaotic history of boom and bust, investment and disinvestment, natural disasters and human impacts, and a rich diversity of industry, parklands, and neighborhoods with unequal access to the levels of power and nature's benefits. The Vision is derived from decades of related plans and studies that pointed to the river's tremendous benefits for our communities and resulted in a patchwork of built projects and identified but unfulfilled needs. Most importantly, the Vision is guided by extensive engagement with Partners and neighborhoods along the river and informed by some of the most extensive data available anywhere in the nation. In our Vision, the completed Blue River Greenway will:

- Become a regional destination to live, work, and play
- Complete the linchpin of our regional greenways
- Strengthen natural, transportation, social, economic, and political connections
- Reduce flooding & improve water quality
- Draw down CO₂ and help achieve carbon neutrality
- Improve air quality
- Cool the urban heat island
- Provide equitable access to nature and healthy outdoor recreation
- Promote zero-waste, circular, economic development and provide green-collar jobs
- Connect residents and workers to local jobs

The following pages flesh out the Vision and its many beneficiaries and benefits, key implementation strategies and high-priority projects, and short- and long-term implementation needs. The conclusion summarizes and prioritizes the implementation strategies and their preliminary benefits and costs, describes key partners and roles, and identifies resources needed to realize the Vision.

HISTORY

The story of the region's growth is the story of its relationship with water, which shaped early settlement and was shaped and manipulated by development. It is also a story of conservation and connection, as farsighted residents sought to protect its natural beauty and preserve a vital corridor for humans and nature from a torrent of development. Through our efforts to protect, connect, and restore the Blue River Greenway, we will finally realize this Vision.

Located in the center of the continent at the confluence of the Kansas (Kaw) and Missouri Rivers, in the ecotone between the great eastern forests and prairies of the Great Plains, what is now the Kansas City region has long been a natural and cultural crossroads. The Native tribes, including the Osage, Kickapoo, Kaw/Kanza, and Kaskaskia, inhabited the area. They interacted with Pawnee, the Oceti Sakowin (People of Seven Council Fires, also known as the Sioux Nation), and other traders and travelers. During its westward expansion in the late 1700s early 1800s, the United States government relocated eastern tribes to the area, including the Shawnee and Sac & Fox, and other tribes traversed the area during their relocation to Oklahoma (Native-Land .ca | Our home on native land). The Black Bob Band of Shawnee Indians Reservation occupied much of the upper Blue River watershed until it was parceled off, and the land was purchased or swindled from tribal members (Kansas City Public Library 2021).

For many of the same reasons, the region's central location played a key role as the new nation developed. Trading posts, trail stops, and eventually, the railroad would pave the way for Kansas City's development. Kansas City's expansion significantly increased when the intercontinental railroad first spanned the Missouri River. Warehouses, industry, and ports spawned along the river, and the Missouri still serves a bustling industrial and manufacturing sector.

Credit: Kansas City Public Library



The Blue River Valley grew in time with the city. During the Civil War, the Blue River was the site of the Battle of Byram's Ford, which was part of a larger battle that resulted in a key Union victory. As the city boomed after the war, investors began purchasing land just east of the city limits in the Blue River valley, and railroads moved in. The industrial towns of Centropolis, Manchester, Sheffield, and Leeds were established. And yet the Blue River also provided swimming, fishing, and camping for the residents of these emerging communities. Cottages and watercraft rental outfitters lined the riverbanks in the summers. Houseboats were used as art studios, weekend picnic retreats, summer cottages, and, for many, year-round homes—the deep, clear water made for good swimming and fishing. By 1908, 65 launches, four boathouses, and fleets of rental craft were operating on the Blue (Kansas City Public Library 2021).

However, as river recreation was booming, there were natural and manufactured elements threatening the river's future as a popular outdoor destination. On the city's western side, industrialization, wastewater, and channelization of Turkey Creek provided a preview of what was to come.

The 1912 A Special Report for the Blue Valley Parkway, Kansas City, Missouri, called for the acquisition of river frontage from 13th Street south to Swope Park for a “pleasure highway” to protect the river from development and create a vital north-south corridor through the Blue River valley. As part of his design for the City's world-renowned parks and boulevard system, famed landscape architect George E. Kessler proposed a parkway that would rival beautiful waterways like the Charles River in Boston and the Schuylkill River in Philadelphia. Despite endorsement by the Board of Park Commissioners, park officials, city engineers, and transportation authorities, the project died for lack of funding, with the predicted results. In 1920, The Kansas City Star referred to it “as one of the city's most underutilized assets, describing it as a stagnant little stream poisoned by sewers, sick with trash and inaccessible along much of its course” (Kansas City Public Library, 2021).



Credit: kclibrary.org

Pleasure Boating
on the Blue River?
KCQ Navigates This
Interesting History

Credit: Heartland Conservation Alliance



With increased development near the river and additional areas higher in the watershed came increased habitat destruction and pollution. Increasingly frequent flooding spurred well-intentioned but ultimately destructive channelization meant to protect manufacturing in the lower valley. This channelization and paving of natural areas and uplands caused the landscape to lose its ability to absorb, slow, and filter water from storms, increasing flooding and pollution in a vicious cycle. Major floods in 1961 and 1977 spurred a massive Federal “flood control” project and more channelization. These changes also resulted in less shading and cooling, increasing the urban heat island effect. Today, habitat loss threatens native species, and a lack of physical access to the river prevents Kansas Citians from using it. Some do not even know it exists.

In 2021, the Blue River Watershed received a grade of “C” in the Blue River Report Card, with an overall score of 46%. The grade reflects the combined scores from six categories. Four categories (Water Quality, Development, Recreation, and Community Connections) received “C” letter grades; two categories (Governance and Habitat) received “D” letter grades. (For more information, go to: heartlandconservationalliance.org.)



CLIMATE JUSTICE & EQUITY

What We Heard

The Blue River Greenway should provide regular, welcoming, safe, and easy access to nature in urban and rural areas, regardless of socioeconomic status, race, age, ability, location, or transportation.

Address historical
Environmental
Justice issues.

Provide healthy, carbon-sequestering, pollution-reducing, recreationally attractive green and blue space for all.

Create resilience to natural hazards like extreme heat, drought, and flooding.

All communities should have knowledge of – and direct, consistent, and reliable access to – clean water, outdoor recreation, and natural resources.

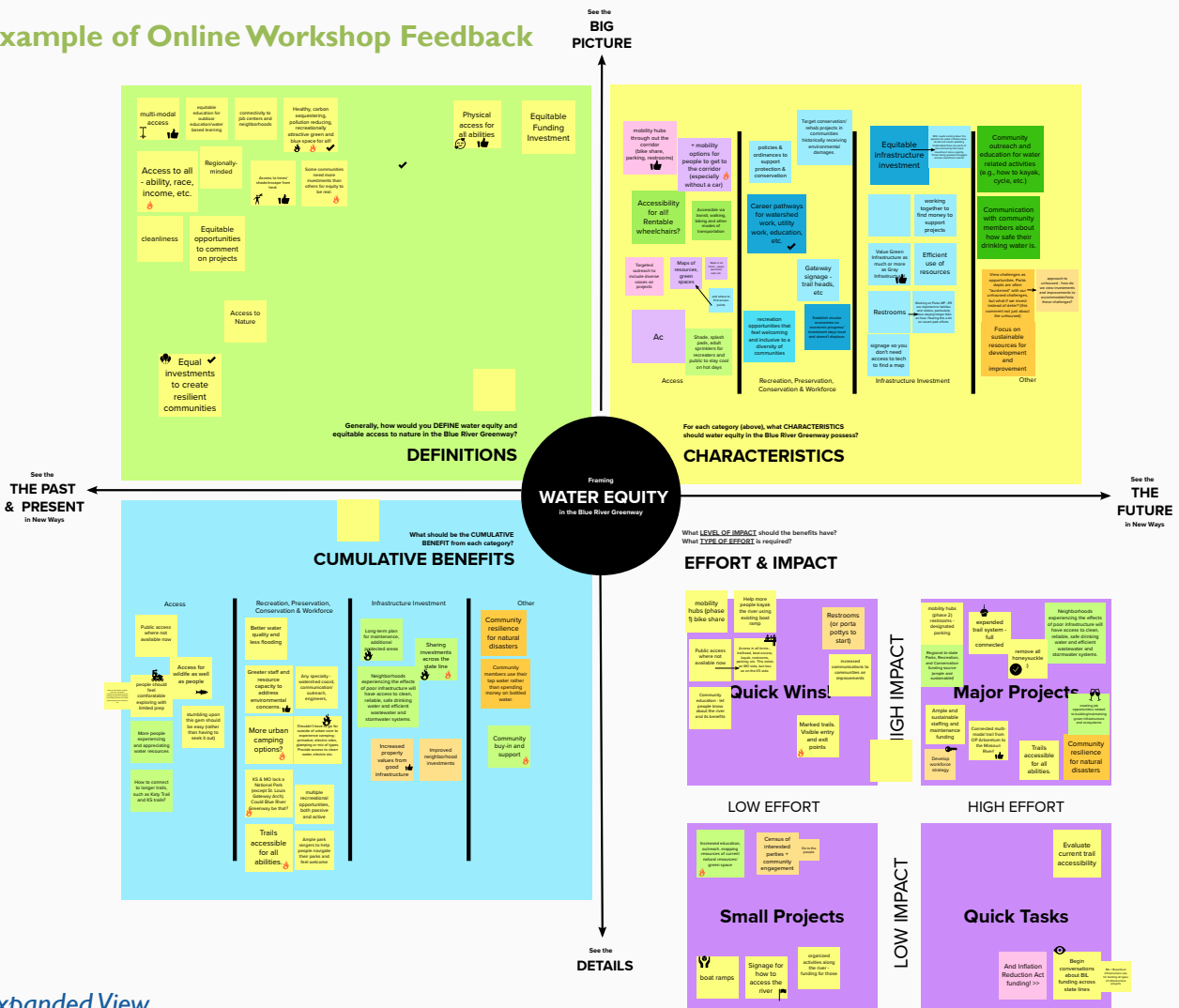
The Vision for Blue River Greenway is to reconnect neighborhoods and people along the corridor to each other, creating healthy natural communities. Neighborhoods, residents, and community organizations throughout the corridor joined the partnership to create a unified vision for Climate Justice and Equity. Protecting, connecting, and restoring the Greenway will alleviate the disproportionate and historical burdens of flooding, pollution, economic decline, and disinvestment on some of our region's most vulnerable residents, helping build resilience to future climate extremes and providing greater opportunity and enhanced quality of life by:

