

# Mississippi River Corridor Critical Area (MRCCA) Ordinance

Ordinance 25-72

## BACKGROUND

The MRCCA ordinance is a statewide effort to align local land use regulations with updated state standards for protecting the river corridor. Minnesota adopted new MRCCA rules in 2017, and the Department of Natural Resources (DNR) developed a model ordinance in 2019 for cities to implement.

Twenty-five cities and townships along the river have overwhelmingly adopted the DNR's model ordinance language that balances environmental protection with urban development. Saint Paul remains the only city that has not yet done so.

## THE ISSUE

The current version of the MRCCA ordinance advanced by the Planning Commission includes stricter height restrictions than city staff recommended for the Urban Core district, covering downtown Saint Paul. These limits would cap new building heights at roughly one story above Kellogg Boulevard unless a Conditional Use Permit (CUP) is obtained.

This approach is inconsistent with the DNR's model ordinance and with how most cities along the river have implemented the rules. It also introduces a complex "base height" formula that creates uncertainty and administrative burden for future downtown projects.

## WHY IT MATTERS

Downtown Saint Paul is at a pivotal moment. The city faces urgent needs for more housing, stronger economic growth, and a revitalized downtown. The proposed height restrictions work against these goals and conflict with the city's Downtown Investment Strategy, which seeks to create a vibrant, inclusive, and economically resilient downtown.

The stricter ordinance will make it harder to attract private investment to projects like RiversEdge by causing delays and added costs through additional permitting requirements. The same barriers could apply to other key sites within the Urban Core, limiting future opportunities for redevelopment and investment.

By contrast, adopting the staff recommendations would maintain environmental protection while allowing projects that would grow the city's tax base, create jobs, and attract new residents.

## BOTTOM LINE

Saint Paul should align its MRCCA ordinance with state guidance and the similar approach taken by other municipalities along the river. Exempting the Urban Core from new height restrictions is a practical and balanced solution that protects the river while supporting downtown revitalization and future economic growth.

**SUPPORT DOWNTOWN REVITALIZATION BY  
EXEMPTING HEIGHT LIMITS IN THE URBAN CORE**