Information Item

Metropolitan Parks and Open Space Commission

Meeting Date: March 5, 2026

Topic

2026 Work Planning: Met Council Regional Parks and Trails Team

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

Since the adoption of Imagine 2050 by the Metropolitan Council in February 2025, Council staff across the organization have been implementing policies, actions, and work plan items. After a year of implementation, it is an opportune time to revisit what staff have set out to accomplish and outline priorities for the year ahead. The draft 2026 Regional Parks and Trails work plan is the focus of this information item. Staff will share a high-level summary and welcome the Commission's feedback and advice.

The 2050 Regional Parks and Trails Policy Plan, part of Imagine 2050, includes a four-year work plan that incorporates input from Regional Park Implementing Agencies, Council committees, the American Indian Advisory Council, and others (Attachment 1). The work plan outlines 17 projects organized into five themes including Accountability and Research, Protection and Restoration, Culture, Trails, and Finance. Each of these projects is aligned with specific sections of the policy plan. Council staff have made progress on a number of these items. Many of them are ongoing; others will begin this year or later.

In addition to the items listed in the policy plan's work plan, staff have ongoing work outlined in the body of the policy plan, including the review of long-range plans for regional parks and trails, the review of comprehensive plan amendments and environmental reviews, and the annual review of Geographic Information Systems (GIS) data, also known as the Modernizing Mapping Project. Council staff also support agency's work to foster a sense of belonging and build awareness of the Regional Parks and Trails System through the Parks Ambassador Program. In addition, staff administer grant programs that ultimately bring the Regional Parks and Trails System to life. This core work is ongoing and will continue to occur as items in the four-year work plan are implemented. A draft of the Council Parks and Trails team's 2026 work plan is included as Attachment 2.

Attachment 1: Table 9-1. 2025 Work Plan for the 2050 Regional Parks and Trails Policy Plan

Projects by Theme	Time Frame	Location in Policy Plan
Accountability and Research		
1. Develop a process to create a small set of performance measures at the Policy level to measure progress toward our key Regional Parks and Trails System priorities.	2025-2026	Section One
2. Implement the 2025 Regional Parks and Trails System Visitor Study.	2024-2026	Not included
3. Explore expanding cost-effective research approaches, including forecasting tools, that provide implementing agencies with the management information at the park and trail unit level.	2025-2028	Section Two, Action 2
Protection and Restoration		
4. Explore establishment of a Special Feature – Historical Landscape subclassification.	2026-2027	Section Two, Action 1
5. Explore the establishment of a Special Features – Open Space/Natural Systems subclassification in consultation with the Council's Natural Systems workgroup. This effort includes renewal of the Regionally Significant Ecological Area dataset.	2025-2026	Section Two, Action 1
6. Reconvene Climate and Natural Systems Workgroup to discuss implementation steps for Climate Resilience Policy and Actions.	2025-2028	Section Four
Culture		
7. Develop a cultural resources inventory requirement for long-range planning in partnership with key stakeholders.	2025-2026	Section Five, Action 1; Planning Handbook
8. Continue to develop and refine the Cultural Landscape Classification, in coordination with American Indian Tribes, other cultural communities, and regional park implementing agencies.	2025-2026	Section Two, Action 1
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.	2026-2028	Section Seven, Action 1

Attachment 1: Table 9-1. 2025 Work Plan for the 2050 Regional Parks and Trails Policy Plan *continued*

Projects by Theme	Time Frame	Location in Policy Plan
10. As part of a broader Council effort, develop a training program and learning opportunities for Council and regional park implementing agency staff to explore indigenous land management practices and other related topics.	2026-2028	Section Seven, Action 1
Trails		
11. Continue to convene a trail coordination workgroup, supporting the development of a more coordinated, integrated, and connected regional trails system and Regional Bicycle Transportation Network.	2025-2028	Section Seven, Action 5
12. Create regional guidelines for e-bike use on regional trails.	2025-2028	Section Seven, Action 5
13. Explore systemwide wayfinding and signage minimum requirements.	2025-2028	Section Seven, Action 5
Finance		
14. Explore scoping and development of a systemwide Asset Preservation Plan, or similar.	2025-2028	Section Eight
15. Continue to pursue Pay-Go for greater flexibility to fund a wider range of activities, facilities, and programs. Pay-Go would provide an additional tool for funding the regional system.	2025-2028	Section Eight
16. Explore changing/reducing the local match requirement for the Park Acquisition Opportunity Fund Program, as state rules allow.	2025-2028	Section Eight
17. Continue discussion of strategic funding for the Regional Parks and Trails System, with a goal to better meet the needs of this growing system.	2025-2028	Section Eight, Actions 5-6

Attachment 2: Draft 2026 Council Parks and Trails Team Work Plan *(February 17, 2026, Community Development Committee item projects in **bold**)*

Department Management

- Oversee and support the Metropolitan Parks Act
- Oversee Regional Parks and Trails Policy Plan Implementation
- Collaboration Among Partners, including support for Metropolitan Parks and Open Space Commission, Regional Park Implementing Agencies (including monthly partner meetings and work groups), and Parks and Trails Legacy Advisory Committee
- 2026 Legislative Coordination

Ambassador and Art + Policy Programs

- **Regional Parks and Trails System Map update**
- **Minnesota Parks Artist in Residence program (MNPAiR) 2.0**
- Convene Outreach coordination group
- Imagine 2050 Impact Report: Art+Policy
- Adventure Guide update
- Water Party 2.0
- Land Acknowledgement Art with American Indian Advisory Council
- Metro Transit Art Partnership, including bus stop project
- Washington County Art Project

Finance Program

- **Regional Park and Trail grant reviews (Parks and Trails Legacy, Bonding)**
- **Regional Parks Operations and Maintenance Allocations**
- Continue Strategic Funding discussion with Council leadership and Implementing Agencies
- Coordinate, implement Equity Grant Program for 2026-27
- Ongoing Programs – maintain and build support for:
  - Park Acquisition Opportunity Fund Program
  - Parks and Trails Legacy Program
  - Operations & Maintenance Program
  - Bonding Program
  - Equity Grant Program
  - Modernization Program
  - Tree Planting Program

Planning

- **Regional Park and Trail Long-Range Plan and Plan Amendment reviews**
- **Annual report on administrative review of parks long range plan amendments**
- **System additions process scoping**
- Review comprehensive plan amendments, environmental assessment worksheets, environmental impact statements, and alternative urban areawide reviews
- Modernizing Mapping project – Annual update and on-board new staff
- Continue convening Climate and Natural Systems workgroup.
- Continue convening Trail System Coordination workgroup.
- Continue implementing American Indian Advisory Council commitments and related work.
- Continue developing Cultural Landscape subclassification.

Research

- **2026 Regional Parks Visitor Study**
- **Update research on communities of color in regional parks**
- Coordinate, prepare, and share regional park and trail use estimates.