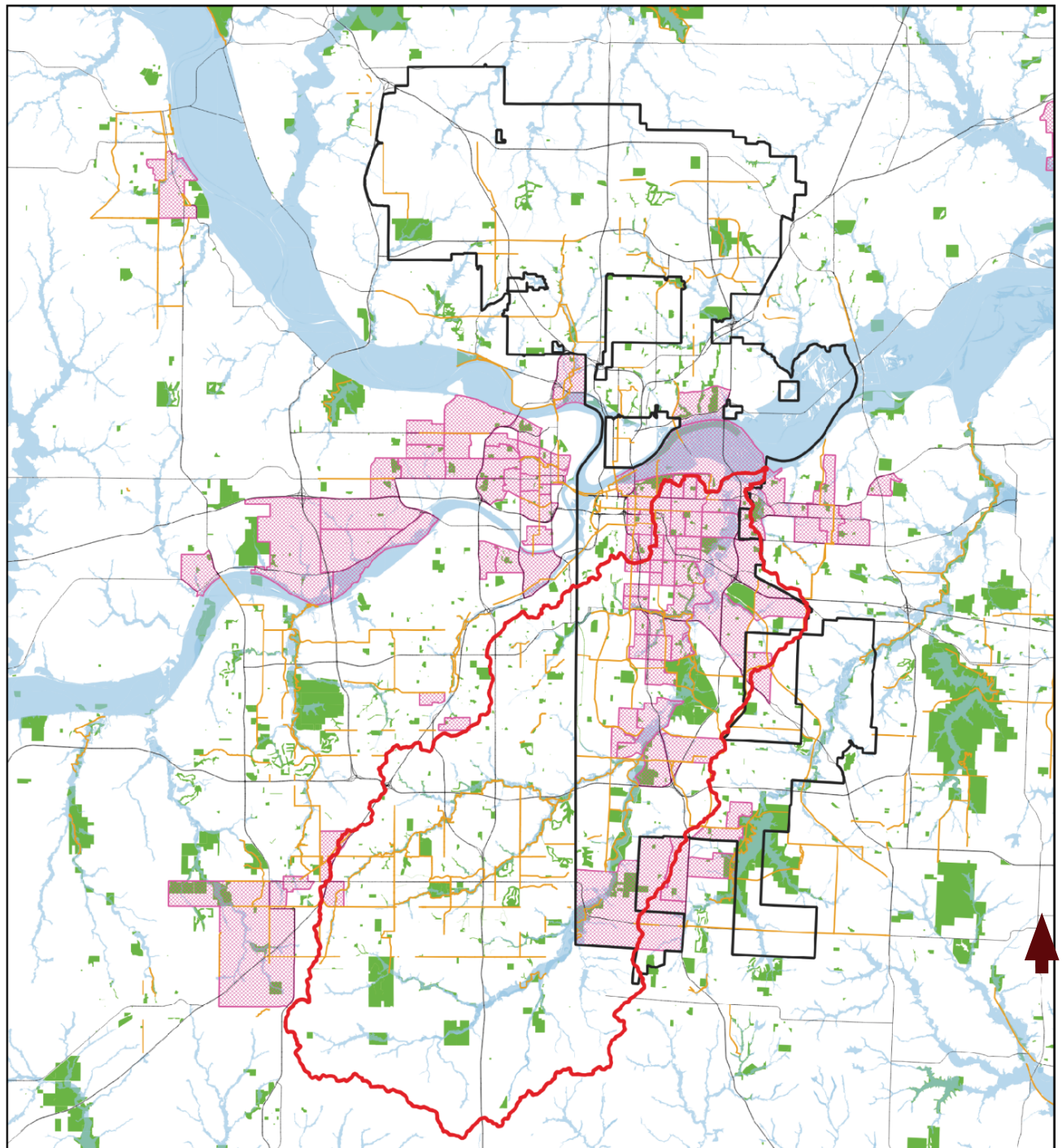
- Reducing flooding and improving water quality
- Filtering air pollutants and improving air quality
- Cooling the urban heat island
- Providing equitable access to nature and healthy outdoor recreation
- Restoring blighted, underutilized, and contaminated properties and public spaces (refer to Highlight Projects)
- Sharing the economic and social benefits of a restorative economy
- Creating real connections and shared interests among residents from diverse backgrounds, races, income groups, and political jurisdictions








Exclusion, Engagement, and Reconnection

The Blue River Valley plays a significant role in the region's race, exclusion, and eventual reconnection story. The practice of “redlining” in selling real estate and issuing both private and federally subsidized home loans increasingly concentrated minority communities to the eastern side of Kansas City, which includes the Blue River Valley, while flooding was driving industry and jobs out of the area. Meanwhile, suburban areas of Kansas City upstream boomed after World War II, as the same programs and subsidized mortgages lured homeowners to new suburban developments that were essentially off-limits to all but white residents (Johnson County Parks & Recreation District, 2022). Poverty and disinvestment in the lower and middle Blue River Valley increased the burden of flooding and pollution, habitat loss, and degraded parklands on the remaining residents. Climate change is increasing flooding and heatwaves for some of the region's most vulnerable (see Figure 2).

Example of Online Workshop Feedback





- | | |
|---|---|
|  Parks |  Blue River Watershed Boundary |
|  500 year floodplain |  KCMO City Boundary |
|  Existing Trails |  Tracts with High Social Vulnerability |
|  Highways | |





Credit: US Army Corps of Engineers

In developing this Vision, the Partners actively engaged a diverse range of community groups, neighborhood associations, and citizens to ensure that the Blue River Greenway can fulfill the needs and desires of all residents and stakeholders now and in the future. Experienced facilitators with backgrounds in equity, environmental justice, and community engagement helped shepherd the conversations and solicit dialogue, input, feedback, and guidance. The resulting Water Equity Road Map (WERM), a companion to this Vision, will guide our work, helping to ensure equitable access to nature and healthy outdoor recreation, promote climate justice, and provide shared economic and workforce development driven by continuous neighborhood engagement.

FLOODING & WATER QUALITY

What We Heard

Investment in green infrastructure wherever possible that will provide benefits to downstream communities

Community resilience for natural disasters

Neighborhoods experiencing the effects of poor infrastructure need access to clean, reliable, safe drinking water and efficient wastewater and stormwater systems.

