

# Greater Minnesota Regional Parks and Trails Commission

## Designation Application

### General Section

Designation Application #: 16-043D      Date Submitted: 04/28/2016

Park or Trail Name: Tioga Recreation Area

District #: 2      Map Coordinates (Latitude and Longitude): Latitude: 47.2127 Longitude: -93.6106

#### Location Description:

The Tioga Recreation Area is located in Itasca County. It's also located within the city limits of Cohasset and is less than two miles from the city of Grand Rapids. Together, Cohasset, Grand Rapids, and surrounding townships form a retail, tourism, arts and culture, and economic center. This center draws residents, shoppers, business people, audiences, tourists, and second home owners from around the county, region, state, and beyond. Itasca County as a whole is home to more than 1,000 lakes, the Mississippi River, and hundreds of thousands of acres of public land. The Tioga Recreation Area itself is surrounded by Pokegama Lake, which is one of the county's most popular and developed recreational lakes. Pokegama is 6,800 acres and connects directly to the Mississippi. Other smaller lakes in the immediate area include Cavanaugh, Jay Gould, Loon, and the Tioga Pit Lake. The Tioga Recreation Area is also located near large tracts of state land and is connected to Cohasset and Grand Rapids via multi-use trails and bike routes. Major facilities that are near the Tioga Recreation Area and are accessible by trail and bike routes include the Minnesota Historical Society's Forest History Center and Grand Itasca Clinic and Hospital, which employs more than 500 people. The area immediately surrounding Tioga is residential, densely settled, and growing. Combined, Cohasset, Grand Rapids, and adjacent townships have a population of approximately 30,000. This is the second most-populated area in Northeastern Minnesota, outside of Duluth. The area's population increases to more than 45,000 during the summer, when vacationers, tourists, and second home owners arrive to enjoy abundant natural beauty, recreational opportunities, and a burgeoning arts and culture scene.

Lead Applicant Organization: City of Cohasset

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Joint Applicant #1 Organization:

Joint Applicant #2 Organization:

Joint Applicant #3 Organization:

Joint Applicant #4 Organization:

Describe other project supporters:

Itasca County is supportive of the long-term use of the land that it owns within the recreation area. The county has contributed staff time and resources for planning. An agreement between Cohasset and Itasca County will be finalized in summer 2016 to detail the particulars of the long-term land use agreement. The Grand Rapids Itasca Mountain Bicycling Association (GRIMBA) is a local member-based mountain biking organization. GRIMBA contributed \$2,500 of its own funds and raised \$10,000 from within its membership to contribute to planning. It was GRIMBA's interest in the Tioga Recreation Area that led Cohasset to further examine how it could more fully develop Tioga as a multi-use destination area that would have greater appeal to more users. GRIMBA has agreed to oversee maintenance of purpose-built trails. The particulars of this agreement will be further defined and finalized in summer 2016. The Minnesota Department of Natural Resources (DNR) is highly supportive of the long-term recreational use of school trust lands that are a part of the proposed project area and has contributed staff time for planning (A DNR representative sits on the planning committee.) A draft 20-year use agreement has been created between Cohasset and the DNR. The DNR has initially approved the drafted agreement, which is attached. It will be finalized and signed when all development plans and trail designs are complete. The DNR is not leading the project. It has agreed, in response to the requests from Cohasset and GRIMBA, to support the project and contribute to planning. The DNR has already conducted an in-depth analysis of the land and determined that further development of the Tioga Recreation Area is in the best interest of the school trust as it will help to secure maximum long-term revenues (through the lease). The lease agreement places all development and management responsibilities on Cohasset and GRIMBA. The Minnesota Office of School Trust Lands is highly supportive of efforts to further develop the Tioga Recreation Area, because it will help to secure additional revenue for the school trust while allowing for the development of a high-quality recreation destination in an established economic and regional center. The city of Grand Rapids is highly supportive of efforts and has contributed staff time and mapping resources. Get Fit Itasca is a non-profit that advocates for healthy lifestyles, fitness, and nutrition in Itasca County. Get Fit is highly supportive, has contributed staff time and resources, and plans to help create new programming that will take place at the Tioga Recreation Area. Visit Grand Rapids is a member-based organization that promotes tourism in Grand Rapids and Itasca County to a Midwest audience. Visit Grand Rapids has contributed staff time and is highly supportive. The Forest History Center is operated by the Minnesota Historical Society and is highly supportive. The Forest History Center looks forward to contributing to programming that will take place at the Tioga Recreation Area. The Grand Rapids Area Chamber of Commerce is highly supportive. Mobility Mania is a non-profit organization dedicated to identifying and addressing accessibility issues, promoting accessibility awareness, and improving accessibility in Northern Minnesota and beyond. Mobility Mania is highly supportive. The Itasca Trails Taskforce is a non-profit that promotes and supports trail development in Itasca County. The taskforce is highly supportive and has contributed \$10,000 to assist with project planning. The Iron Range Resources and Rehabilitation Board contributed \$8,600 to assist with project planning.

