REGIONAL PARKS AND TRAILS PLANNING HANDBOOK

February 2025

METROPOLITAN
COUNCIL

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Figures and tables

SECTION 1: INTRODUCTION AND ENGAGEMENT SUMMARY

The Met Council develops, implements, and updates the Regional Parks and Trails Policy Chapter (policy chapter or policy plan), as part of the Imagine 2050 regional development guide. The policy chapter implements Imagine 2050's vision, goals, and values. It includes the Regional Parks and Trails System's vision, mission, and values, as well as its objectives, policies, and actions that describe how the Regional Parks and Trails System will act on its visionary and aspirational direction in partnership with the 10 regional parks and trails implementing agencies.

Resources for the Regional Parks and Trails Policy Chapter

This Regional Parks and Trails Planning Handbook and the Grants Administration Guide are resources that complement the policy chapter.

The planning handbook contains more detailed procedural guidance on how the policy chapter's policies and actions are implemented. It is a resource guide developed primarily for implementing agency and Met Council staff. It contains policy content requirements, agency-Met Council processes, and planning resources. It provides guidance on the requirements and processes related to agency long-range planning and system protection requests, as well as to serve as a resource for more information, examples, and best management practices.

Requirements and processes detailed in the planning handbook carry the same authority as those outlined or previewed within the policy plan. For example, the policy plan outlines the required components of long-range plans developed by regional park implementing agencies for each unit of the Regional Parks and Trails System, while the planning handbook details the specific content that must be included within each of these components. The planning handbook will continue to evolve and develop as agency and Met Council staff work together to enhance, grow, and promote the Regional Parks and Trails System. For example, regional park implementing agencies occasionally seek guidance from Met Council staff on how to fulfill specific long-range plan requirements. Excerpts of long-range plans or additional guidance on how to meet requirements may be included in future versions of the planning handbook.

The Met Council administers a wide range of funding sources and grant programs for the 10 regional park implementing agencies as directed by the Minnesota Legislature. The Grant Administration Guide provides an administrative overview for managing these state and regional funds. Since legal requirements for these programs vary, the Met Council helps to ensure compliance with all relevant requirements.

Figure 1-1. Met Council Planning Document Relationships
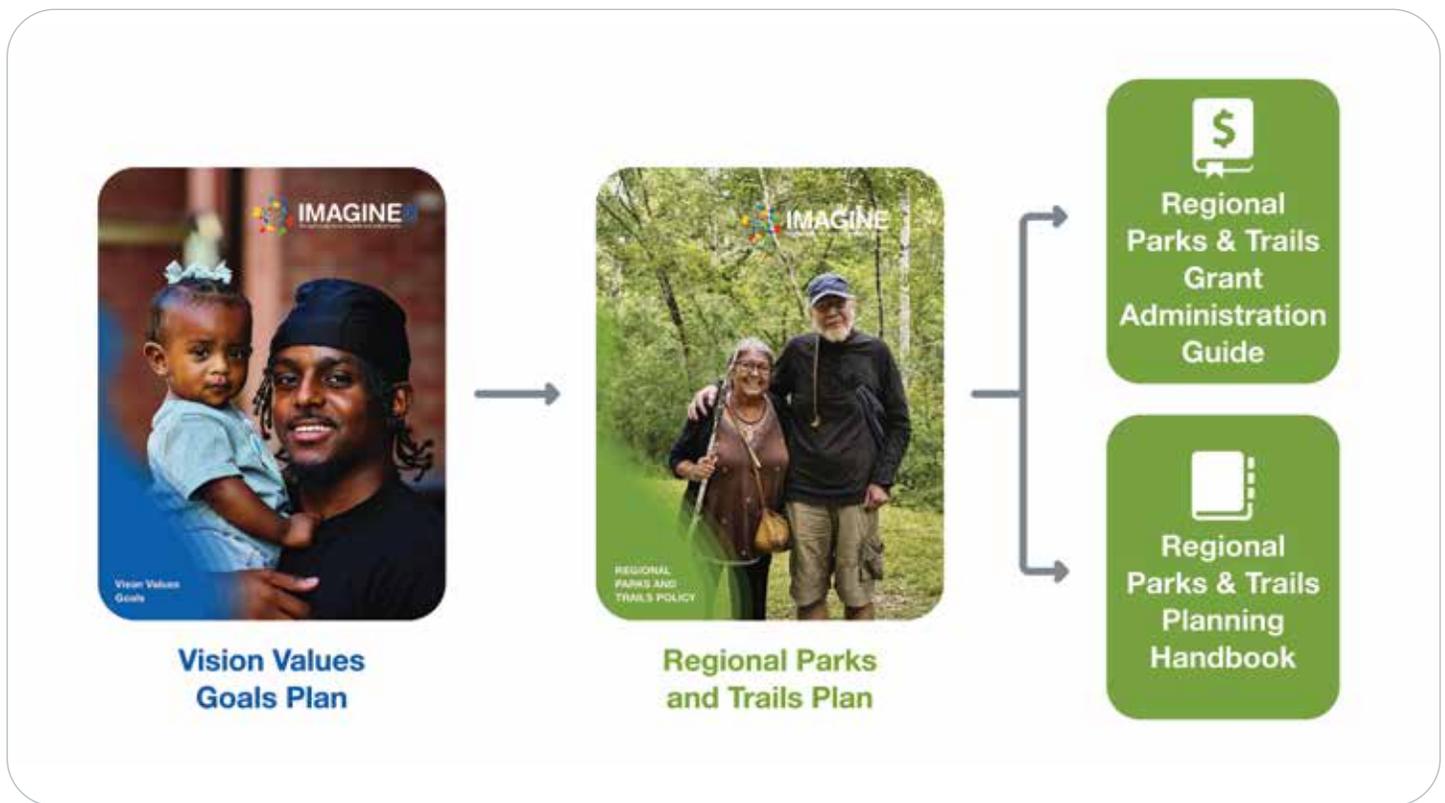
Organization

The planning handbook follows the organization of the 2050 Regional Parks and Trails Policy Chapter:

- Section 1: Introduction and Engagement Summary

- Section 2: System Plan

- Section 3: Natural Systems

- Section 4: Climate Resilience

- Section 5: Planning

- Section 6: System Protection

- Section 7: Recreation, Facilities, and Activities

All finance procedures are contained in the Regional Parks and Trails Grant Administration Guide.

Amending the Handbook

The planning handbook is a reference document meant to primarily serve implementing agency and Met Council staff. It will be updated as needs arise, and resources become available.

The policy chapter is updated on a four-year cycle. Since the planning handbook is a complementary document to the policy chapter, this update process offers an ideal opportunity to update the planning handbook as well. Met Council staff will partner with implementing agencies, the Metropolitan Parks and Open Space Commission, and the Community Development Committee on these updates.

Staff will seek Met Council approval of the planning handbook for any updates that directly impact or necessitate implementing agency action, including:

- Section 3: Process and Criteria for System Additions

- Section 5: All except Design Considerations

- Section 6: Land Conversion Process

- Section 7: Recreational Activities Evaluation Process and Process for Including New Activities or Facilities.

Staff will not seek Met Council approval for minor changes to the resources, tools, or contextual information within the planning handbook. Such updates are meant to provide implementing agency staff, Met Council staff, and others with helpful information that facilitates planning processes and accomplishing shared goals. Staff will share these types of modifications or updates with the Metropolitan Parks and Open Space Commission as an information item at the time such changes are proposed.

Met Council Regional Parks and Trails System Research and Engagement Summary

The existing conditions assessment, recent research, and engagement efforts provided a foundation for the development of the Regional Parks and Trails System's vision, mission, values, objectives, policies, and actions. This section summarizes three sets of research and engagement findings, including:

- Adventure Close to Home: Connecting Youth to the Regional Park System (2021)

- Regional Parks and Trails Visitor Study (2021)

- Community and targeted engagement about Regional Parks and Trails (2020-2024)

This content is meant to complement research and engagement information summarized for the region and other Met Council systems at the beginning of Imagine 2050. Connections to research and engagement are called out in different sections of the policy chapter.

Connecting youth to the Regional Parks and Trails System

The Regional Parks and Trails System protects valuable natural systems, preserves wildlife habitat, and offers opportunities to enjoy nature close to home. Connecting teens with these outdoor opportunities contributes to a healthy, equitable region and offers an opportunity to strengthen support for the Regional Parks and Trails System into the future.

By 2040, young people of color will account for more than half of all people under 18 years old.[1] Connecting these youth to the outdoors deserves high priority – for future support of the Regional Parks and Trails System and for providing equitable access to outdoor experiences.

The Met Council examined the needs and preferences of multicultural and multiracial youth and identified potential opportunities for regional park implementing agencies. The Met Council served as the lead partner of the research team, which included members of youth-serving community organizations, and professional staff from park implementing agencies.

The project included an engagement process that connected youth organizations and members of affected communities to the park implementing agencies. Project researchers used qualitative methods – including multifaceted field experience, interview data, analysis of photos taken by youth, focus groups, and youth-led discussion groups – to compile details and validate data.

The findings and recommendations cover a broad range of issues for youth and other community members, including outdoor skills, in-park racism, cultural climate, preferred park activities, time constraints, and transportation obstacles in accessing the parks.