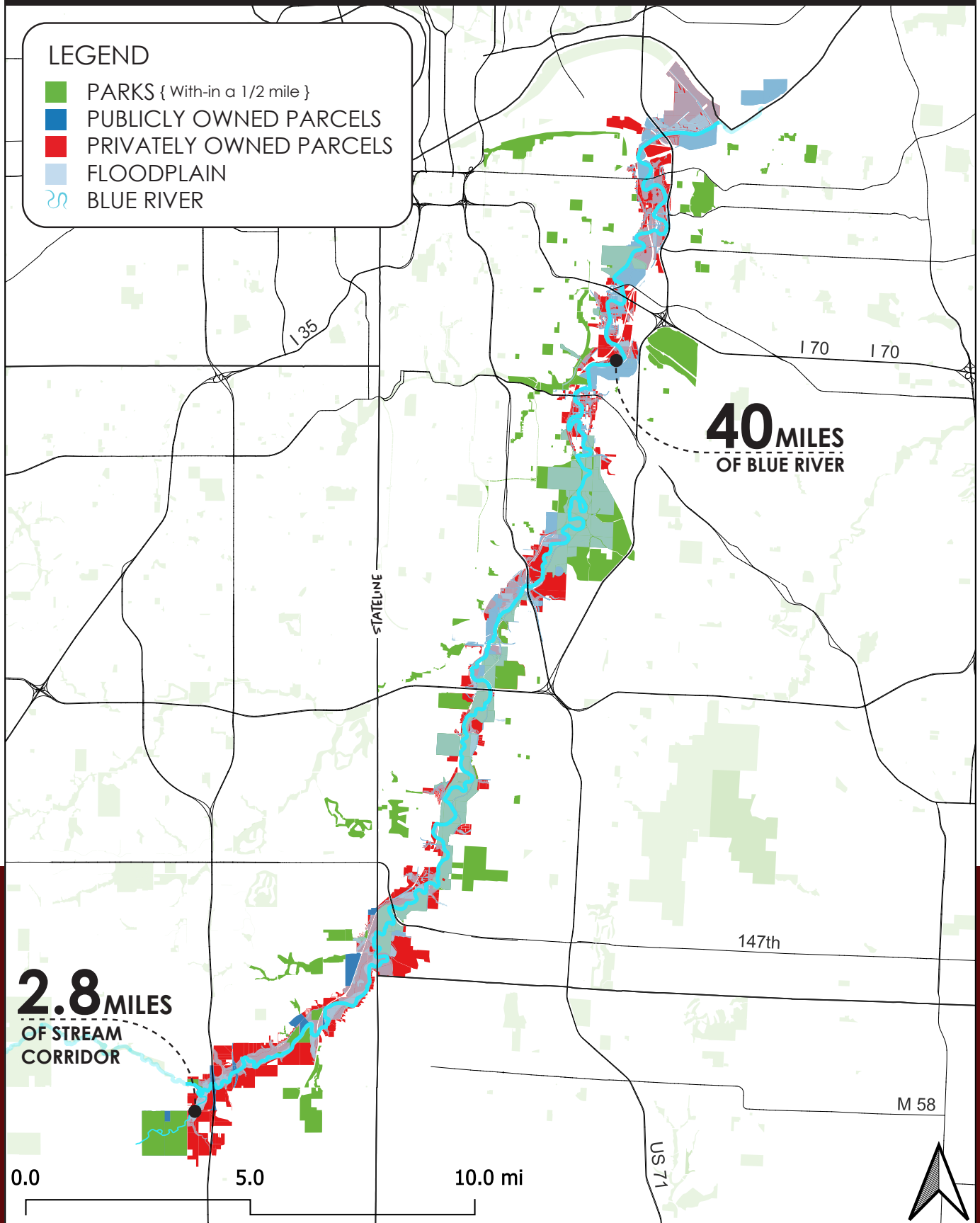
Reducing flooding is the key to reversing the historic decline and revitalizing the Blue River Greenway. Flooding played an enormous role in the Blue River Valley’s decline and disinvestment and continues to threaten life, property, infrastructure, and investment. We now know from decades of local and regional research, field assessments and monitoring, and numerous flood studies and watershed management plans that protected, connected, and restored floodplains and fully vegetated riparian (stream) corridors are:

- The #1 strategy to protect stream health, human life, property, and infrastructure
- The most cost-effective way to prevent and reduce flooding
- Critical for preventing stream erosion, bank failures, and infrastructure damage
- Natural buffers that filter pollutants from runoff and stream flows, in addition to reducing sediment from bed and bank erosion
- “Urban air conditioners” that help cool surrounding neighborhoods on hot days
- Important habitat corridors that support all manner of wildlife throughout the seasons and their stages of life

As envisioned, the 43-mile greenway will fully protect, connect, and restore the Blue River’s floodplain and surrounding upland areas where practical. Fortunately, much of the Greenway is already publicly owned, including just over half of the floodplains. To ensure that the remaining floodplains and adjacent upland areas are protected and that meaningful trail connections can be made, the Partners are committed to working collaboratively with private landowners using a range of public-private partnerships, incentives, long-term contracts, perpetual conservation easements, or acquisition of key parcels and right-of-way.

	Public	Private
# of Acres	7,499	9,146
# Acres in Floodplain	4,657	4,452
% Acres in Floodplain	62.1%	48.7%

BLUE RIVER CORRIDOR FLOODING



ECONOMIC & WORKFORCE DEVELOPMENT

What We Heard

Neighborhoods surrounding the river should have as much if not more access to the resources and share in the benefits generated by revitalization of the river

Growing food in the greenway is important for many communities along the river

Leverage water and natural resources as assets that generate real community income

Economic benefits must be distributed equitably by race, income, location, transportation access, and ability

The fully realized Blue River Greenway will be the backbone and engine of a vibrant and prosperous 21st-century circular economy designed to eliminate waste production. Fully protecting, connecting, and restoring the Blue River Greenway is a generational opportunity to create widely shared prosperity for the residents of the Blue River Valley and our entire region. Circular economic development will sustainably revitalize the area's economic base, naturally connect workers and jobs, create thriving neighborhoods and businesses, and establish the Blue River Greenway as an eco-tourism destination. We will capitalize on this opportunity by:

- Redeveloping brownfields and greyfields
- Restoring and maintaining healthy native landscapes
- Creating a wide array of well-paying and fulfilling jobs where people live
- Providing affordable and accessible local land and entrepreneurship support to create circular businesses for sustaining and improving communities
- Promoting circular economy industries served by modern green infrastructure
- Infusing regenerative agriculture and agroforestry into the urban environment
- Providing multi-use trails for residents and workers to commute and enjoy
- Developing local outdoor recreation businesses to serve residents and visitors
- Generating income and resources that stay in the community, directly benefits and supports neighborhoods and residents, and addresses gentrification
- Reinvesting in critical infrastructure that serves the entire community

Agriculture and Green Collar Jobs: Hands-on green jobs for our region's residents, creating thriving riparian and wetland communities with a connected trail system stewarded by a new cadre of trained land managers and specialists. Urban gardeners and farmers will grow healthy, sustainable, and native foods and create businesses to provide for their families, neighbors, and communities (refer to Highlight Projects). Agroforestry will grow and harvest native food crops from the Greenway's restored woodlands. All the while, habitat restoration, and regenerative agriculture will build healthy soils that store carbon and retain moisture to enhance climate resilience further.



Ecotourism: The Blue River Greenway’s regional and national connections and unique mix of outdoor recreation offerings will draw residents and visitors from across the nation to enjoy and explore the valley and beyond, supported by homegrown ecotourism businesses.

Industrial Ecology: By employing zero-waste strategies that stack together and make the highest use of byproduct synergies to supply local open-source products, “Ecodustrial” companies could line the corridor, catalyzed by small businesses and local start-ups. These new businesses could take root, remediating and restoring productive use of undervalued sites degraded and ultimately abandoned by 19th and 20th-century industries. Modern green infrastructure, native landscaping, and sustainable business practices can further enhance the corridor’s natural resources and economy, creating a win-win-win for the region. (Refer to the Blue Valley Plan Case Study)

Collaborative Education: Regional educational institutions will collaborate to provide the skills, training, and educational programs to enable workers and entrepreneurs from all walks of life to build this new economy and share in its prosperity. This new educational ecosystem will provide hands-on training, technical and entrepreneurial programs, support research and development, measure success, and propagate the most promising approaches. Service-learning programs will recruit passionate and creative young professionals to support partner organizations and institutions’ critical projects and unmet needs, creating a force multiplier and building the skills of our regional workforce while fulfilling their desire to give back to the community.

Financial Innovation: New local business models, financial structures, and markets will be created to enable this transformation and to capture and widely distribute its benefits. By necessity, we will identify and employ new sources of capital funding and financing and new financial partners. We will create innovative tools to capture and monetize a wide range of human health, social, and environmental benefits that will be directly reinvested into the community and its people. Robust public-private partnerships will leverage resources to avoid duplication, reduce costs, and create efficiencies that maximize public and private sector return on investment.

