

## The Nature of Art and The Art of Nature



Photo: Courtesy of Caponi Art Park

The Caponi Art Park and Learning Center is a unique place where people of different talents and interests come together through art and nature. Located on 60 acres of wooded hills and lakeshore in Eagan, the Art Park encourages exploration and discovery, and inspires creativity. Works of art are made on-site and permanently installed so the art blends in with the surrounding environment.

There was a time when the future of the Art Park was uncertain. Fortunately, with the help of the Dakota County Farmland and Natural Areas Program (FNAP) — a \$20 million referendum approved by County voters to help protect natural areas and farmland — the Park has been permanently protected for future generations to enjoy.

The Caponi Art Park was the vision of Anthony (Tony) Caponi, a sculptor and now-retired professor and former chair of the Art Department of Macalester College in St. Paul. In the early 1950's, when the population of Eagan Township was just 1,500 people, Tony purchased 83 acres where he

built a home and raised a family. Tony has always valued land protection and stewardship. He illustrated this commitment by, among other projects, planting large pine trees to help control erosion. In 1972, Tony sold 20 acres to the City of Eagan, which became a portion of Patrick Eagan Park. During that time, development in Eagan was rapidly increasing and Tony wanted a way to protect his land. Out of this, the dream to create the Art Park was born.

The Art Park became Tony's labor of love. The property was opened for informal tours and activities in 1987. In 1992, with encouragement from local officials and residents in the south metro, the Caponi Art Park non-profit corporation was formed to develop the park into a local and regional cultural resource. However, soaring land costs and lack of funding made the Park's future uncertain.

In 2003, the Art Park submitted an application to the FNAP for partial funding. The proposal was reviewed and recommended to the Dakota County Board of Commissioners

by the FNAP Citizen Advisory Committee, and the Board gave preliminary approval for the project. After a year of developing a partnership and funding package among the Caponi Art Park Board, the State of Minnesota, the City of Eagan, and Dakota County, the Caponi Art Park was permanently protected.

According to Tony, the FNAP was essential in providing significant matching funds, keeping the partnership focused on land protection as part of the larger Eagan Core Greenway, and meeting the needs of the individual partners. The Caponi Art Park and Learning Center is an example of how dedicated open space funding and collaboration has protected more than just land. It has turned one man's dream into reality — to the pleasure and benefit of current and future residents.

For more information on the Caponi Art Park and Learning Center, visit [www.caponiartpark.org](http://www.caponiartpark.org). For more on the Dakota County FNAP, visit [www.dakotacounty.us](http://www.dakotacounty.us) and search on "Farmland and Natural Areas."