The recommendations focus on time and resources for three sectors of the regional park and trail system: (1) regional park implementing agency funding, policies, and planning; (2) programming and outreach staff; and (3) long-range plan approval and research from the Met Council. The recommendations are intended to help us reach desired outcomes, including:

- Develop partnerships with affinity groups and constituent-led organizations

- Develop, adapt, and implement models that overcome obstacles in connecting youth to parks

- Invest in inclusivity through staffing, programming, research, capacity-building, and dialogue

- Develop, adapt, and implement programming and outreach models that value youth's prior experiences

- Connect youth to parks to strengthen equitable usage, conserve high-quality natural systems, and provide a comprehensive Regional Parks and Trails System.

Regional Parks and Trails Visitor Study

The 2021 Met Council Park and Trail Visitor Study[2] shares survey findings from people visiting parks and trails in the seven-county Twin Cities region. The survey was conducted to:

- Help inform planning, policy, and management.

- Evaluate and strengthen equitable usage of regional parks and trails in accordance with the 2040 Regional Parks Policy Plan.

- Update data in funding formulas to help determine where funding goes for parks and trails.

The survey gathered information from visitors about their reasons for visiting, activities they participated in at the site, how they planned their visit, transportation to the park, group size, seasonal visitation, demographic information, and more.

Are visitors satisfied with their experiences? What improvements do they suggest?
89% of visitors reported that the facilities on the day of their visit were "excellent" or "very good." Visitor satisfaction was similar across the system. Satisfaction was slightly lower in mature systems with older facilities (Minneapolis and Saint Paul).

Visitors were asked to name one thing that would improve their visit. For parks, the top suggestions were related to "general maintenance" (20%), followed by "nothing at all" (16%). The most popular suggestions were basic improvements like bathroom and drinking water access, trail conditions, and improved signage/information. Park agencies discussed the need for adequate funding to provide the basic amenities the public needs and how bathroom and water access are key to making new and underserved visitors comfortable in the Regional Parks and Trails System.

Who visits regional parks and trails?
Systemwide, 38% of visitors are from outside the geographic area of a given park agency ("nonlocal") and 62% are visiting from within the park agency's boundaries.

New and infrequent visitors represented 18% of parks visitors and 6% of trail visitors. Their answers to the survey questions can help us understand how to attract new visitors.

Adults aged 45 to 64 represent the largest share of visitors. Teens, young adults, and adults older than 75 are underrepresented at our parks and trails. Adults aged 25-44 are also underrepresented on our trails. Ramsey, Dakota, and Scott counties have the greatest disparities in young people's visitation, with Bloomington, Three Rivers Park District, and Anoka County having the smallest disparities.

Asian American, Black, and Latino visitors are underrepresented relative to the regional population of each group. Visitors aged 18-24 were more racially/ethnically diverse than older visitor groups. Carver, Anoka, and Washington counties have the smallest racial/ethnic disparities relative to population, while Dakota County, Minneapolis, Three Rivers, and Bloomington have the greatest. Disparities are even higher for regional trails.

Figure 1-2. Who Visits Regional Parks and Trails
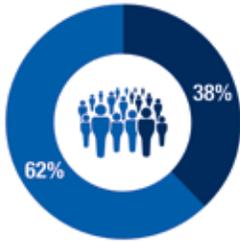
38% of visitors from outside the geographic area of a given park, 62% are visiting from within the park agency's boundaries

38%

62%
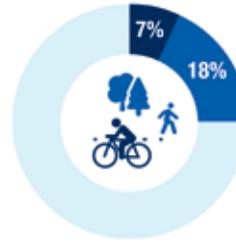
New and infrequent visitors represented 18% of parks visitors and 7% of trail visitors

7%

18%

Adults 45-64 represent the largest share of visitors

Visitors ages 18-24 are more racially/ethnically diverse than older visitors

Ramsey, Dakota, and Scott Counties have greatest disparities in young people's visitation, with Bloomington, Three Rivers Park District, and Anoka County having the smallest

Teens, young adults, and adults older than 75 are underrepresented in our parks and trails

Anoka and Washington Counties have the smallest racial/ethnic disparities. Dakota County, Minneapolis, Three Rivers, and Bloomington have the greatest. Disparities are higher for regional trails.

Asian American, Black, and Latino visitors are most underrepresented

Adults aged 25-44 are underrepresented on our trails

How do visitors travel to regional parks and trails?
Visitors traveled to parks mostly in cars (59%), but they traveled to trails via mostly people-powered methods (81% by bike or foot). Urban core regional parks and trails have higher rates of people-powered transportation compared with other parts of the region.

What do people do in parks and trails?

Primary activities are those reported by visitors as the main reason they visited on that day. The top five primary activities of summer day visitors to the regional parks are walking/hiking (33%), dog walking/dog park (13%), biking (10%), swimming (6%), and jogging/running (5%).

The top five primary activities of summer day visitors to the regional trails are biking (48%), walking/hiking (25%), jogging/running (9%), dog walking/dog park (6%), and commuting (4%).

The five most popular activities (when visitors could report all the activities they were doing) in regional parks are hiking/walking (55%), relaxing/doing nothing (27%), observing nature (27%), biking (22%), and meeting up with family or friends (18%).

The five most popular activities on regional trails are biking (54%), hiking/walking (41%), dog walking/dog park (16%), jogging/running (16%), and observing nature (15%).

All visitors, regardless of social characteristics, enjoyed a diverse range of activities. Analyzing activity patterns among underserved users, however, may help identify how to better serve these communities at parks and trails.

Community and Targeted Engagement

Since 2020, Met Council staff have attended and hosted many community engagement events as a commitment to fostering relationships with the many stakeholders of the Regional Parks and Trails System, such as regional park implementing agencies, local organizations, other partners, and residents. As park and trail use inequities persist, a focus on underserved communities is essential – and consistent with the Met Council's community-centered engagement framework. Engagement events include participation at fairs and festivals, hosting focus groups, and supporting research studies.

Like existing conditions and research, engagement informs the vision, mission, values, objectives, policies, and actions. Community and targeted engagement summarized in this space include:

- Future Forest: Love Letters to Regional Parks

- Monarch Festival

- LGBTQ+ Perspectives in Parks

- Young Leaders Collaboration

Future Forest: Love Letters to Regional Parks

At the 2020 Art Shanty event on Lake Harriet in Minneapolis, Met Council staff invited people to write a love letter to a regional park and chat with naturalists about tree canopy and climate change. One tree was planted for every five letters written. Visitors wrote over 4,000 letters expressing their love for their favorite regional parks.

Key themes included:

- Human connection

- Connection to place

- Natural resources

- Mental health/feelings and emotions

- Physical health

- Recreation

Monarch Festival

Met Council has staffed a table at the Monarch Festival at Lake Nokomis annually since 2020 to engage visitors by asking an applicable question in exchange for a reward. The festival embraces Latin culture and celebrates the migration of monarch butterflies from Minnesota to Mexico.

In 2020 and 2021, Met Council staff invited people to find their "naturehood" on regional park maps, raising awareness of where regional parks are located and potential activities at regional parks. In 2021, Met Council staff asked, "What do you love about parks?"

In 2022, Met Council staff asked visitors, "What do you like to do in nature?" and "I feel at home or comfortable in nature when___". Themes from 2022 included:

- Felt at home while doing an activity

- Cleanliness is important

- Knowing the area is important (importance of signage/wayfinding)

- People feel at home when they are connected to certain aspects of nature (trees, space, flowers, lakes)

In 2023, Met Council staff asked visitors, "What can a butterfly teach us about the land we all share?" to inspire ideas about the connections between butterflies, humans, and land. Themes from 2023 included:

- Borders of land are a human construct

- Interconnectedness between humans and the environment

- It is our duty as humans to nurture our natural systems

- Large appreciation and connection to the wrapped "We Are on Dakota Land" bus

LGBTQ+ perspectives in parks

At the urging of regional park implementing agencies, the Met Council hosted three focus groups to better understand perspectives within the Lesbian, Gay, Bisexual, Transgender, Queer, Plus (LGBTQ+) communities on representation, possible barriers, and visions for the future of parks. The participating organizations were Urban Bird Collective, Solcana Fitness, and Macalester College Outing Club. Each group is run by LGBTQ+ leaders with members from across the region.

Recommendations include:

- Create more affinity group programs that support learning and feelings of safety.

- Provide resources to build confidence and a desire to return.

- Involve naturalists and outreach staff that reflect the community.

- Listen to and support LGBTQ+ staff's experience.

- Use more inclusive language and comprehensive information.

A graphic-rich story map discussing takeaways from these focus groups is available here: https://arcgis.metc. state.mn.us/portal/apps/storymaps/stories/b0421951338244429d643021412934f0

Young leaders' collaboration

Young leaders from the Environmental Stewardship Institute and other regional organizations participated in a Met Council-sponsored workshop series where they conducted research of diverse youth in the region to create parks policy recommendations. Interviews of young people combined with discussion and analysis resulted in the creation of recommendations. Below are the "Directives for the 2050 Regional Parks Policy Plan":

- Parks are safe for everyone regardless of gender, race, or ability.

- Our parks are accessible and safe for the youth of the region.

- Our parks are biodiverse, clean, and well-kept; our parks and trails receive adequate funding to maintain them free of litter or pollution.

- Our parks facilitate the need for relaxation for the busy youth of this region.

SECTION 2: SYSTEM PLAN

The Regional Parks and Trails System Plan (system plan) in the policy chapter includes policies and actions that address research, mapping needs, and management for the Regional Parks and Trails System. The system plan lists each regional park or trail that is in the system, including current regional parks and trails that are open-to-the-public, planned, and search areas/corridors.