Economic Destination: Ultimately, as the Greenway’s success catalyzes broader restoration of our region’s greenways and economy, talented entrepreneurs, motivated job seekers, and innovative companies will be drawn to our region for its unsurpassed economic vitality, recreational opportunities, thriving natural communities, and high quality of life.

REGIONAL CONNECTIONS & OUTDOOR RECREATION

What We Heard

Natural spaces should provide access to healthy outdoor recreation, including hiking, cycling, and mountain biking, kayaking and canoeing, rock climbing and skateboarding

Allowing more people experience and appreciate water resources

Creating a regional and national destination for tourism, and a recreational asset that drives economic opportunities



The Blue River Greenway will connect, expand, and enhance some of our region's most wonderful outdoor spaces and natural areas while adding new recreational uses that are unique to our region. When completed, the Greenway (and Blueway!) will provide a unique mix of healthy outdoor recreational experiences accessible to residents of all abilities from all neighborhoods and walks of life. With its prime location in our MetroGreen regional greenways system and imminent connections to multi-state and cross-country trails, the Blue River Greenway will draw people from across the region and nation to create an ecotourism destination. Residents and visitors will enjoy the following:

- Over 40 miles of continuous, paved, multi-use trails for cycling, walking, and running
- A network of over 50 miles of mountain biking trails for beginners to highly technical riders
- A 40+ mile "Blueway" for kayaking and canoeing
- Indoor/outdoor rock climbing, bouldering, and skateboarding
- Hiking and nature trails through upland forests and woodlands, glades, prairies, bottomland hardwood forests, wetlands, and stream corridors
- Opportunities for birdwatching, nature viewing, and fishing
- Numerous regional parks with a full range of active recreational activities

Completing and fully connecting the Blue River Greenway will form the linchpin of our regional greenways by completing critical MetroGreen system linkages. It will connect the Brush Creek Trail to The Plaza and Trolley Track Trail with several segments of the award-winning Johnson County Streamway Trails system. Alignment studies anticipate connections to the Missouri Riverfront Trail with access to downtown Kansas City, Missouri and Kansas City, Kansas, and to the Rock Island and Katy trails to metropolitan St. Louis. Plans are in the works to connect to Kansas' Prairie Spirit and Flint Hills Trails. And finally, the cross-country American Discovery Trail will traverse the Blue River Greenway along Bannister Road.

Currently, there are:

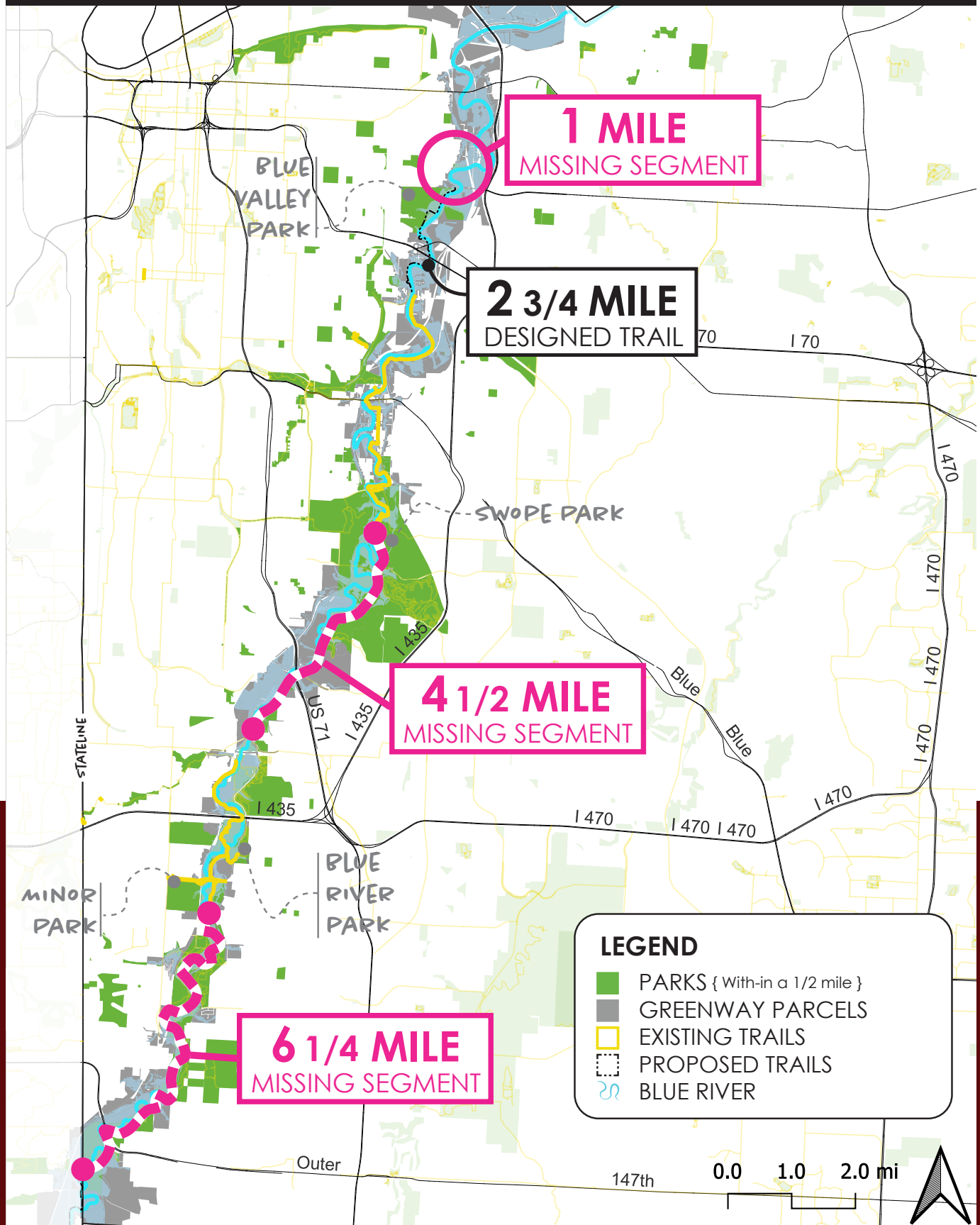
- 19 miles of constructed trail (18 1/2 miles in Missouri and a 1/2 mile in Kansas)
- Construction documents for the 2 3/4-mile Blue River Trail Segment C in Missouri
- 10 1/4 miles of conceptual trail alignments
- Approximately 12 miles of gaps (11 1/2 miles in Missouri and 1/3 mile in Kansas)

According to UrbanTrail Co. today, the Kansas City region has the largest hand-built interconnected mountain bike trail network in an urban environment in the nation, drawing riders from across the U.S. and internationally. Nearly 50 miles of trails lie within the Blue River Greenway, and more are planned within existing parks and future connections. Beginner trails are provided at the Heartland Overlook Preserve and are planned for the Municipal Farm to introduce newcomers to the sport safely.

