



Council Agenda Item 25-0494R

MEETING DATE: 06/16/2025

SUBJECT/TITLE: RESOLUTION AUTHORIZING THE NOMINATION OF THE LESTER-AMITY-HAWK RIDGE NATURAL AREA TO THE DULUTH NATURAL AREAS PROGRAM.

SUBMITTED BY: Jim Filby Williams, Director of Properties, Parks, and Libraries

RECOMMENDATION: Approve the nomination.

BOARD/COMMISSION/COMMITTEE RECOMMENDATION: April 23, 2025 – Natural Resources Commission recommended approval of the nomination to the Planning Commission. May 13, 2025 – Planning Commission approved nomination. May 14, 2025 – Parks and Recreation Commission recommended approval.

PREVIOUS COUNCIL ACTION: September 9, 2002 – Duluth City Council approved the [Duluth Natural Areas Program Guidelines for the Permanent Protection of Ecologically Significant Lands in Duluth, Minnesota](#), which describes the designation process, eligibility and criteria, and the management plan requirements for designated natural areas.

The [Duluth Natural Areas Program](#) (DNAP) is also described by City ordinance: [Duluth City Code, Chapter 2, Article XXIX](#). City code outlines a two-step process to designate a specific place as a Duluth Natural Area, where step one is the approval of a nomination, and step two is the development and approval of a land protection and management plan.

BACKGROUND: The DNAP is a mechanism for designating certain lands of environmental value as permanently protected natural places. The criteria for eligibility as lands of environmental value include observed plant and animal communities, habitat for special species, natural water features, important bird habitat areas, and geologic landforms. There are [currently three designated areas](#) in Duluth: Hartley, St. Louis River, and Magney-Snively.

In December 2023, four natural resources partners approached the City to explore the possibility of nominating City-owned lands with high ecological value and low development potential along Amity Creek and in Hawk Ridge Nature Reserve to the Duluth Natural Areas Program. The partner organizations include the Minnesota Land Trust, Minnesota Trout Unlimited, South St. Louis Soil and Water Conservation District, and Hawk Ridge Bird Observatory. A sequence of meetings between City staff, City administration, and the partner organizations were held to determine appropriate lands for inclusion in the nomination and clarify the nomination process and documentation requirements.

Following the partner organizations' development of the nomination package, the nomination was presented to the Natural Resources Commission (NRC), Planning Commission, and Parks and Recreation Commission. At the April 23, 2025, NRC meeting, Commissioners recommended approval of the nomination to the Planning Commission, which then approved it at its May 12, 2025, meeting. Though not required by code, the Parks and Recreation Commission also recommended approval of the nomination.

Approval of the nomination will grant provisional DNAP approval for the nominated natural area. Then, the partners will have one year to write and finalize a management plan for the nominated area. After the management plan is prepared, it will be brought before City Council for review and approval, which will solidify the designation as a Duluth Natural Area.

BUDGET/FISCAL IMPACT: There is no financial commitment for the City. Partners are bringing \$1.5 million in federal and state funding, plus their own staff time to restoration projects within the proposed Natural Area over the next 2-5 years with more funding expected over the next ten years. These partner-supplied funds will support implementation of management plan activities.

OPTIONS: Approve the nomination as recommended by the Planning Commission to provisionally approve the natural area and the creation of a management plan or reject the nomination.

NECESSARY ACTION: Approve the nomination.

ATTACHMENTS:

Exhibit A: Lester-Amity-Hawk Ridge Designated Natural Area Map

Exhibit B: Nomination Package



Legislation Details (With Text)

File #:	25-0494R	Name:	
Type:	Resolution	Status:	Agenda Ready
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Title:	RESOLUTION AUTHORIZING THE NOMINATION OF THE LESTER-AMITY-HAWK RIDGE NATURAL AREA TO THE DULUTH NATURAL AREAS PROGRAM.		

Sponsors:

Indexes:

Code sections:

Attachments: 1. Cover Memo_Lester-Amity-Hawk Ridge Natural Area, 2. Exhibit A - Proposed Boundary Map, 3. Exhibit B - Nomination Package

Date	Ver.	Action By	Action	Result
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RESOLUTION AUTHORIZING THE NOMINATION OF THE LESTER-AMITY-HAWK RIDGE NATURAL AREA TO THE DULUTH NATURAL AREAS PROGRAM.