The planning handbook's system plan section contains a description of the recreational system within which the Metropolitan Regional Parks and Trails System exists. This section also includes maps of the regional parks and trails for each implementing agency.

Minnesota Outdoor Recreation System

State and Federal recreational parks and open spaces are often large-scale natural settings that draw visitors from across the state and beyond. They serve similar recreational needs as the Regional Parks and Trails System. Local recreational open space facilities provide active recreation, such as athletic fields, courts, and aquatic centers. Private operations also make substantial contributions to the provision of recreational facilities and services, including golf courses, riding facilities, marinas, day camps, downhill ski areas, and privately owned public spaces (Figure 2-1).

National Parks and Federal Lands

The Twin Cities region includes the Minnesota Valley National Wildlife Refuge and two national parks, the Mississippi National River and Recreation Area and the St. Croix National Scenic Riverway.

Minnesota Valley National Wildlife Refuge

The Minnesota Valley National Wildlife Refuge is a corridor of land and water along the Minnesota River that stretches from Bloomington to Henderson and is managed by the U.S. Fish and Wildlife Service. The refuge was established in 1976 to provide habitat for many migratory waterfowl, fish, and other wildlife species threatened by commercial and industrial development, and to provide environmental education, wildlife recreational opportunities, and interpretive programming for Twin Cities residents.

Mississippi National River and Recreation Area

The 54,000-acre Mississippi National River and Recreation Area (NRRA) was established in 1988 and is a unit of the National Park Service. The National Park Service owns very little land within its borders but partners with local governments, state agencies, and organizations to protect the significant resources along the 72-mile stretch of river running through the region. Several regional parks and trails, which are owned and operated by regional park implementing agencies, are located within the corridor. Additionally, 72 miles of the Mississippi River and four miles of the Minnesota River have been designated as the Mississippi National River and Recreation Area Water Trail, a national recreational amenity.

Mississippi National Water Trail

The National Park Service's management of the National River and Recreation Area (NRRA) is guided by the Mississippi National River and Recreation Area Comprehensive Management Plan[3] The National Park Service emphasizes how future acquisitions in the river corridor can serve both conservation and recreational purposes, aligning with NRRA's objectives of safeguarding the river's ecological health while enhancing public access. The NRRA Comprehensive Management Plan calls for undeveloped areas above the Interstate 694 bridge to be acquired to support a more continuous public open space along the river.

St. Croix National Scenic Riverway

A portion of the St. Croix National Scenic Riverway is within the region. The St. Croix National Scenic Riverway is a unit of the National Park Service located on the St. Croix River and the Namekagon River in Wisconsin. The National Riverway includes the two rivers and their riparian areas and occupies the boundary between Wisconsin and Minnesota. It's maintained and managed by the National Park Service and the Minnesota and Wisconsin Departments of Natural Resources.

State Parks, Lands, and Trails

The Minnesota Department of Natural Resources (DNR) manages state parks, lands, and trails in the region, including Afton, Fort Snelling, and William O'Brien state parks, the Minnesota Valley State Recreation Area, and the Brown's Creek, Gateway, Luce Line, and Minnesota Valley state trails. The DNR also provides wildlife management areas for hunting, trapping, fishing, wildlife viewing, and other compatible recreational uses. Scientific and natural areas are open to the public for nature observation and education but are not meant for intensive recreational activities.

There are six state water trails and a system of boat and canoe launches that travel through the metropolitan area along the Cannon, Crow, Minnesota, Mississippi, St. Croix, and Rum rivers. The DNR and its government partners actively manage the state water trails for canoeing, kayaking, boating, and camping.

The DNR administers the Wild and Scenic River System program. This program works with local units of government to preserve and protect treasured river resources in their natural beauty and quietude, while also providing access and amenities for visitors. Several rivers in the program intersect the metro region, including the Mississippi, Minnesota, Saint Croix, Crow, and Rum Rivers.

Regional Parks and Trails System

The Regional Parks and Trails System is an interconnected network of large, nature-based, recreational open space parks and trails in the seven-county metro region. The system primarily consists of lands located in natural settings that provide close-to-home recreation and protect continuous habitat, plant, and animal communities, as well as clean water, air, and soil. Typically, these areas are contiguous to lakes, rivers, or other water bodies. Regional parks and park reserves include large areas of land or water that often intersect multiple political jurisdictions. Regional trails may traverse several communities and provide connections between regional parks, park reserves, population centers, and the greater trail network in the region. Please visit Section 1 of the Policy Plan for more information about the Regional Parks and Trails System.

Local Parks

Local recreational open space facilities provide for a large number and variety of recreational activities that occur in the metropolitan area. Local parks are often more intensely developed than regional parks and provide facilities for active recreation, such as athletic fields, courts, and aquatic centers. Local parks are designed to serve a neighborhood or community and are frequently located in residential areas.

Local parks are usually much smaller than regional parks and are located and designed to serve the local population, rather than primarily based on natural amenities. Local trails typically provide connections between community destinations, such as schools, libraries, and community centers. Although local recreational open space areas are not covered by this plan, the facilities and services they offer are taken into consideration when long-range plans of the regional system are prepared and reviewed.

Private Recreation

Public recreational open space facilities do not meet all the demands of area's residents. Private operations also make substantial contributions to the development of facilities and the provision of services. The most prominent facilities provided by the private sector are golf courses, riding facilities, gun clubs, marinas, day camps, and downhill ski areas. There are also multiple recreational open space areas owned and operated by corporations, employee associations, benevolent associations, and nonprofit social agencies. These private facilities reduce the burden on the public sector, provide additional opportunities, and help to preserve thousands of acres of land in open space. They complement activities and experiences offered by the public sector.

Nonprofit Partners

Nonprofit organizations, such as the Parks and Trails Council of Minnesota, the Trust for Public Land, and the Nature Conservancy, have a long history of supporting the outdoor recreation system in the region by protecting and restoring natural areas and wetlands, helping to acquire park land, and advocating for the importance of recreation and open space.

Figure 2-1. National and State Recreation Lands
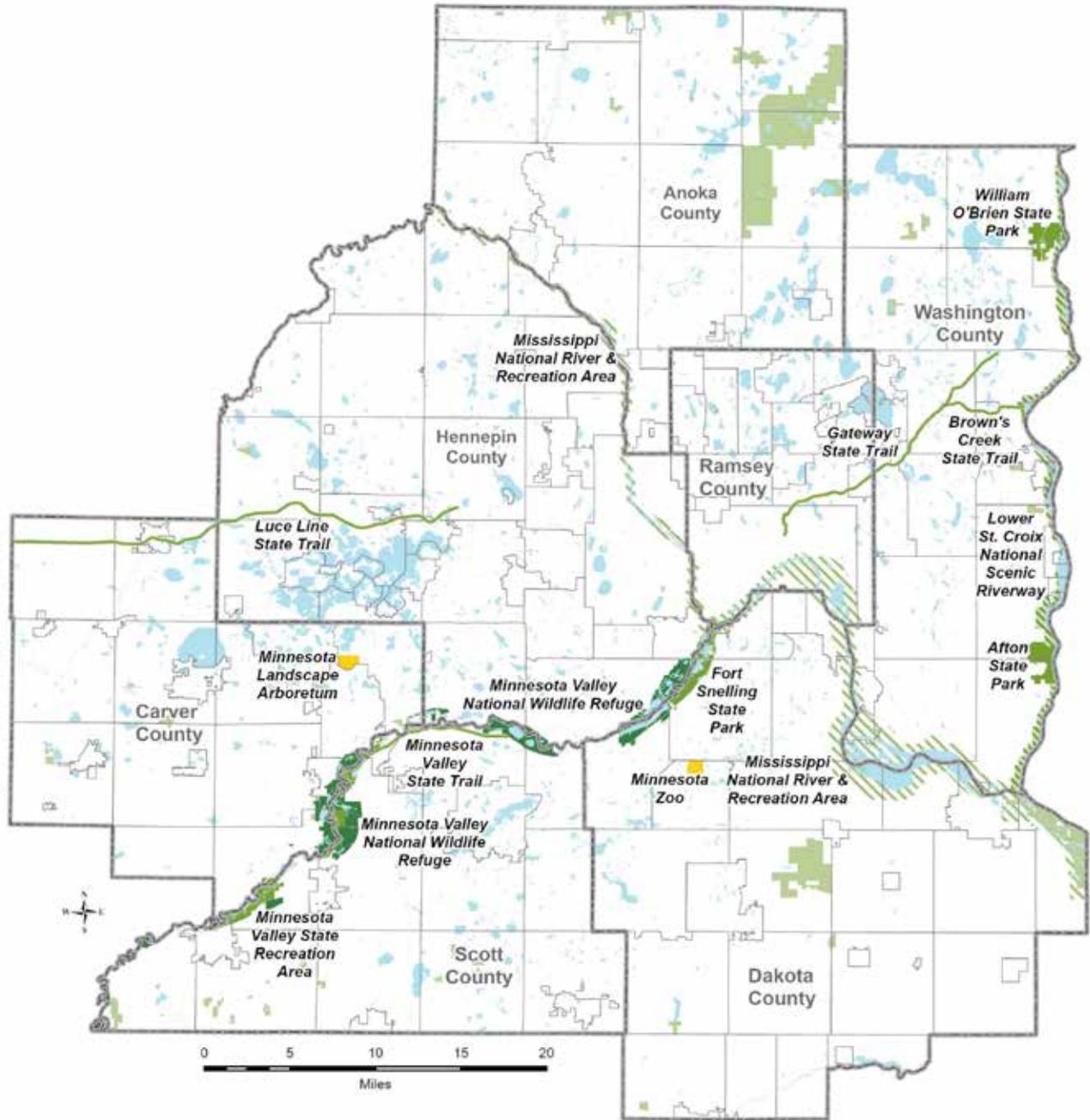
Legend:
- State Trails
- Mississippi National River & Recreation Area
- Lower St. Croix National Scenic Riverway
- MN Valley National Wildlife Refuge
- State Parks
- Minnesota Valley State Trail and Recreation Area
- State Wildlife Management Areas
- Special State Recreation Features
- County Boundaries
- City and Township Boundaries
- Lakes and Rivers

Regional Parks and Trails Mapping by Implementing Agency

Implementing Agency Regional Park and Trail maps will be located on the Metropolitan Council website located at https://metrocouncil.org later in 2026.