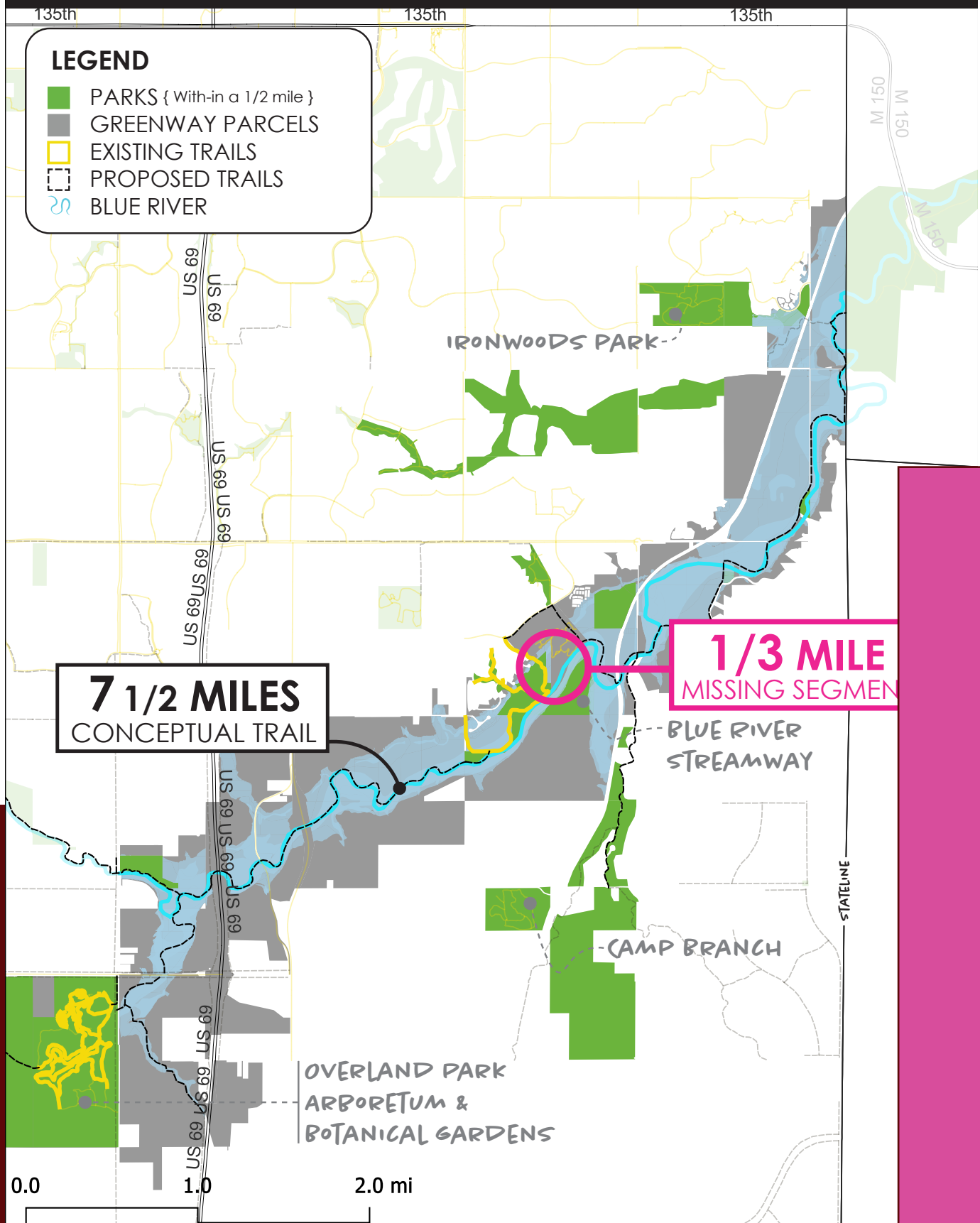
The Greenway also links many of our region's most exceptional parks, including the Overland Park Arboretum, Jerry Smith Park and Saeger Woods Conservation Area, Alex George Wetlands, Minor Park and Blue River Park, the Blue River Parkway (refer to Highlight Projects), Swope Park (home of the Kansas City Zoo), and Blue Valley Park. Spurs will connect to nearby Camp Branch Glade and Ironwoods Parks in Johnson County. Visitors and users will be able to experience the whole gamut of our region's natural communities and wildlife, including remnant prairies, wetlands, upland and bottomland woodlands and forest, and streamway corridors, along with traditional active recreation like golf, soccer, and disc golf to name a few.

Finally, the Municipal Farm (refer to Highlight Projects) at the confluence of Brush Creek and the Blue River will be a destination for indoor and outdoor rock climbing – the only location in the U.S. with both – along with an urban skateboard park, nature trails, and fishing, canoeing and kayaking on several small ponds. Former limestone mines providing hibernacula for threatened and potentially endangered bats could be developed into a preserve like Hannibal, Missouri's Sodalis Nature Preserve, or other subterranean attractions if surveys determine that bats no longer inhabit the caves.