### Description Section

Regional Significance Statement: The Tioga Recreation Area is a 460-acre natural resource-based playland sandwiched between Cohasset, Grand Rapids, and Pokegama Lake. The unique and scenic area offers many high-quality outdoor recreational opportunities as well as easy connectivity to local

communities. The core vision is to further develop Tioga in a way that makes use of existing assets, preserves the stand-out setting and historical significance, and expands the area's attractiveness as a primary non-motorized, multi-use recreation destination in the region.

Classification: Natural Resource Based Regional Park

Total proposed acreage: 460

Overview/Description of Park or Trail:

The Tioga Recreation Area offers a unique and exciting opportunity to build on natural strengths in Itasca County and develop a recreation destination that will help drive the overall health and prosperity of the region. The 460-acre area features rolling terrain, pine forests, hardwoods, a crystal-clear pit lake, overburden piles that are nearly 200 feet high, and spectacular views over the Mississippi River, Pokegama Lake, Cohasset, Grand Rapids, and the surrounding forests. The historic area, which was once home to an iron ore mining operation, is already a popular destination for walkers, runners, bikers, swimmers, scuba divers, kayakers, and more. Existing development/facilities in the heart of the recreation area include a swimming beach, fishing pier, parking lot, public water access, signage, and six miles of old service roads/trails. The pit lake is regularly stocked with rainbow trout by the Minnesota Department of Natural Resources. The former mining area was the focus of a mineland reclamation project by the Iron Range Resources and Rehabilitation Board in the 1980s. At that time, thousands of tree seedlings were planted and have grown into beautiful pine forests. The parking lot, swimming beach, pier, and other basic facilities were also added at that time. Directly across the road from the pit lake, the city of Cohasset has made a significant investment in additional recreational amenities for local residents and visitors. Located on Pokegama Lake, this facility (Tioga Beach) includes a popular swimming beach, picnic area, playground, parking lot, a restroom, a fishing pier, and a paved multi-purpose trail. The trail leads from the area into the communities of Cohasset and Grand Rapids. It provides a link to other trails including the Portage Park hiking/skiing trails, paved bike trails/routes in Cohasset and Grand Rapids, trails at the Forest History Center and Grand Itasca Clinic and Hospital, and the Mesabi Trail, which when fully complete will run 150 miles from Grand Rapids to Ely. For the past four years, a group of local residents, recreation enthusiasts, and city officials have been working to develop a dynamic new vision for the Tioga Recreation Area. The reimagined park will provide a high-quality outdoor experience while diversifying the recreational opportunities available to residents and visitors and connecting them to the outdoors in a way that highlights local history and the uniqueness of the surrounding land. The multi-use area will cater to human-powered activities including hiking, skiing, snowshoeing, trail running, mountain biking, birdwatching, trout fishing, swimming, etc. Hunting will be allowed in November. Unique land features and purpose-built trails will add value and character to the site. The site is unparalleled in the region in terms of the sense of place and the opportunity for many high-quality recreational opportunities. The park will make room for existing uses of the area while broadening the appeal to address emerging recreational needs in a way that emphasizes high-quality outdoor experiences and healthy lifestyles. The park will be a destination unto itself and will entice visitors to return time and time again.

What is the Acquisition and Development Status?

- New Park or Trail (no land acquired or developed)
- Existing Park or Trail
  - Land Acquisition

Status: All land owners are agreeable and supportive: Cohasset, 10 acres; Itasca County, 50 acres; School Trust Lands, 400 acres. Long-term use agreements being drafted/finalized in summer 2016.