- Anoka County

- City of Bloomington

- Carver County

- Dakota County

- Minneapolis Park and Recreation Board

- Ramsey County

- City of Saint Paul

- Scott County

- Three Rivers Park District

- Washington County

SECTION 3: NATURAL SYSTEMS

The Regional Parks and Trails System serves as a nature-based recreation system that protects high-quality natural areas. With a focus on the protection, restoration, and enhancement of natural systems, the Met Council is committed to working collaboratively with the ten regional park implementing agencies to strategically locate and acquire lands for the Regional Parks and Trails System to ensure high-quality opportunities and access for all visitors.

Locating and Acquisition

The legislative charge to the Met Council is to prepare a policy plan that "…shall identify generally the areas which should be acquired by a public agency to provide a system of regional recreation open space comprising park district, county and municipal facilities, which together with state facilities, reasonably will meet the outdoor recreation needs of the people of the metropolitan area and shall establish priorities for acquisition and development" (Minnesota Statutes, section 473.147, subd. 1).

The Met Council uses a system addition process to identify and include regionally significant areas for the Regional Parks and Trails System, and to provide a balanced network of outdoor recreation opportunities across the region.

Process and Criteria Overview for Policy Plan and Long-Range Plan System Additions

The Met Council evaluates park and trail land additions through policy plan updates and long-range plan amendments.

Some policy plan updates feature new regional units that are evaluated through a system addition process in partnership with the 10 park implementing agencies. This process is organized to assess and determine whether the proposed additions are of regional significance and will help provide a balanced system of public outdoor recreation for the metro region.

Long-range plan amendments may include new park and trail land additions to existing long-range plans. These proposals are considered within the context of the boundary adjustment thresholds in Table 5-1.

The process of adding a new park or trail or expanding an existing one is illustrated in Figure 3.1. Major considerations in determining what lands should be brought into the Regional Parks and Trails System are organized around three primary factors:

- **Natural systems foundation:** Acquiring lands that protect or restore natural features, help protect or improve water quality, provide wildlife habitat, and/or offer opportunities for outdoor recreation

- **Geographic distribution:** Ensuring regional park and trail facilities are evenly distributed around the region or distributed in proportion to the existing and forecasted population

- **Equity:** The ability to strengthen equitable use of regional parks and trails by all our region's residents regardless of age, race, ethnicity, income, national origin, and ability

Adding a unit to the Regional Parks and Trails System or substantially modifying a long-range plan boundary outside of a Regional Parks and Trails Policy Plan update requires the Met Council to conduct a formal policy plan amendment process that includes a public hearing conducted under the requirements of Minnesota Statutes, section 473.147. See Section 5, Planning, under the Boundary Adjustments sub-header later in this handbook for more information about adding to and expanding the Regional Parks and Trails System.

The Met Council convenes an evaluation process where the proposed idea may be considered within a larger regional context, recognizing that all system additions increase the total cost to complete the Regional Parks and Trails System, as outlined in Section 2 of the Policy Chapter.

Figure 3.1: System Additions Evaluation Processes
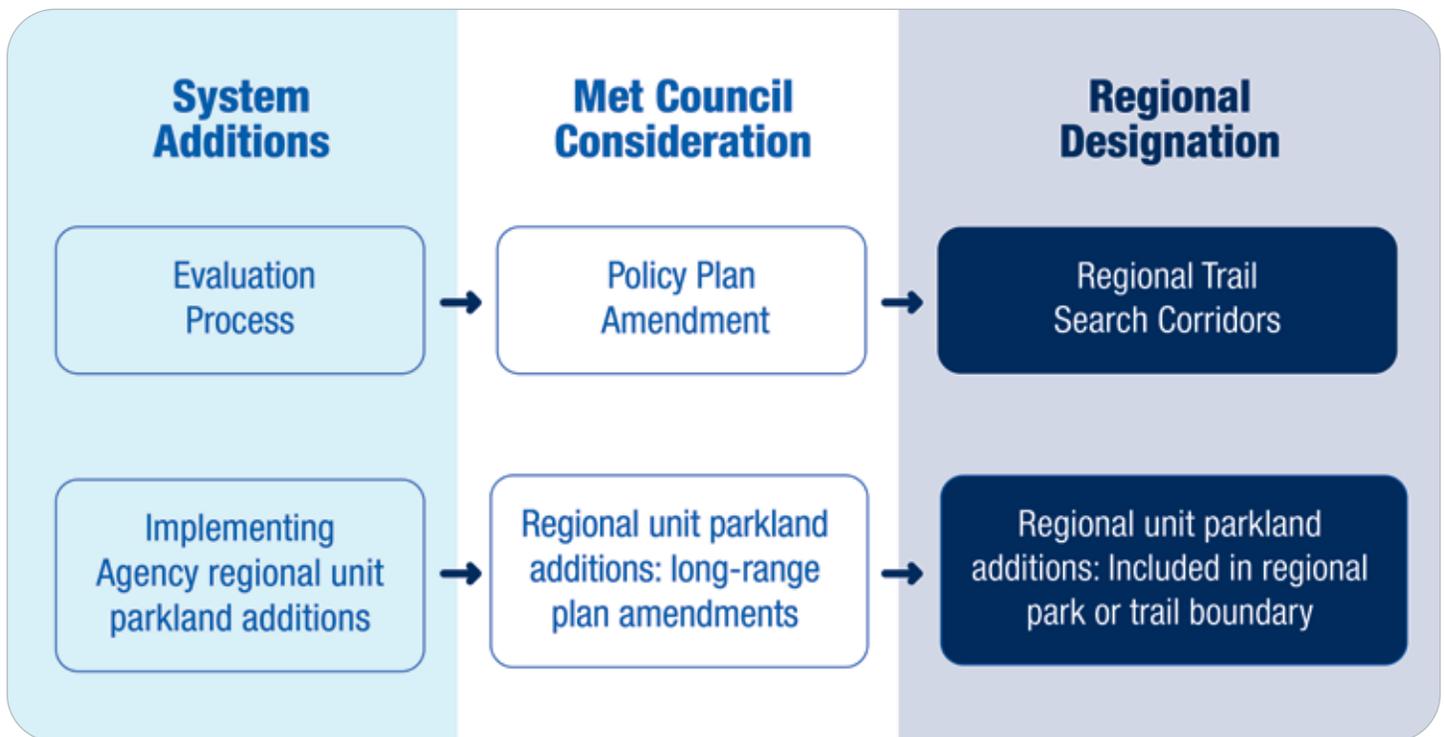
Regional Park and Trail Study Areas

Typically, new regional parks and trails are proposed as search areas or search corridors based on high-quality natural features or desired connections between units of the Regional Parks and Trails System and other destinations. However, there are instances when a regional park implementing agency will propose that an existing park or trail become part of the Regional Parks and Trails System. Such proposals may meet approval if the existing park or trail is able to fill a gap in the Regional Parks and Trails System in relation to the three primary factors listed above (natural systems, geographic distribution, and equity). For example, a park located in the urban core may not have high-quality natural features but may provide opportunities for historically underserved communities through proximity, recreation, community affinity, or programming opportunities.

Sometimes prior to the system additions process, a candidate park or trail is identified as a "Study Area" because Met Council staff need time to assess whether the proposed addition is of regional significance. The proposed area for consideration is called a "regional park or trail study area." This designation does not guarantee that a park will become part of the Regional Parks and Trails System. It simply means that the Met Council, in coordination with the regional park implementing agency who has proposed the addition, will conduct a study to determine whether the facility warrants regional status. Once these studies are complete, the information will be presented to the Metropolitan Parks and Open Space Commission and the Met Council for evaluation.

The Met Council regularly conducts visitor use studies to understand visitor use patterns, among other things. A key metric measured is local and nonlocal visitation. A local visit means the visit is by someone living within the regional park implementing agency's jurisdiction. Nonlocal visits are by people who live outside the park's implementing agency jurisdiction. Nonlocal visitation is one important variable in several of the regional parks funding program formulas.

The 2021 visitor study showed that the average percentage of nonlocal visits across the Regional Parks and Trails System was about 38%. As our region continues to grow, and as residents become more aware of the impacts of climate change and a desire to reduce their carbon footprint, staff project that nonlocal visits will continue to decline as visitors choose parks and trails closer to their home. Met Council staff will continue to observe and evaluate nonlocal visitation to ensure this criterion is relevant and appropriate for future Regional Parks and Trails System additions.