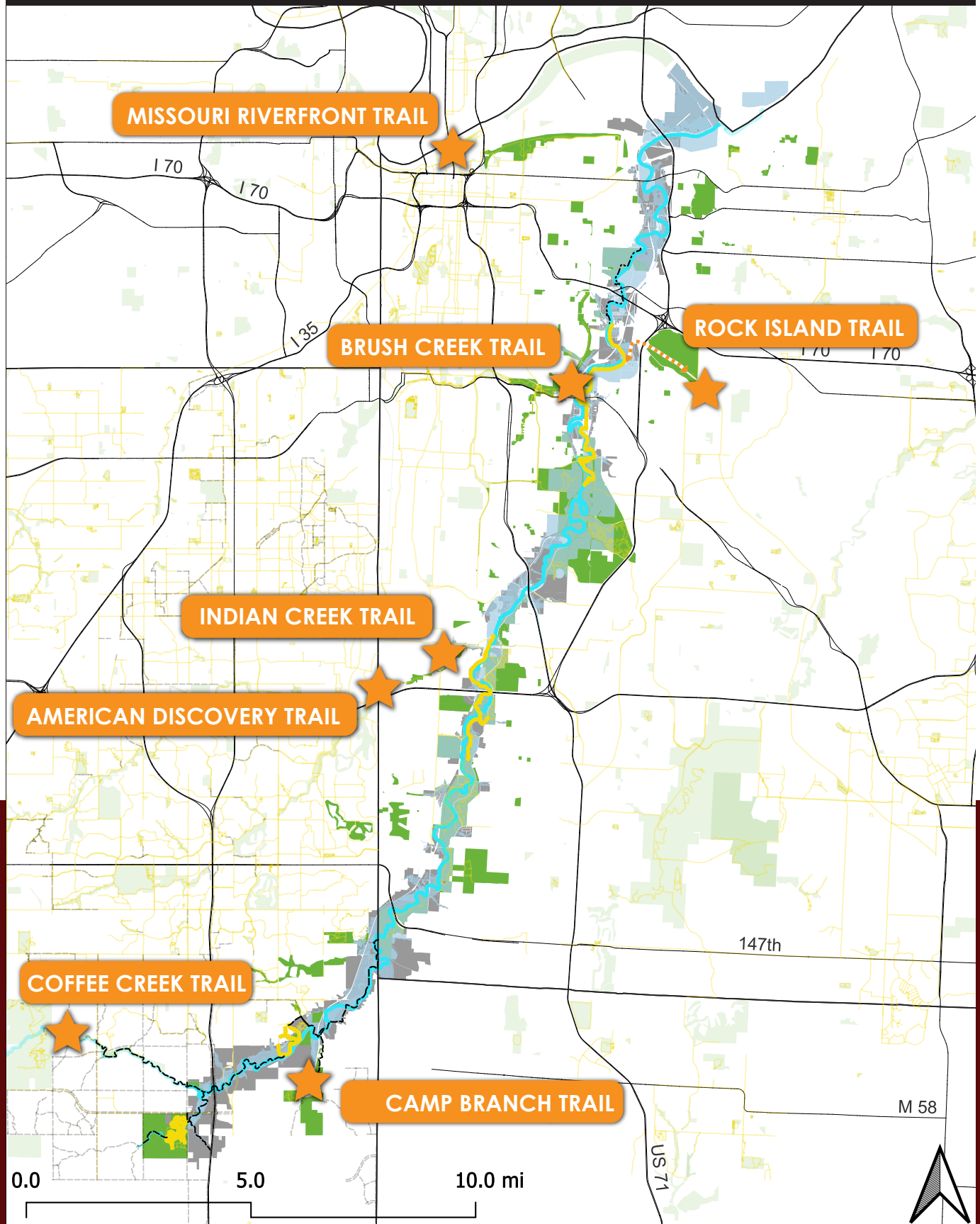
MISSOURI TRAILS



KANSAS TRAILS



REGIONAL CONNECTIONS



Credit: Vireo, Blue River Trail



NATURE BASED CLIMATE RESILIENCE

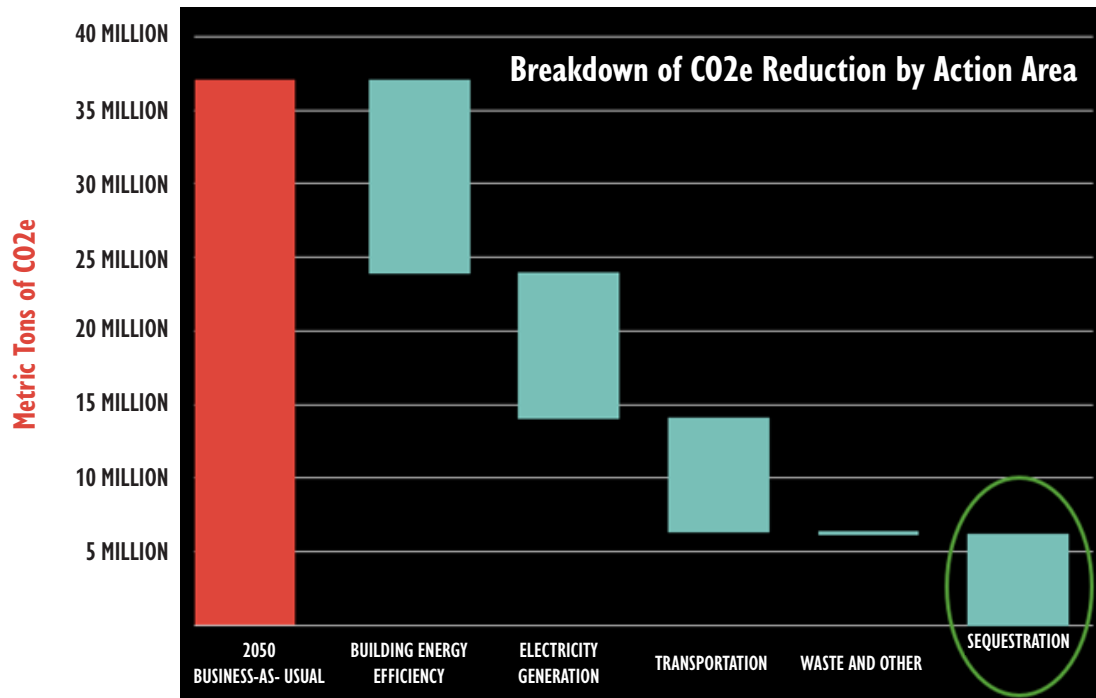
The Blue River Greenway will lead our region's efforts to use nature-based solutions to adapt to and mitigate climate change. Protecting and restoring woodlands, prairies, and native vegetation is one of the most important and effective actions we can take. It is one of the rare strategies that aid our region's ability to adapt to climate change by reducing the impacts of extreme weather on our communities and mitigating climate change by drawing down carbon dioxide and other climate-warming greenhouse gases from the atmosphere and sequestering (storing) them in plants and soils. We will lead the region by successfully:

- Protecting and restoring thousands of acres of existing riparian woodlands on public and private lands
- Beginning restoration on public lands where we can start immediately
- Developing the tools and partnerships to work cooperatively with private landowners, creating and sharing benefits of protection and restoration
- Developing a robust, innovative, and ultimately self-sustaining investment pool dedicated to fund nature-based solutions, protection, restoration, and finance long-term maintenance
- Identifying the beneficiaries and quantifying, monetizing, and reinvesting co-benefits such as carbon sequestration, improved public health, flood damage reduction, wetland mitigation, and other habitat restoration
- Creating a market for corporations and governments to invest in the Blue River Greenway and its people, places, and community to meet their climate mitigation and adaptation goals, keeping the benefits and revenues in our region

Climate Action KC's Regional Climate Action Plan calls green infrastructure, increasingly referred to as nature-based solutions, "the low-hanging fruit of climate adaptation" for the many benefits described previously (reduced flood risk, improved air quality, and urban cooling, and reduced energy use), and goes on to say that:

Nature-based solutions present meaningful, scalable opportunities to mitigate greenhouse gas emissions at large and small landscape scales while helping with adaptation and resilience toward critical climate threats of heat and flooding... MARC estimates that our region's riparian forests sequester approximately 600,000 tons of CO₂e/year. Doubling well-managed riparian habitat would double carbon sequestration. (CAKC, 2021)

Our region intends to reduce its future greenhouse gas emissions by 80% by 2050, avoiding the emissions of about 37 million metric tons of CO₂ and equivalent greenhouse gases (CO₂e) per year. Even this ambitious target assumes that we will still emit about 6 million tons of CO₂e per year, which must be offset to achieve our region's ultimate goal of "net zero" emissions.

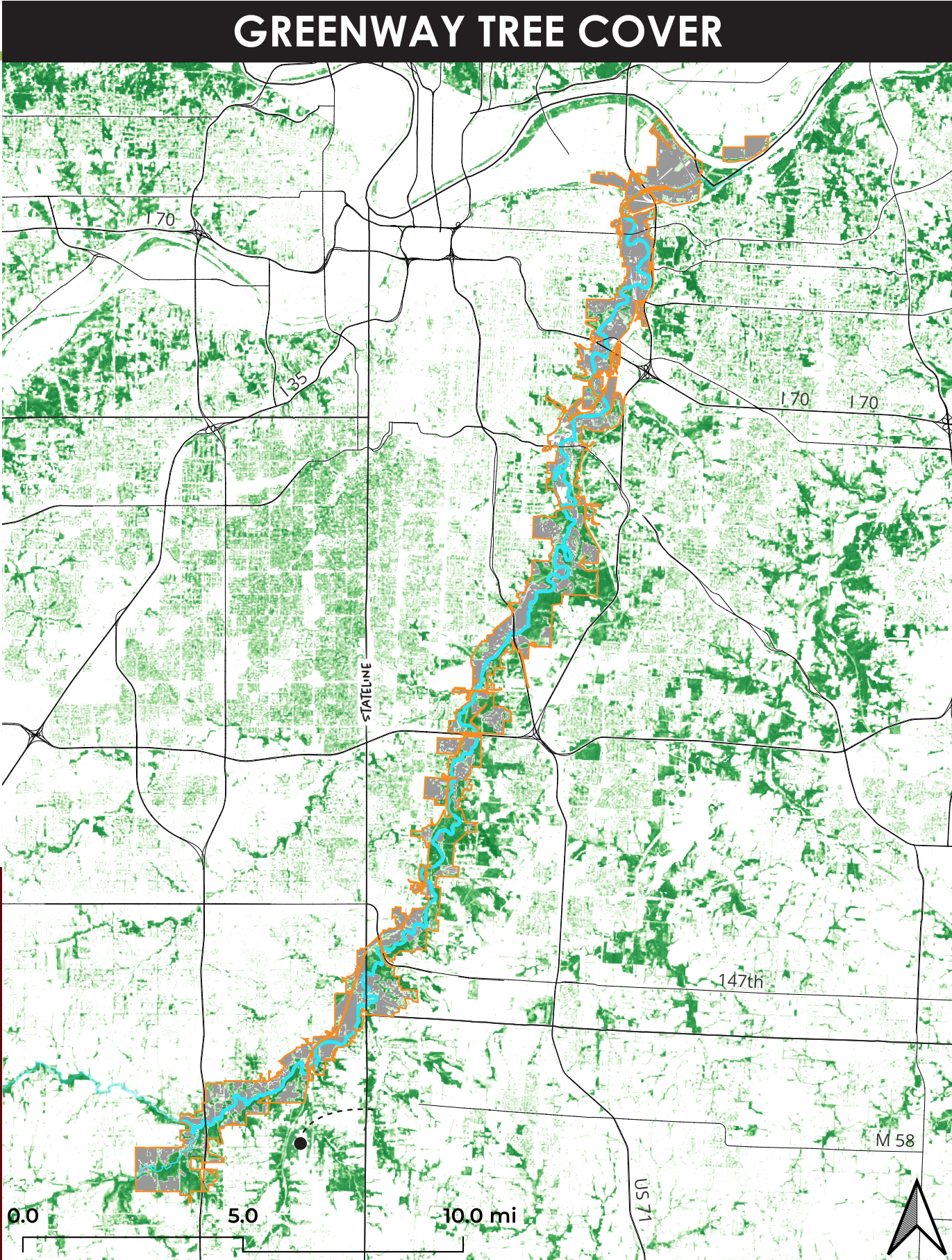


Credit:
Climate Action KC

	Existing	Future
# Acres Trees	6,100	11,000
% of Greenway	42	76
Metric tons (mt) of CO ₂ /yr.	28,300	51,100

Merely protecting our region's existing floodplain woodlands would offset about 10% of our region's remaining future emissions. If our floodplains were fully re-vegetated, we could offset as much as 2 million mtCO₂e, or 1/3 of our estimated future emissions! Conversely, allowing our existing woodlands to be lost would add another 600,000 mt/CO₂e per year to the atmosphere.

Using data from the MARC, the same data used by CAKC, the Blue River Greenway's 6,000 acres of trees draw down almost 30,000 tons of CO₂e annually. By fully protecting and restoring the Greenway, we can add as many as 5,000 acres of trees and draw down an additional 20,000 tons or more per year! More than a meaningful down payment toward our climate goals, the Blue River Greenway will provide the launch pad and means for Partners across the region to fully connect and restore the greenways across our nine counties.



IMPLEMENTATION

The Blue River Greenway Partners believe that now is the time to fully realize the Vision and potential of the Blue River Greenway. This concept paper lays out the framework for an ambitious but realistic implementation strategy to complete the Greenway within the next decade.

