

# Information Item

Community Development Committee



Meeting Date: April 20, 2026

## Topic

Climate and Natural Systems Regional Park Implementing Agency-Council Workgroup Update

**District(s), Member(s):** All

**Policy/Legal Reference:** Minn. Stats. §§ 473.145 and 473.147

**Staff Prepared/Presented:** Colin Kelly, Planning Analyst (651-602-1361)  
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**Division/Department:** Community Development / Regional Parks and Trails

## Proposed Action

Information item; no action is proposed at this time.

## Background

The Climate and Natural Systems workgroup was formed during the development of the Imagine 2050 Regional Development Guide, as Council staff considered updates to the Regional Parks and Trails Policy Plan and sought to create tangible connections between regional goals and parks and trails policies. The workgroup is made up of Regional Park Implementing Agency staff and is facilitated by Met Council staff. Although the workgroup was “sunset” at the completion of Imagine 2050, the workgroup was reconvened as part of the implementation of the regional development guide in 2025, with strong interest and support from the park agencies.

At the April 20, 2026 Community Development Committee meeting, Council parks staff will provide an update on the Climate and Natural Systems workgroup, with a focus on the exploration of the creation of an open space classification. Council staff will seek the Committee’s feedback and advice on the 2026 workgroup priorities. The following information is intended to provide the Committee with background on the workgroup and its basis in the regional development guide and the Regional Parks and Trails Policy Plan.

During the March 5, 2026 Metropolitan Parks and Open Space Commission meeting, Council staff shared a similar update with commissioners and received thoughtful feedback on the potential open space classification. Commissioners sought to better understand what would make such a classification “regional” in nature, as well as the classification’s intent. Commissioners noted that there are similar natural and conservation areas at the state level and in some metro area counties and noted the potential challenges of a new classification in a limited funding environment. Commissioners also touched on the classification’s possible impact and relationship with existing regional parks and trails system units.

In addition to engaging with the Metropolitan Parks and Open Space Commission, Council staff have been conducting informational interviews with natural resource staff at park implementing agencies, non-profits, conservation districts, and state conservation agencies to better understand the current landscape of natural systems protection efforts and where this new classification idea may fit. While Council staff continue to engage with these groups during the month of April, earlier interviews have provided valuable feedback on the possible purpose of the open space

classification. Participants shared similar thoughts about the potential challenges in funding availability but can see the classification's potential in unlocking new funding sources for the Regional Parks and Trails System at the state and federal levels. Participants mentioned that this classification could provide additional tools that would complement the current efforts for natural system protection, as it fills an unmet need to protect lands that don't fit existing classifications. While participants expressed support for exploring this concept, they also encouraged the Council to convene agencies and other conservation partners to collaboratively identify high priority corridors or natural areas to strategically protect and connect these natural spaces.

The Climate and Natural Systems workgroup's exploration of an open space classification aligns with the Council's goals, objectives, and policies articulated in Imagine 2050. Regional goals include, "We lead on addressing climate change" and "We protect and restore natural systems." Related Regional Parks and Trails System objectives include, "protect and restore natural systems to safeguard the well-being of all living things" and "increase the region's resilience to climate change through land stewardship practices that mitigate greenhouse gases and adapt to future climates."

The Climate and Natural Systems workgroup is intended to help the region achieve these regional goals and meet these objectives by implementing policies and actions in the Regional Parks and Trails Policy Plan. The Natural Systems and Climate Resilience policies and their associated actions are the mechanisms for this implementation. Council staff are interested in strengthening and expanding this new area of focus in the policy plan.

The policy plan's Natural Systems policy states, "identify lands with high-quality natural features and/or with high restoration potential that are desirable for Regional Parks and Trails System activities and put these lands in a protected status so they will be available for recreational uses and preservation purposes in perpetuity." This policy evolved significantly during the development of Imagine 2050, and was reorganized to better align with regional goals and parks objectives.

The policy plan's Climate Resilience policy states, "adapt and enhance the Regional Parks and Trails System to promote resilience to climate change, including the mitigation of greenhouse gas emissions." This policy and its associated actions appear for the first time in the 2050 Regional Parks and Trails Policy Plan. Acknowledging that the current policy represents an early articulation of this body of work, revisions and/or additions to the policy and actions will continue to evolve.

The 2050 Regional Parks and Trails Policy Plan includes multiple work plan items that relate to the Climate and Natural Systems workgroup including:

5. Explore the establishment of a Special Features – Open Space/Natural Systems subclassification in consultation with the Met Council's Natural Systems workgroup. This effort includes renewal of the Regional Significant Ecological Area dataset.
6. Reconvene Climate and Natural Systems Workgroup to discuss implementation steps for climate resilience policy and actions.
9. Develop an inventory of and guidelines for harvestable fruits, mushrooms, and other plants in partnership with regional park implementing agencies, American Indian groups, and other partners and interested stakeholders.
10. As part of a broader Met Council effort, develop a training program and learning opportunities for Met Council and regional park implementing agency staff to explore indigenous land management practices and other related topics.

Council staff look forward to discussing Climate and Natural Systems-related topics with the Committee at its meeting on April 20, 2026.