Percentage of Land Acquired: 100

- Development Status
  - No Development
  - Some Development, but more Proposed
    - New Facilities Proposed
    - Existing Facilities to be Upgraded
  - Fully Development

Facility Listing Section

Classification: Natural Resource Based Regional Park	
Existing Facility List	Proposed Facility List
Picnicking and picnic shelters, Walking Trails (paved), Hiking Trails (natural), Biking Trails (paved), Swimming, Lake Access for power boats, Canoeing Facilities, Fishing Piers, Play areas, Overlooks, beaches	Camping-cross-section of camper types, Non-electric campsites, Tent only sites, Camper Cabins, Yurts or some other form of low-cost, semi-permanent accommodation., Picnicking and picnic shelters, Walking Trails (paved), Hiking Trails (natural), Biking trails (paved), Mountain Biking Trails (natural), Cross-country Skiing Trails, Nature Center/Interpretation Trails, Restrooms/sanitation building, Roads and Parking Areas, Development will include construction of new shelters, improvements to parking/roads, extension of paved walk/bike trails, addition of new restroom facilities, and construction of a purpose-built, 25-mile trail system. The trail system will serve hikers, runners, skiers, people with disabilities, mountain bikers, and others. It will include trails of varying levels of difficulty. It will also include signage, trailheads, and historical interpretation.

## Master Plan Status Section

Master Plan Status: No Master Plan is Available

Describe Other Supportive Information:

A local committee is working to develop the master plan and intends to submit it in May.

## Classification Details Section

Classification: Natural Resource Based Regional Park

Criteria #1 Provides a High-Quality Outdoor Recreation Experience: The Tioga Recreation Area is located in a scenic setting that innately appeals to visitors. The 460-acre, multi-use area is surrounded by multiple bodies of water including the Mississippi, Jay Gould Lake, and Pokegama Lake, which at 6,800 acres in size, is one of Itasca County's most popular recreation lakes. Because of its unique land features, some of which were formed by mining activity more than 50 years ago, Tioga provides expansive views over the surrounding area. These views are unparalleled in the region. In addition, Tioga features trails that lead both through former mining lands and natural settings including pine forests, glacial moraine, and beautiful hardwood forests. The Tioga Pit Lake is a standout feature in the area. It reaches a depth of 230 feet, is crystal clear, and is stocked with rainbow trout. It is a popular destination for swimming, fishing, scuba diving, kayaking, and stand-up paddle boarding. Tioga Beach on Pokegama Lake is an additional standout feature and further diversifies recreational opportunities. Other existing facilities in the Tioga Recreation Area include fishing piers, public water accesses, a playground, and a picnic pavilion. These help provide a robust cross section that attracts a wide range of user groups. Development in the Tioga Recreation Area will include well-designed paved trail extensions, road/parking improvements, camping/yrurts, and 25 miles of non-motorized, purpose-built trails. Development will preserve current uses, will provide new recreational opportunities, and will broaden the appeal of the area. Trails will be designed for mountain bikers, hikers, trail runners, skiers, people with disabilities, and others. Trails will provide multiple levels of difficulty and will meet the contemporary needs of the targeted user groups. The overall area will be highly unique in the region because it will combine an outstanding sense of place with diverse and high-quality recreational opportunities.

Criteria #2 Preserves a Regionally-Significant and Diverse Natural or Historic Landscape: The Mesabi Iron Range, which runs from Grand Rapids on the west to Babbitt on the east, has provided the majority of the nation's iron ore since the ore body was first discovered in 1866. During the 1950s and 60s, the Tioga No. 2 Mine, located in Cohasset, shipped more than 3,000,000 tons of ore. The mine closed in 1961, leaving a unique landscape that includes a deep pit and overburden piles more than 200 feet high. Since then, the land has been reclaimed. This work was conducted as part of a mineland reclamation project by the Iron Range Resources and Rehabilitation Board in the 1980s. It capitalized on the unique landforms within the area to create a popular recreation lake, trails, and scenic overlooks. Tioga also includes natural areas that were never touched during the mining operation. These areas, such as pine and hardwood forests and flowing glacial moraine, complement the former mining lands and diversify the character of the recreational opportunities available there. Tioga is further enhanced by its

proximity to major water features including Pokegama Lake. This combination of man-made, historic features and scenic natural areas forms the foundation of Tioga's importance as a regionally significant destination. It's also one of only a few former mining sites that are now publicly owned and as such are available for recreational use and development. The size of Tioga is perhaps one of its greatest assets. Because it's 460 acres, it can accommodate diverse non-motorized uses while preserving and strategically highlighting the sense of place and protecting the natural features. The site and trails will be used to interpret mining history. Research will also be conducted to determine if the area holds significance within Native American culture. If so, this element of the site's history will also be interpreted.