In developing the implementation framework presented in this paper, we took careful stock of existing infrastructure and community assets, reviewing past and ongoing plans and studies, and cataloging proposed projects and identified needs. We built upon this base through deep engagement with residents, neighborhood representatives, City and County staff, and not-for-profit and community organizations, to identify new focus areas, projects, programs, and initiatives to unlock and maximize the Greenway's full potential. We had honest conversations about past failings and missed opportunities and developed the Blue River Greenway WERM to guide our efforts. Finally, we drew on our Partners' decades of experience in conservation, watershed management, recreation and transportation, economic and community development, and nature-based solutions for climate resilience, to map out the implementation steps, program budget, and resources needed to achieve the Vision.

The following outlines a community-based program that will fully protect, connect, and restore the Blue River Greenway. The program is predicated on protecting the remaining Greenway land through a voluntary program of property and easement acquisition, donated conservation easements, and long-term contracts (40- and 100-year terms). Work will begin immediately on existing public and newly protected land to implement watershed management projects, compete greenway and blueway improvements, develop outdoor recreation programs and public greenspaces, and begin protecting and restoring natural landscapes. All the while, we will promote circular economic development and develop the workforce needed to construct, operate, and maintain our new assets, and implement new programs and services.

Implementation is proceeding as Partners complete ongoing and funded projects, comprehensive master plans and studies, identify new (and equity-focused) projects and programs, apply for and secure Federal and state grant funding, and identify traditional and novel funding and financing sources. The next steps include the following:

- Finalizing a strategic funding and finance plan for the Blue River Greenway
- Identifying and securing additional Federal and state grants
- Approaching major regional and national philanthropic funders
- Leveraging City, county, state, Federal, and philanthropic funding and innovative financial instruments
- Developing a comprehensive, long-term funding and financing pool that distributes resources equitably and efficiently, guided by the community's Vision, needs, goals, and desires as documented in this Vision and the Water Equity Road Map

LAND ACQUISITION & PROTECTION			
(Supports All of the Following)			
	<u>Floodplain Acres</u>	<u>Upland Acres</u>	<u>Est. Cost (2023 \$)</u>
Land & Right-of-Way Acquisition	2,470		\$20,400,000
Conservation Easement Donations	990	470	\$5,800,000
Long-term Protection Contracts	990	4,220	\$8,300,000
SUBTOTAL			\$ 34,500,000
FLOODING AND WATER QUALITY			
	<u>Description</u>		<u>Est. Cost (2023 \$)</u>
Floodplain Restoration & Detention	Flood benching, detention, wetlands		\$ 13,500,000
Streambank Stabilization	Streambank stabilization and vegetation		
SUBTOTAL			\$13,500,000
ECONOMIC & WORKFORCE DEVELOPMENT			
	<u>Description</u>		<u>Est. Cost (2023 \$)</u>
Restoration and Maintenance			
Restoration & Maintenance Crews	Hire, train & equip municipal, NGOs, and neighborhoods		\$1,650,000
Neighborhood Stipend Program	Fund neighborhood association stewards		\$1,000,000
Urban Agriculture Program	Commercial and community training, logistics, & finance		\$2,500,000
	Multi-institution cooperative for training, education, research		
Regenerative Landscape Research & Ed.	& development, field stations		\$3,750,000
Water Ranch	Experiential Water Center attraction & education		\$2,000,000
Ecotourism Business Incubator/Hub	Ecotourism businesses development center		\$1,300,000
Circular Economy Studio	Circular economy business development center		\$1,200,000
Outcomes-Based Marketplace	Eco-Credit development and market establishment		\$2,000,000
MetroGreen Fellows Program	Multi-institution cooperative for training, education, research		\$5,000,000
SUBTOTAL			\$20,400,000
REGIONAL CONNECTIONS AND OUTDOOR RECREATION			
	<u>Missouri</u>	<u>Kansas</u>	<u>Est. Cost (2023 \$)</u>
Greenways & Blueways			
Paved Multi-Use Trails & Trailheads	18 miles	7.5 miles	\$25,578,000
Mountain Bike Trails		TBD	\$1,500,000
Boat Access (@ trailheads above)	\$900,000	\$180,000	\$1,080,000
Restrooms, Shelters, Benches, Water			\$3,000,000
SUBTOTAL			\$31,158,000
	<u>Description</u>		
Parks & Neighborhood Greenspace			
Alex George Wetlands	Outdoor classroom, nature play, pollinator & wetlands		\$366,000
Blue River Commons	Shelters, playgrounds, trails, games		\$1,426,000
Blue Valley Park	(Trailhead and boat access included above)		TBD
Municipal Farm	Outdoor classroom, nature & mountain bike trails, I/O rock climbing, skate park, bat preserve		TBD
	Trails, gardens, urban agriculture, green infrastructure, play areas, outdoor gathering spaces		\$7,000,000
Palestine East Project			
Vacant Lots & Neighborhood Spaces	Parklets, community gardens, gathering spaces		\$3,000,000
Native Veg. & Green Infrastruct.	Residential native landscape restoration & rain gardens		\$1,500,000
SUBTOTAL			\$13,292,000
Equitable Access, Wayfinding, & Safety			
Signage & Wayfinding	Physical signage		\$125,000
Neighborhood Access	Access points for residents of all abilities		\$1,440,000
Outdoor Recreation Programs	Programs, training, & outreach to urban residents		\$1,500,000
Mobility Hubs	Transit access for trails, blueways, & parks		\$1,800,000
Greenway Rangers	Safety and maintenance patrols		\$5,000,000
Anti-Dumping & Litter Control	Waste management and litter/dumping prevention		\$2,000,000
Program Staff & Administration			\$1,137,000
SUBTOTAL			\$13,002,000
NATURE-BASED CLIMATE RESILIENCE			
	<u>Description</u>		<u>Est. Cost (2023 \$)</u>
Riparian Corridor Protection	Woodland protection for carbon sequestration & offsets		(\$18,433,600)
Riparian Corridor Restoration	Reforestation for carbon sequestration & offsets		(\$9,649,000)
Neighborhood Tree Planting	Plant and maintain trees in public spaces & private lots		\$3,956,000
Invasive Species Management	Eradicate and replace honeysuckle & other invasives		\$1,750,000
SUBTOTAL			(\$22,376,600)
PROGRAM TOTAL			\$103,475,400

PRIORITIZATION

Implementation is prioritized into two phases over ten years, with corresponding resource needs.

CAPACITY BUILDING

(\$5M of \$25M Secured)

Build the organizational capacity to establish the program and secure additional investment, including:

- **A Partnership Framework** delineating Partner roles, responsibilities, and operational procedures.
- Funding for a **program coordinator, development director, and key staff** at Partner organizations.
- Seed capital for the funding and finance pool to leverage Federal, state, and philanthropic grants, begin land assembly, and develop carbon offset projects.
- **Pilot Project** funding for shovel-ready projects:
 - SECURED! \$5 Million American Rescue Plan Act (ARPA) grant for forest and wetland restoration and crew expansion.
 - \$3.0 Million to complete Blue River Trail Segment C from Stadium Drive to Corrington Park.
- Establish the **Educational Collaborative, Workforce Training, & Service-Learning Program**.
- Launching the Circular Economy, Ecotourism, and Urban Agriculture **Business Incubators**.

PROTECTION, CONNECTION, RESTORATION, & REINVESTMENT

(\$100 M)

The fully operational program needs will consist of the following:

- Assembling land, acquiring easements, and securing long-term contracts for carbon offsets.
- Capital projects to construct trails, trailheads, boat access, neighborhood access, parks, and greenspace.
- A full-scale restoration program to reforest and restore wetlands and prairies assembled and contracted land and manage carbon offset revenue.
- Economic and workforce development, neighborhood reinvestment, and investment pool management.
- Administration, monitoring, and maintenance.

HIGHLIGHT PROJECTS



The following pages introduce several focus areas and projects that highlight early successes and exemplify the Blue River Greenway's promise.

Use the links below to view additional information on the following case studies.

[Municipal Farm](#)

[Palestine East Corridor Project](#)

[Blue River Parkway Masterplan](#)

[Blue Valley Plan](#)

MUNICIPAL FARM

Expanded View

Located on the banks of the Blue River east of the Brush Creek confluence, the 444-acre Municipal Farm has been in City ownership since 1911 and benefits from its proximity to critical regional amenities and natural resources (the Truman Sports Complex, Brush Creek and Blue River greenway trails, and the Rock Island Corridor). Over the last century, the farm has been home to the city's tuberculosis hospital, women's reformatory, "potter's fields" (indigent cemetery), municipal correctional institution and an inmate-run farm, municipal landfills, and hazardous materials storage. The US Army Corps of Engineers have altered the adjacent Blue River to reduce flooding, and the area is surrounded by industry and residential neighborhoods struggling with crime, poverty, and environmental challenges. The Municipal Farm has become overgrown with invasive species, resulting in a monoculture of understory species displacing native wildlife.