Met Council staff, in collaboration with the 10 regional park implementing agencies, are preparing the 2025 Visitor Study. This study will again measure local and nonlocal visits and compare the findings to those from the 2021 study. Staff will continue monitoring and reporting on these evolving trends and share insights with the Met Council and park agencies for future decision-making.

Process for Moving from "Search Area" to "Planned" to "Open to the Public"

Regional parks and trails with a search area or search corridor designation are considered part of the Regional Parks and Trails System, but they are ineligible for regional funding until the implementing agency completes a long-range plan for the unit and the Met Council approves it. These areas and corridors are defined in intentionally vague terms as they rely on the long-range planning process to identify future boundaries.

After the adoption of the long-range plan, the implementing agency may begin to assemble the land needed for the unit. This process may take one significant acquisition, or it may take a number of years. Once the unit reaches a point of critical mass, the Met Council in consultation with the regional park implementing agency, will determine it "open to the public." Once it reaches this point, it's added to the annual use estimate for the system (it should be noted that the "open to public" status will not be reflected in the policy plan until the next update).

More information about the long-range planning process can be found in Section 5 of this handbook.

SECTION 4: CLIMATE RESILIENCE

This section was added as a placeholder for future parks and trails climate resilience procedures. Since the climate resilience policy and its associated actions are new with Imagine 2050, it will take time to develop and operationalize the procedures necessary to implement them.

SECTION 5: PLANNING

The 2050 Regional Parks and Trails Policy Plan underscores the importance of long-range planning in fostering a welcoming, vibrant, and resilient parks and trails system. By promoting integrated resource planning across jurisdictions, we help ensure that our region's natural systems are preserved and enhanced for current and future generations. Collaborative efforts and long-range planning are essential for addressing the evolving needs of our diverse communities, caring for our natural systems, and enhancing the quality of life for all residents and visitors in the region.

Regional park implementing agencies are required by the Met Council to prepare a long-range plan for each Regional Parks and Trails System unit that they own and/or operate. Long-range plans are high-level planning documents that generally show a regional park or trail unit's boundaries, development concept, and where future acquisitions are desired. Long-range plans are conceptual in nature and they work in concert with an implementing agency's more detailed geographical information system (GIS) dataset, that is submitted through an annual Met Council-coordinated process. The Met Council reviews long-range plans for consistency with Imagine 2050, the requirements in this section of the Planning Handbook, and other policies and systems.

The following section summarizes the different types of long-range plans, the planning process review timeline (Figure 5-1), and the individual planning requirements.

Long-Range Plans:

Long-range plans

Long-range plans are subject to all plan requirements and Met Council Committee Review.

Acquisition long-range plans

Acquisition long-range plans are done to help secure park or trail lands quickly and as an initial step to establishing the unit. They do not include a development concept. The park implementing agencies will commit to doing this work as part of a future plan or plan amendment.

Figure 5-1. Type of Long-Range Plan Council Review Process Timeline
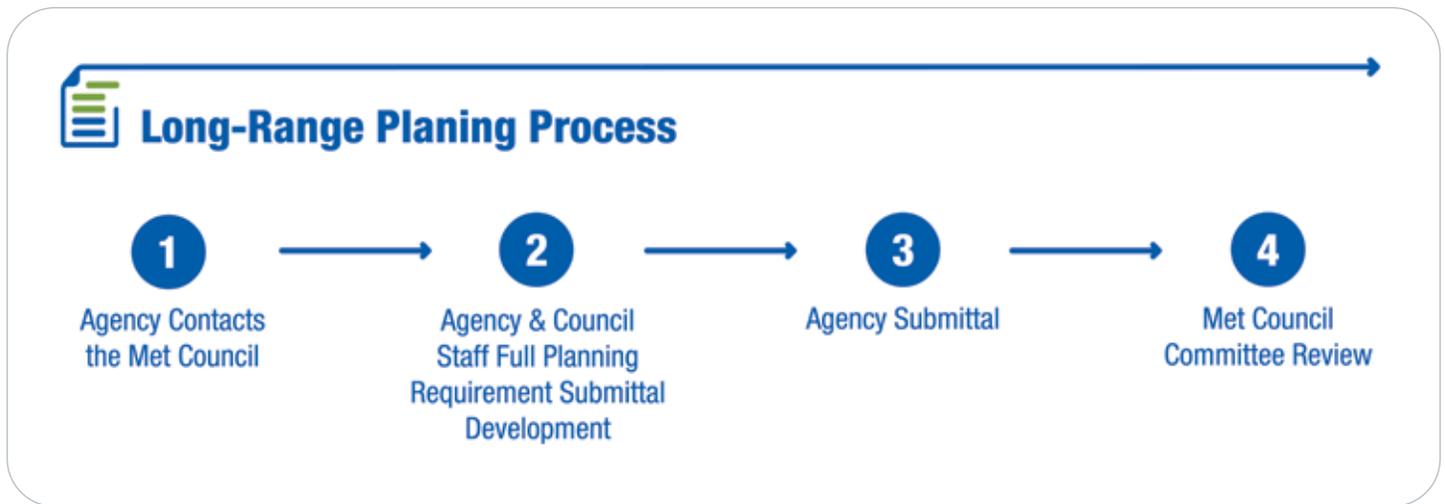
Design Considerations for Long-Range Plans

The planning handbook incorporates policy direction from Imagine 2050 to:

- Promote expanded multimodal access to regional parks, regional trails, and the transit network.

- Acknowledge the range of recreation opportunities throughout the region by encouraging context-sensitive and nature-based approaches to designing facilities.

- Develop opportunities, programs, and spaces that strive to uplift community connections to the outdoors while countering barriers and harm placed on underrepresented communities found in the most recent visitor study.

To respond to these goals, regional park implementing agencies are encouraged to consider the following design elements in a regional park or trail long-range plan:

Promote expanded multimodal access:

- Met Council and implementing agencies are encouraged to provide connections to transit stops or park-and-rides when designating the alignment of a regional trail. Implementing agencies are encouraged to collaborate with Metropolitan Transportation Services and Met Council Parks and Trails staff early in the regional trail planning process.

- Provide bike racks located near activity areas in regional parks and trails so visitors can safely park their bikes while they recreate.

- Design multiple entrance points to each regional park to make it easier for bicyclists and pedestrians to access the park.

Acknowledge the range of recreation opportunities:

- Regional parks and trails facilities designed with a nature-based, context-sensitive approach fit their setting while using innovative approaches to improve or enhance natural systems. Examples include infiltration basins, green roofs, and permeable surfaces.

- Offer recreation activities that play to the strengths of the regional park or trail's location instead of trying to offer all things to all people. An example is the incorporation of watercraft and swimming access in a regional park located on a lake.

- Relative to areas outside of the Metropolitan Urban Service Area, encourage more development in regional parks and trails within the area to provide diverse recreation opportunities and settings, helping to ensure everyone's needs are met across the Regional Parks and Trails System.

Develop opportunities, programs, and spaces that strive to uplift community connections to the outdoors:

- Use universal design in regional park and trail facility designs.

- Establish gender neutral bathrooms and provide bathrooms with running water.

- Provide adequate seating and improved lighting along trails.

- Enhance wayfinding to make it easier for visitors to navigate within and across systems.

- Promote signs that use Indigenized and non-Western design elements developed in consultation with Indigenous people, youth, and historically excluded communities.

Long-Range Plan Requirements

Each long-range plan for regional parks, park reserves, special features, and regional trails must include specific information or requirements. Please note: requirements may differ from one classification to another. For example, regional parks, park reserves, and special features may have different requirements than regional trails.

Requirements that are unique to regional parks, park reserves, and special features are accompanied by a tree symbol

Requirements that are unique to regional trails are accompanied by a trail symbol

Long-range plan requirements are grouped into three major areas and include a subset of required content areas including Engagement, Development Concept, and Natural Systems.

Checklists are provided for each of the main areas at the end of each content area (engagement, development concept, and natural systems) to provide a quick snapshot of the long-range plan requirements. Implementing agencies should refer to the full narrative descriptions to ensure each of these plan sections meets the required level of detail.

Long-Range Plan Requirements – High-Level Checklist

- ☐ **Engagement**
  - ☐ Demand forecast
  - ☐ Public and partner engagement and equity analysis
- ☐ **Development Concept**
  - ☐ Boundaries
  - ☐ Acquisition costs
  - ☐ Development concept
  - ☐ Accessibility
  - ☐ Operations
  - ☐ Public services
- ☐ **Natural Systems**
  - ☐ Natural systems
  - ☐ Mississippi Corridor Critical Area

Engagement

Demand Forecast

The demand forecast estimates the future demand to be met by the unit as identified by the Met Council, the regional park implementing agency, or other sources. This requirement is typically met by including:

- A current or recent visitor estimate or a service area population.

- A projection of how the visitor estimate or service area population is expected to grow.

- A statement that the regional park or trail serves a need, or that the proposed expansion responds to the forecasted need.

For the projection of population, Met Council population data and local forecasts must be used to estimate this demand. Met Council publishes county-level, city and town-level, and sub-city zone-level forecasts at www.metrocouncil.org/forecasts. Agencies can request local population estimates and forecasts for a more detailed and customized service-shed.