**Criteria #3 Well-located and Connected to Serve Regional Population and/or Tourist Destination:** The Tioga Recreation Area is located in one of the mostly densely populated areas in Northeastern Minnesota (outside of Duluth). The total population of Cohasset, Grand Rapids, and surrounding townships is 30,000. During the summertime, the number is even higher as vacationers and second home owners move into the area for the summer. Specifically, the Tioga area is located within the city limits of Cohasset and is two miles from Grand Rapids. It's in an area located just outside the core areas of both of these communities. The immediate vicinity of Tioga is residential and is densely populated by rural and lake homes. Because of its many lakes and proximity to Grand Rapids, Cohasset is growing rapidly. From 1990 to 2000, it increased by 26 percent. From 2000 to 2012, it increased by 9 percent, outpacing Itasca County as a whole by more than 6 percent. Currently, the city's population stands at 2,800. According to the Minnesota State Demographer's office, the population will grow by 25.5 percent by 2035. Grand Rapids is growing as well and increased by 35 percent between 1990 and 2013. Grand Rapids and Cohasset are a regional retail, economic, arts and culture, and tourist hub within Itasca County and Northeastern Minnesota as a whole. The area includes the region's major employers, healthcare facilities, public services, and retailers. Grand Rapids is the county seat within Itasca County. The Tioga area is readily accessible by a combination of local, regional, and state trails from nearby facilities, neighborhoods, and communities. The primary spur that leads to the Tioga area is a 3-mile paved trail that runs along the side of Highway 63. This trail links to routes/trails in Cohasset and Grand Rapids as well as the Mesabi Trail, which runs from Grand Rapids to Ely.

**Criteria #4 Fills a Gap in Recreational Opportunity within the Region:** The proposed project addresses the pressing need for a high-quality, non-motorized, multi-use recreational area in a growing regional center. In recent years, Cohasset, Grand Rapids, and surrounding townships have been fortunate to see many young families move to the area. These include adults in their 20s, 30s, and 40s who grew up here and desired to return. They also include residents who have moved to the area for the first time and have found jobs in local healthcare, government, schools, and business. These new residents, as well as other long-standing residents and visitors, seek contemporary forms of non-motorized recreation that promote fun and health. Currently, no recreational opportunity of a similar nature is otherwise available within a reasonable distance. There are a number of small local parks in Cohasset in Grand Rapids, however, they are not large enough to feature water access and an extensive, intentionally designed trail system. For this reason, they do not generally appeal to multiple user groups. There are also a number of cross country ski trails as well as motorized trails, however, these largely appeal to specific user groups. Several state forests and parks are located in Itasca County, and while they are well

used and loved by a broad range of people, they are too far from the regional center and primary population base to adequately serve local residents and visitors regularly. In addition, there is no non-motorized recreation area that is integrated in a beautiful natural setting, surrounded by lakes and forests, that also incorporates the rich history of iron ore mining. The nearest comparable recreation opportunity is Cuyuna Country State Recreation Area, which is more than 75 miles away. This is too far for local residents and/or visitors to access easily and regularly.

Attachment List Section (only lists up to 10 documents)

<b>Type</b>	<b>Description</b>
Photo	Photos of the Tioga Recreation Area
Resolution	Resolution from Cohasset
Agreement	Draft of long-term lease agreement, developed by Cohasset and DNR and to be signed in summer 2016
Letters of Support	Eleven letters of support
Resolution	undefined
Resolution	undefined
site_characteristic_images	Photos and descriptions of trails and facilities in core area
site_characteristic_images	Aerial images of Tioga Mine Pit Lake
site_characteristic_images	Aerial images of Tioga Pit and Surrounding Area
site_characteristic_images	Photos of Tioga Beach on Pokegama Lake