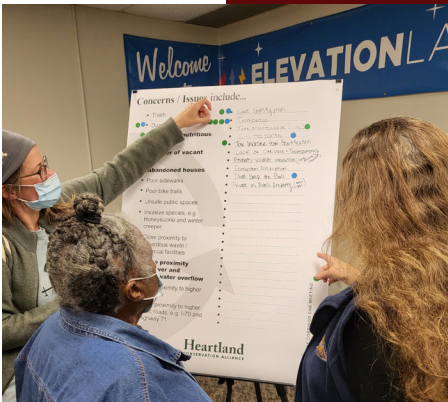
After the jail was demolished in 2009, a Municipal Farm Sustainable Reuse Plan was created and adopted in 2012 (Resolution No. 120959). As many partners work to implement the plan, the Municipal Farm helps to revitalize urban agriculture, restore habitat, and provide healthy outdoor recreational opportunities to its under-served community. Expanding community gardens, restored farmland, and a future food hub to train and support urban farmers will provide healthy food and economic opportunities. Over 30 acres of wetland and bottomland hardwood habitat restoration have been completed with plans to double the conservation area, helping to offset historical groundwater contamination in the industrial area downstream. Plans include mountain biking, kayaking and canoeing, fishing, nature viewing, rock climbing, and even skateboarding, creating an unparalleled urban nature park that has the potential to become a regional ecotourism destination.

Photo Credit: Heartland Conservation Alliance



Expanded View

PALESTINE EAST CORRIDOR PROJECT



HCA coordinated with several Partners to adopt a reuse plan for approximately 20 acres of vacant land nestled into existing neighborhoods. The site provides a forest refuge for many species of inner-city wildlife and natural spaces for neighbors to enjoy. The reuse plan aims to reduce crime and illegal dumping, improve home values, and foster a sense of community and place for the surrounding neighbors.

Through a series of community surveys and workshops, HCA learned that nearby residents had significant connections with their backyard forest and a deep desire to protect it. A tree inventory was conducted in 2019 to prepare the way for concept development by the Community Advisory Board (CAB).

Nine individuals with varied backgrounds gathered to build trust and listen to one another's concerns for the site. They created concepts centered around Ecosystem Services and Economic Advance. Each focuses on accessible trails, neighborhood gathering spaces, community food production, and restoration of natural spaces by improving water quality and removing invasive species.

Engaging in community is tough but so worth it. Resident leaders spoke truth to power tonight and we are committed to stellar basic City services to earn their trust.

#GreenInfrastructure
#SmartSewer
#PeopleFirst



KC Water and their smartsewer program are working with the neighborhood to integrate green infrastructure in to this plan.

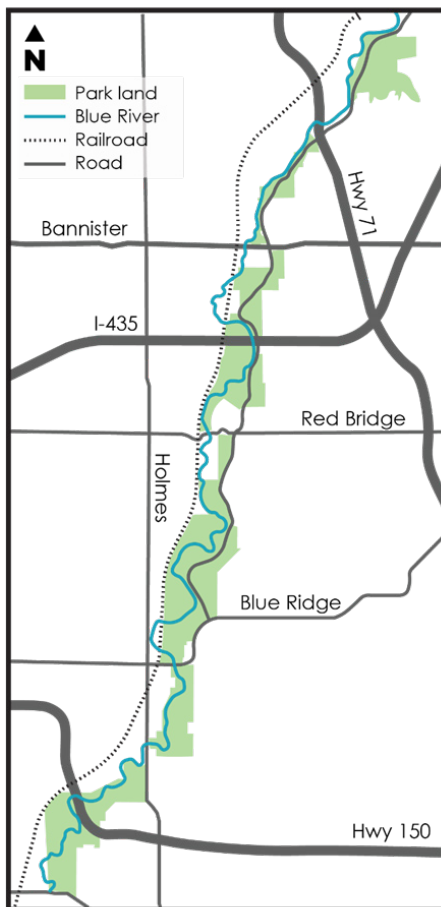
BLUE RIVER PARKWAY MASTER PLAN

[Expanded View](#)

Jackson County Parks + Rec sought to create a master plan for the Blue River Parkway, which stretches from south of Swope Park to Kenneth Road and consists of approximately 2,200 acres. Throughout the citizen-driven master planning process, input from stakeholders, existing partners, and the public was critical in informing and creating the three primary goals and priorities:

- Land management and natural resources
- Enterprise, recreation, and programs
- Park development and improvement

The final deliverable included a master plan document highlighting the Parkway's historic importance, public engagement results, major goals, priorities, and objectives for the future of the Parkway, and capital improvement plans for strategic areas along the Parkway, like the Alex George Wetland.



Kenneth Road

ALEX GEORGE WETLAND

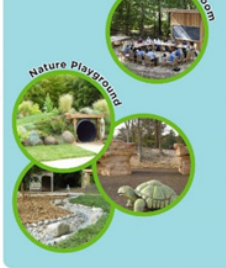
Wetland restoration efforts with the 20-acre park are a collaborative effort between Jackson County Parks + Rec, Heartland Conservation Alliance, Missouri Department of Conservation, Bridging the Gap and others. The restoration project represents a transition from a deep pond that has been filling in with sediment from surrounding areas to a shallow water wetland. In order for the wetland to reach its full potential, focus should be placed on the following areas:

- Improve water quality and reduce algae - conduct ongoing water quality monitoring as parts of the restoration project are implemented. Data will be useful for evaluating future nutrient and sediment loading in the wetland and surface waters within the region.
- Improve shoreline conditions by planting natives and managing invasive species. Establishment of native plants will reduce erosion, increase diversity, and improve infiltration of pollutants entering the wetland. Management of invasive species like shrub honeysuckle is also critical to this effort.
- Pollinator gardens - vegetation management of these areas is necessary for successful establishment and long-term management of native plant species that will in turn benefit native pollinator species like bees, butterflies, and even birds.
- Park amenities - the trail system along with shelters, picnic tables, restrooms, and boardwalks represent amenities that are essential to encouraging people to recreate within the park. Placement and maintenance of these amenities will be instrumental to achieving the goal of providing educational opportunities at the park.

The park concept presented here was heavily influenced by a previous capstone study from a Professional Science Masters student at the University of Kansas. The Alex George Wetland serves as a perfect place for educational opportunities to teach people about natural processes, native plants, pollination, wetlands, and fauna who

may live in these types of habitats. This park concept adds several small shelters, a nature playground, pollinator gardens, a small boardwalk and observation deck, a completed loop trail, and an outdoor classroom. Educational interpretive signs placed around the area could enhance the experience and opportunities for enrichment for students and visitors alike. Expanding the parking lot, especially with the increased number of shelters and activities, would allow for greater use and visibility of the park.

Alex George Wetland Improvements:
Shelter (16'x24')
Nature playground
Pollinator garden seed
Boardwalk
Outdoor classroom
Loop trail connections



ALEX GEORGE WETLAND CONCEPT

0 100 200 400 Feet

BLUE VALLEY PLAN

[Expanded View](#)



At this unique time, businesses, communities, and the public sector alike have united in a desire, and an approach, to regenerate the Blue River Valley.

In solidarity, we the stakeholders believe that the following projects, programs, and interventions will serve as a blueprint to revitalize the Blue River Valley to once again serve as an economic engine for Kansas City but this time do so in ways that empower the community and restore ecological assets.

Our approach is made up of economic development best practices for the 21st century.

We come together to wholeheartedly endorse the efforts below and believe that each will help us take a step closer to once again seeing the Blue River Valley become a resilient and productive part of Kansas City's economy for generations to come. The once-thriving corridor now only contributes to the status quo of blight and economic hardship for the area and surrounding communities. The opposite must become the new

reality, especially since this area is Kansas City's front door to the 2026 World Cup games. Reinvigorating a large part of our community, which has experienced decades of underinvestment, will take time and effort. It must begin somewhere though, and we believe that is outlined in these projects.

- Blue River Greenway led by Heartland Conservation Alliance
- Economic Development Pilots led by Foundation for Regeneration & EDCKC
- Missouri River Terminal led by Port KC
- Wetlands Mitigation Bank led by The Nature Conservancy
- Infrastructure "GreenSheet" led by KCIC



BLUE RIVER VALLEY
INDUSTRY | COMMUNITY | NATURE

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