CITY PROPOSAL:

BE IT RESOLVED, that the Duluth City Council hereby makes the following findings of fact pertaining to the project areas shown on "Exhibit A - Proposed Boundary Map":

1. That the nomination is an area of special or unique ecological or environmental significance to the city of Duluth because it meets not just one, but all five of the science criteria defined in Article IV A of the Duluth Natural Areas Program Guidelines:
 - a. Significant Native Plant Communities Area - Plant surveys within the Hawk Ridge Nature Reserve identified nine significant native plant communities including Northern Rich Maple-Basswood Forest and a relatively high abundance of Oak species, a resilient species that is expected to do well in warmer temperatures.
 - b. Special Species Area - Canada Buffaloberry, a state listed species of special concern, has been documented within the nominated natural area. The species has been found in six separate rock outcrop areas within the proposed natural area boundary.
 - c. Important Bird Congregation Area - This site encompasses the internationally recognized Hawk Ridge Nature Reserve. More than 60,000 raptors and over 200,000 other birds are counted at HRNR annually. Thousands of people from around the world visit Hawk Ridge to witness the fall migration every year.
 - d. Natural Water Features Area - Portions of Amity Creek and Lester River are located within the proposed natural area. They are both state-listed designated trout streams.

Amity Creek has been identified by the MPCA as the 5th best quality trout stream in the northeast part of the state.

- e. Geologic Landform Area - Hawk Ridge exists because it is made up of a rock called diabase, which is resistant to weathering and erosion. Hawk Ridge is one of Duluth's most recognizable high points, and can be traced back to processes that occurred during both the Mid-Continent Rift and the Great Ice Age Glaciation.
2. That the land constituting the proposed natural area is eligible for nomination for the Duluth Natural Area Program because it is either owned by the city, or is owned by private or other public owners, in which owners have to provide consent to the designation of the property as a natural area under the program and to the imposition of controls in the form of a management plan thereon.
3. That the nominated area is in compliance with all applicable state and federal laws, rules and regulations.

FURTHER RESOLVED, that pursuant to Section 2-155 (a) of the Duluth City Code Article XXIX, 1959, as amended, the Lester-Amity-Hawk Ridge Natural Area as described in "Exhibit B - Nomination Package" is hereby provisionally designated as a Duluth Natural Area, which designation shall continue to be provisional until program protections and a management plan for the area have been approved.

STATEMENT OF PURPOSE: This resolution authorizes city officials to approve the nomination of the Lester-Amity-Hawk Ridge Area to the Duluth Natural Areas Program. The proposed 1183-acre area is comprised entirely of existing City property of which 171 acres is already protected as parkland, 395 acres has been protected since the early 1970's as Hawk Ridge Nature Reserve, and 617 acres was acquired by the City from St Louis County in 2023 with the intent expressed in Resolution 22-0251R for the land to be permanently protected.

The nomination was prepared and submitted by a partnership of Hawk Ridge Bird Observatory, Minnesota Trout Unlimited, the South St Louis Soil and Water Conservation District, and the Minnesota Land Trust who have collectively committed to invest \$1.5 million in managing and restoring the proposed Natural Area over the next five years with more thereafter.

The Natural Resources Commission recommended approval of the nomination to the Planning Commission on April 23, 2025. The Planning Commission approved the nomination on May 13, 2025. Though not required by City Code, Parks and Recreation Commission also reviewed and recommended approval of the nomination on May 14, 2025.

The Duluth Natural Areas Program was established in city code to preserve Duluth's natural heritage for the public good by protecting lands of special environmental significance. City code outlines a two-step process to designate a specific place as a Duluth Natural Area. This resolution completes step one: approval of a nomination. Approval of a nomination establishes a new Duluth Natural Area on a provisional basis. After the nomination is approved, the partner organizations will have one year to write and finalize a management plan for the nomination area, including a list of prioritized actions to restore and protect the terrestrial and aquatic values of the area. After the management plan is prepared, it will be brought before City Council for review and approval. Approval of the management plan would complete the second step of the designation process and solidify the designation as a

Duluth Natural Area. Following approval of a management plan, an 8-to-1 City Council super-majority is necessary to remove the Natural Area designation.

The boundaries of the proposed Natural Area were set in close collaboration with the Planning and Economic Development Department to exclude land that could plausibly be developed in the foreseeable future. Development within existing designated parkland and Hawk Ridge Nature Reserve is already prohibited. Development of the 617-acre portion of the proposed Natural Area that was purchased from St Louis County in 2023 is prohibited by, or prohibitively restricted by:

- The predominance of dense, heavily used recreational trails for snowmobiles, skiers, pedestrians, and bikes, infrastructure that would cost several million dollars today.
- The predominance of land that is wet, steep, rocky, and/or within cold water Shoreland Management Zones.
- The existing designations of 100% of the land as Parks in current zoning and/or as Open Space in the Future Land Use Map.