Public and Partner Engagement and Equity Analysis

For the public and partner engagement requirement, the regional park implementing agency describes the process they conduct for involving the public, local units of government, and other affected agencies including state and/or federal recreation providers in the development of the long-range plan or plan amendment. This process should:

- Ensure that the public and key stakeholders have opportunities to be heard and to influence the plan's contents.

- Engage affected agencies and recreation providers to present and address concerns related to the long-range plan.

  - The submitted plan must include a resolution or letter of support from the regional park implementing agency board. If a resolution or letter of support from the agency board is not provided, the correspondence accompanying plan submittal must address why it is not included and/or the timeframe for obtaining this documented support.

  - Resolutions or letters of support are strongly encouraged from local government units that underlie the planned park or trail unit.

- Include strategies to mitigate racial, ethnic, cultural, and linguistic barriers, and ensure participation from diverse demographic groups such as different ages, races, ethnicities, incomes, national origins, and abilities.

An equity analysis shall be conducted and should include the following elements:

- Project area description:

  - Define the boundaries and demographics of the engagement area, including neighborhoods adjacent to the park or trail, travelsheds, and other relevant information.

  - Provide context on underserved populations and the historical factors leading to present-day inequities. Met Council staff encourage using the Regional Parks and Trails Equity Tool: https://metrotransitmn.shinyapps.io/regional-parks-equity-tool/.

- Engagement with underserved populations:

  - Identify stakeholders, including youth, Black, Indigenous, and people of color communities, people with disabilities, low-income populations, people 65 years of age and older, and other relevant community groups.

  - Detail engagement strategies used for each stakeholder group. Please consider culturally competent and community representative staffing, training, engagement locations and times, and communication methods in planning and implementing engagement opportunities. Met Council staff encourage using the International Association for Public Participation's Public Participation Spectrum as a resource: https://cdn.ymaws.com/www.iap2.org/resource/resmgr/pillars/Spectrum_8.5x11_Print.pdf

- Summary and accountability:

  - Include a summary of comments received, issues raised, and how engagement influenced the plan's content, especially the plan's development concept. Summarize what strategies worked well and what strategies were less effective.

  - Outline accountability measures for creating better outcomes, including regional and local access, quality of experience, facility rules/policies (including affordability), public awareness (plans for making the people aware of the services available when the unit is open), and reporting back to stakeholders.

Engagement Checklist (same for both parks and trails)

☐ **Demand Forecast**
- ☐ Current/recent visitor estimate or service area population
- ☐ Projection of how the visitor estimate/service area is expected to grow
- ☐ Statement of need

☐ **Public Awareness**
- ☐ Description of plans for making the public aware of services available, if applicable

☐ **Public and Partner Engagement and Equity Analysis**
- ☐ Description of engagement process
  - Includes engagement with the public, key stakeholders, and affected agencies
  - Includes strategies to mitigate racial, ethnic, cultural, and linguistic barriers, and ensure participation from diverse demographic groups
- ☐ Equity analysis
  - Project area description
  - Engagement with underserved populations
  - Summary and accountability

Development Concept

Boundaries

For parks, a map showing the administrative boundary for the unit must be included. It should include agency-owned acres (management boundary) and private inholdings that represent the desired boundary of the proposed parkland managed by the agency.

For trails, a map showing the trail corridor boundary must be included. It should include agency-owned acres (management boundary) and anticipated private inholdings associated with the trail route that establish the desired administrative boundary of the land to be managed by the agency.

Acquisition Plan

The concept should include a list of parcels or real property to be acquired and the estimated total cost, including a description of the natural features, site suitability, special assessments, potential contamination based on data from the Minnesota Pollution Control Agency, and other conditions that affect acquisition of the site or location of the boundaries. It should also have a description of the agency ownership and management arrangement.

The concept should include a list of anticipated parcels or real property to be acquired when known and their estimated total acquisition cost, including a description of the natural features, site suitability, special assessments, potential contamination based on data from the Minnesota Pollution Control Agency, and other conditions that affect acquisition of the site or location of the boundaries. It should also include a description of the ownership and management arrangement.

Development Concept

A plan for recreational development and natural resource management should include:

- A description and a map showing the location of planned development and natural resources management projects.

- Approximate capacity of each facility.

- A map of existing and planned local and regional trail connections to the site and information on how they relate to development within the park.

- A general wayfinding signage plan that reflects what was learned during the public engagement process, where applicable, including approximate locations within the park.

- Estimated timing and estimated costs associated with each project.

A plan for development, including the estimated timing and estimated costs associated with the project, recognizing these estimates may change over time and that funding priorities may shift. The plan should include:

- A map showing the regional trail alignment in relation to the roadway or other land uses, intersection crossings, and other regional and local parks and trails. If interim or alternative trail alignments are proposed for certain trail segments, please label them on a map and describe them in the plan.

- A cross-section graphic showing the trail's separation from the road.

- A general wayfinding signage plan that reflects what was learned during the public engagement process, where applicable, including approximate locations along the trail corridor.

Accessibility

A plan that addresses accessibility and other measures designed to ensure that the facility can be used by people with limited mobility. All new and updated long-range plans for the Regional Parks and Trails System must address compliance with the Americans with Disabilities Act (ADA). Met Council staff encourage regional park implementing agencies to use U.S. Access Board guidelines for Outdoor Developed Areas as a minimum standard of accessibility on all new or substantially altered capital projects within the Regional Parks and Trails System: https://www.access-board.gov/aba/guides/chapter-10-outdoor/

Operations

Provide estimated operations and maintenance costs as well as sources of revenue to operate and maintain recreation facilities, including costs for managing natural resources. The operations section may indicate how energy to operate and maintain the park unit is being managed and conserved, including climate friendly renewable energy approaches.

Provide estimated operations and maintenance costs and sources of revenue to operate and maintain the trail, including costs for managing natural resources, where applicable. The operations section may indicate how energy to operate and maintain the trail unit is being managed and conserved, including climate friendly renewable energy approaches.

Public Services

Provide a description of any nonrecreational public services and facilities, such as transit, utilities, roads, or sewers, needed to accommodate the proposed recreational use. In addition, provide information on how to access the location by transit, if applicable. Regional park implementing agencies are encouraged to include transportation and transit planners in the development of a long-range plan.

If there is a need for regional wastewater services, provide a description. If regional wastewater services are not needed, please note that in this part of the long-range plan.

Development Concept Checklist

☐ **Parks**

    ☐ Administrative boundary map

    ☐ Acquisition plan

        ☐ Parcels or real property to be acquired

    ☐ Development concept

        ☐ Description and map of planned development

        ☐ Capacity of each facility

        ☐ Map of existing/planned trail connections

        ☐ Wayfinding signage plan

        ☐ Drinking water source and locations

        ☐ Schedule and cost estimate for each project

        ☐ Evidence of resolved conflicts with natural resource management

    ☐ Accessibility plan

    ☐ Operations plan

        ☐ Operations and maintenance costs as well as sources of revenue to operate and maintain recreation facilities

    ☐ Public services needed to accommodate recreational use

☐ **Trails**

    ☐ Trail corridor boundary map

    ☐ Acquisition plan

        ☐ Parcels or real property to be acquired

    ☐ Development concept

        ☐ Estimated timing and costs associated with the project

        ☐ Map showing regional trail alignment in relation to the roadway/other land uses, intersection crossings, and other regional and local parks/trails

        ☐ Cross section graphic

        ☐ Wayfinding signage plan

    ☐ Accessibility plan

    ☐ Operations plan

        ☐ Operations and maintenance costs as well as sources of revenue to operate and maintain recreation facilities

    ☐ Public services needed to accommodate recreational use

Natural Systems

Natural Systems

A plan or program for managing and restoring natural resource features of the regional park, park reserve, special feature, or regional destination trail must be included. Note: A Natural Systems component is not required for regional linking trail long-range plans.

This plan or program should include the following components:

Natural Resources Inventory

A natural resources inventory should include a land cover inventory that is consistent with the Minnesota Land Cover Classification System by the Minnesota Department of Natural Resources and MetroGIS. The natural resources inventory should also include native plant communities mapped in the Minnesota County Biological Survey.

This section should also include listed species. Please visit the Minnesota Department of Natural Resources' Natural Heritage Information system to identify and help protect rare, endangered, and threatened species.

Landscape Management, Restoration, and Maintenance

The natural resources inventory should be a basis for projects and proposals to maintain high-quality natural resource features and restore degraded resources, including the estimated capital costs for natural resource restoration projects.

Regional park implementing agencies should consult with natural resource professionals in designing and constructing park facilities, especially for trails that are adjacent to or traverse natural resource areas. The final design and construction of a park or trail should allow the public to view and enjoy these natural areas with minimal adverse impact.

The Natural Systems component should also include information on how vegetation will be managed. The Met Council encourages regional park implementing agencies to select and manage vegetation to enhance resilience to climate changes, including using native species that are more tolerant of climate variability.

Water Resource Protection

The plan should include information on how surface water and groundwater resources in the unit, including wetlands, will be protected. The Met Council encourages regional park implementing agencies to use Minnesota Pollution Control Agency's Minnesota Stormwater Manual: https://stormwater.pca.state.mn.us/index.php?title=Main_Page

The long-range plan should include provisions to, avoid wetland impacts; second, minimize impacts, and mitigate impacts when no other options are available.

The Met Council also encourages implementing agencies to integrate water management practices that enhance the area's resilience to extreme weather events and climate variability.

Mississippi River Corridor Critical Area

This requirement only applies to regional parks, park reserves, special features, and regional trails located in part or wholly within the Mississippi River Corridor Critical Area.

Long-range plans must:

- Acknowledge the purposes of the corridor critical area designation as detailed in Minnesota Statutes, section 116G.15, subd. 1.

- Acknowledge the standards and criteria for the preservation, protection, and management of lands within the critical area in Minn. Rule Chapters 6106.0010 – 6106.0180.

- Map the location of the parkland and its relationship with the critical area boundary.

- Recognize that the design and construction of park facilities must comply with the standards contained in Minn. Rules 6106.0130.

- Plan, design, and construct facilities and projects in a manner that protects primary conservation areas and public river corridor views identified by local units of government in their comprehensive plans.

Natural Systems Checklist (same for both parks and trails)*

☐ **Natural Systems**

    ☐ Natural Resources Inventory

- Land cover inventory

- Native plant communities map

    ☐ Landscape management, restoration, and maintenance

- Estimated capital costs for natural resource restoration projects

- Vegetation management plan

    ☐ Water Resource Protection

- Information on how surface water and groundwater resources will be protected

    ☐ Mississippi River Corridor Critical Area

*Plans for regional linking trails do not require completion of Natural Systems requirements.

Acquisition Long-Range Plan Criteria and Process

Once the Met Council designates a unit to be a part of the Regional Parks and Trails System, the regional park implementing agency conducts a long-range planning process. There are times when the agency has an opportunity to acquire – or protect under an option to purchase – land that does not yet have a development concept, which is one of the requirements for long-range planning. In these situations, the regional park implementing agency may choose to develop an acquisition long-range plan, to establish the long-range plan boundary or to adjust an existing Met Council-approved long-range plan boundary. The acquisition long-range plan or amendment may focus solely on the land under option to purchase. The Met Council must approve the acquisition long-range plan prior to acquisition. Acquisition long-range plans should include:

- A demonstration of the proposed unit's consistency with Section 3: Natural Systems including size/ service area requirements in Section 2: System Plan.

- A map showing the proposed unit's boundaries or for existing units, the parcels to be added to the long-range plan boundary in relation to the existing administrative and management boundaries of the park or trail. Additionally, a description of the future ownership and/or management arrangement.

- A list of parcels to be acquired and the estimated total cost and schedule for their acquisition, and information on natural resources, site suitability, special assessments, potential contamination based on data from the Minnesota Pollution Control Agency and other conditions that affect acquisition of the site or location of the boundaries.

- A demonstration of implementing agency board approval and other support from partner agencies.

Once the regional park implementing agency completes a full long-range plan, they may move forward with the unit's development concept and access financial assistance from the Met Council's grant programs.

Long-Range Plan Amendments Criteria and Process

Minnesota Statutes, section 473.313 requires long-range plans be developed by the park implementing agencies consistent with the Regional Parks and Trails Policy Plan. However, it does not specify when revisions are necessary. As referenced in the policy plan, the regional park implementing agency will submit a long-range plan amendment to the Met Council to change its original proposal for acquisition and/or development, or when the agency has developed significant additional details that need to be reflected in the long-range plan. The Met Council may approve or reject the long-range plan amendment for cause and return the plan to the regional park implementing agency for revisions to address Met Council concerns.

Regional park implementing agencies must provide an opportunity for the public and affected local units of government near the particular park or trail to participate in the process to amend a long-range plan. With regard to financing the construction of recreation and visitor support facilities proposed in a long-range plan,

it is important that there is sufficient detail about the facility included in the plan and that the regional park implementing agency is ready to construct the facility when funds become available. If a long-range plan amendment is needed before funding the construction of a facility, the regional park implementing agency must provide the public and affected local units of government an opportunity to participate in the process as well.

There are several reasons that long-range plan amendments are required to demonstrate how changes to the Regional Parks and Trails System remain consistent with the Met Council's expectations as outlined in this plan. They include, but are not limited to:

- Improvements that substantially differ in type, size, or scale, from those in the Met Council-approved long-range plan but that are needed to meet expanded recreational demands or satisfy quality standards.

- Changes in development concept or acquisition plan.

- Changes to a park or trail boundary.

- Changes in ownership, management, or operations.

- Proposals for placement of telecommunications towers on Regional Parks and Trails System land (see Section 6: System Protection - Telecommunications towers evaluation process in this handbook).

There are a number of types of regional park and trail long-range plan amendments (Figure 5-3). Depending on the type of long-range plan amendment, the Metropolitan Parks and Open Space Commission and Met Council will review the long-range plan amendment for consistency with the criteria of this policy and either approve, modify, or reject the long-range plan amendment. A list of Met Council review processes are shown in Figure 5-4.

Long-Range Plan Amendments:

- Amendments to an existing long-range plan can range from minor housekeeping changes to significant changes in the development concept or acquisition plan.

- Acquisition long-range plan amendments help secure park or trail lands quickly to an existing regional unit. They do not include a development concept. The park implementing agencies will commit to this work as part of a future plan or plan amendment.

- Boundary adjustments add park or trail land or adjust trail alignments. Refer to the plan amendment boundary adjustment criteria and process in this section and Table 5-1. for boundary thresholds.

- Land conversions are park or trail land removals with equally valuable park or trail land replacements, or in rare instances provide facility replacements. Refer to Section 6, System Protection for more information.

Figure 5-3. Types of Regional Parks and Trails Long-Range Plans Amendments

Long-Range Plan Amendments

| Amendments to an existing long-range plan can range from minor housekeeping changes to significant changes in the development concept or acquisition plan. | Acquisition long-range plan amendments may add park or trail land to an existing regional unit. The park agency commits to creating a development concept in a future amendment. | Boundary adjustments land park or trail and or adjust trail alignments for an existing regional unit. | Land conversions are parkland removals from an existing regional unit with equally valuable parkland replacements. |

Types of Met Council Amendment Review Processes:

- Administrative amendments are for minor changes or proposals to an existing regional unit's long-range plan that have no material change to the regional park or trail. These amendments are conducted by Met Council staff. These administrative amendments are for limited circumstances, and they are not required to be presented to the regular Met Council committees for review and approval.

- Focused amendments are for minor changes to an existing long-range plan that may only impact a subset of long-range plan requirement areas. Focused long-range plan amendments are considered through the Met Council committee process with a typical 60-day duration.

- Full amendments change its original proposal for acquisition and/or development, or when the agency has developed significant additional details that need to be reflected in the long-range plan. Full long-range plan amendments are considered through the Met Council committee process with a typical 60-day duration.

- Policy plan amendments exceed the threshold criteria in Table 5-1. and also include regional unit name changes.

Figure 5-4. Types of Long-Range Plan Amendment Met Council Processes
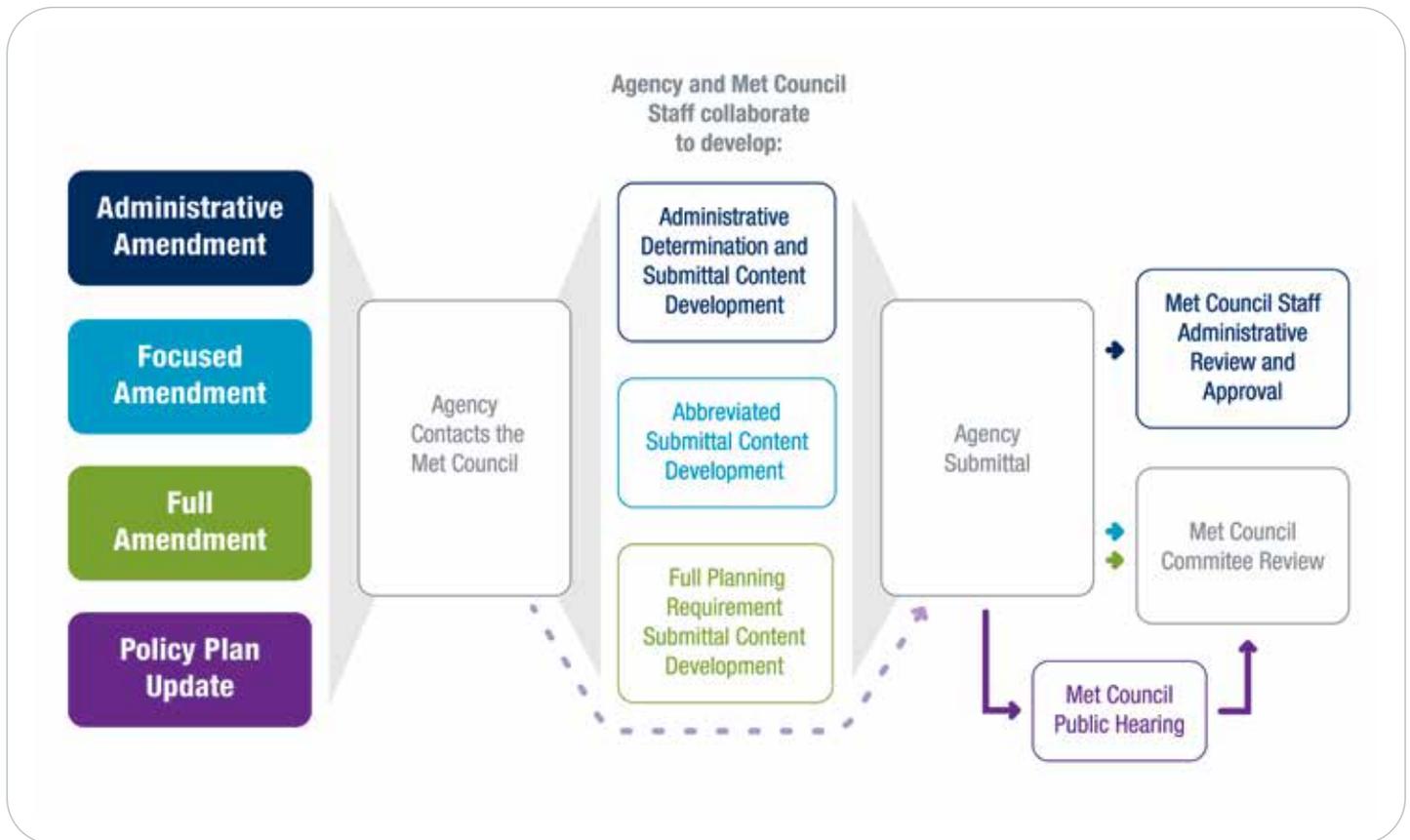
Plan Amendment Boundary Adjustment Criteria and Process

Boundary adjustments are additions or removals of land from an existing Met Council-approved long-range plan's management boundary. The Met Council will consider boundary adjustment proposals through the following amendment processes and criteria outlined in Table 5-1. All other proposals will be considered by the Met Council through the policy plan amendment process. When boundary adjustments arise, agency and Met Council staff will work through a consultation process to determine the most appropriate path forward.

Concurrent with an amendment process and criteria, boundary adjustment proposals must also include:

- A description of the purpose for the change and the extenuating circumstances.

- A map identifying the current boundary and the proposed boundary.

- A demonstration of the proposal's consistency with:

  - Park and trail classifications (Policy Plan, Section 2 System Plan, Action 1 Classifications).

  - Locating and acquisition criteria (Planning Handbook, Section 3: Natural Systems, Action 1 Locate and Acquire Land).

If the Met Council approves the boundary adjustment request, then the new parcel will be eligible for applicable regional funding sources.

Table 5-1: Boundary Adjustment Threshold Summary

Plan Amendments: Boundary Adjustment Criteria and Process – Eligibility Threshold Summary		
Scale of Amendment	**Regional parks, Park reserves Special features, Regional trail corridor land**	**Regional trails alignments**
Minor - Administrative Approval of Long-Range Plan Amendment	• Minor correction to a mapping or design error affecting less than 1% of unit's total management boundary acreage • Proposes a park or trail boundary adjustment, public-to-public land exchange, or an acquisition long-range plan amendment that changes the management boundary by less than five acres; and the land addition/removal is valued up to $750,000 total	Trail realignment alters up to one mile of trail and is within one mile of the original alignment but does not alter the start and end points of the trail.
Limited in scope - Focused Long-Range Plan Amendment, Acquisition Long-Range Plan or Land Conversion	A limited in scope plan amendment that meets one of the following two criteria, whichever is greater: • Affects less than 100 acres of the total management boundary acreage • Affects less than 20% of the total management boundary acreage	A limited in scope plan amendment that meets one of the following two criteria: • Trail realignment is up to 1.5 miles from the original alignment • Proposed trail extension is up to one mile, and it enables connections to existing or future regional units, trailheads, or other important regional destinations.
Full scope - Regular Long-Range Plan Amendment	A full scope plan amendment that significantly changes the earlier proposal for acquisition and/or development and exceeds the thresholds for a focused long-range plan amendment (above)	A full scope plan amendment that significantly alters the earlier trail alignment and exceeds the thresholds for a focused long-range plan amendment (above)
Major - Policy Plan Amendment	Meets one of the following two criteria: • Exceeds plan amendment criteria • Proposes new regional park study area or search area	Meets one of the following two criteria: • Exceeds plan amendment criteria • Proposes new trail

Please note, Met Council staff will consider the requirements of any Met Council or State funding restrictions.

**Amendments meeting the criteria above may still be required to have full Met Council review if determined necessary by Met Council staff.*

Focused Long-Range Plan Amendments

Occasionally, regional park implementing agencies seek to make minor changes to a long-range plan that may only impact a subset of long-range plan requirement areas. The regional park implementing agency should discuss the scope of the desired plan amendment with Met Council staff prior to commencing the amendment process to determine the required subset of long-range plan requirements.

Examples of focused long-range plan amendments include Battle Creek Regional Park – Pigs Eye Lake (2021-68) and Minnesota River Greenway Regional Trail – Fort Snelling State Park segment (2021-342). The Battle Creek Regional Park – Pigs Eye Lake amendment followed a feasibility study on the implementation of islands within Pigs Eye Lake, which are intended to improve aquatic habitat, improve the quantity and quality of habitat for migratory bird species, and enhance the quantity of shoreline habitat. The amendment focused primarily on natural resources and public safety improvements, and did not address park acquisition, boundary adjustments, recreation infrastructure, or access.

The Minnesota River Greenway Regional Trail – Fort Snelling State Park segment amendment followed Met Council review of an Environmental Assessment Worksheet submitted by Dakota County. The amendment included a cooperative use agreement between Dakota County and the Minnesota Department of Natural Resources that allows for the regional trail segment to travel through state property. The amendment focused on the development concept, conflicts, and accessibility. Other typical long-range plan elements were not required as the existing regional trail plan was deemed sufficiently complete in these areas.

Prior to the submittal of each of these long-range plan amendments to the Met Council, regional park implementing agency staff worked closely with Met Council staff to identify the requirements of the focused amendment.

Focused long-range plan amendments are considered through the Met Council committee process, typically lasting 60 days.

Administrative Process for Minor Long-Range Plan Amendments

Administrative reviews of minor long-range plan amendments will be conducted by Met Council staff with delegated authority granted by the Met Council, and they are not required to be presented to the regular Met Council committees for review and approval. Amendments reviewed administratively must meet all relevant proposed criteria adopted by the Met Council, including:

1. **Consistency:** Consistent with Minn. Stat. § 473.313 requirements and be determined to be complete for review by the Met Council.

   - Conforms to the regional systems plans

   - Consistent with Met Council policies, including Imagine 2050 and parks policies

2. **Minor in scope:** Does not change the acquisition and/or development concept.

3. **Subject of the amendment:**

   a. **Corrections:** Proposes corrections to a minor mapping or design error affecting less than 1% of the unit's total acres of the management boundary.

   b. **Minor regional trail realignments:** Proposes regional trail implementation realignments that alter up to one mile of trail and are within one mile of the original alignment but do not alter the start and end points of the trail.

   c. **Boundary changes:** Proposes a regional park or trail boundary adjustment, public-to-public land exchange, or an acquisition long-range plan amendment that changes the management boundary by less than five acres; and the land addition/removal is valued up to $750,000 total.

   d. **Natural area/utility Met Council consents the items listed below**

   - Natural area monitoring.

   - An easement for a natural area restoration, or enhancement project that affects the management boundary by less than five acres.

   - An underground utility that has no material long-range impacts to the park or trail and affects the management boundary by less than one acre.

4. **Minimal impacts:** Does not have the potential for a cumulative or material impact to the regional park or trail's recreational opportunities, natural areas, or cultural resources.

Please note, Met Council staff will consider the requirements of any Met Council or State funding restrictions in determining whether a proposed candidate is eligible for administrative review.

**Amendments meeting the criteria above may still be required to have full Met Council review if determined necessary by Met Council staff.

There may be instances when Met Council staff direct minor amendment proposals to the regular Met Council Committees, due to political sensitivity or other contextual factors. Administrative review is proposed to be completed within 45 business days once the long-range plan amendment has been deemed complete.

Met Council review of this administrative amendment review program is proposed to take place after two years of its approval; then transition to the four-year Policy Plan update cycle. The Community Development Committee will receive annual administrative approval updates. The Metropolitan Parks and Open Space Commission will receive updates more frequently.

Joint Powers or Similar Agreements

Regional park implementing agencies are encouraged to enter into joint powers or similar agreements with local governments regarding the acquisition, use, operation, and maintenance for focused improvements within Regional Parks and Trails System units.

Joint powers or similar agreements do not need to be identical, but regional park implementing agencies are encouraged to negotiate arrangements that:

- Address who owns, controls, and manages the land under the Regional Parks and Trails System unit improvement.

- Ensure that the unit improvement will be open to all people (not restricted by residence).

The unit improvement should be a truly regional facility since it will be eligible for regional and state funds to finance its acquisition, use, development, and operations/maintenance once the Met Council has approved a long-range plan for the parks system unit.

The duration of the joint powers or similar agreements should last the expected life of the unit improvement. They should be included in a unit's long-range plan as an assurance that any funds provided by the Met Council for improvements would be spent consistently with the approved long-range plan.

Regional trails usually extend through several communities, so they require coordination for segment implementation. Regional parks, park reserves, and special features may coordinate with one or two local governments on specific facility improvements to enhance a Met Council-approved long-range plan. If an improvement to a Regional Parks and Trails System unit occurs on land owned by a local government instead of the regional park implementing agency, the agency may lease the park unit land and manage it through a joint powers or similar agreement with the local jurisdiction.

Regional park implementing agencies should include a copy of any joint powers or similar agreements as part of the long-range plan. This assures the Met Council that any funds it provides or passes on for the parks system unit's acquisition, development, use, or operation and maintenance will be consistent with the approved long-range plan.

SECTION 6: SYSTEM PROTECTION

The Met Council protects acquisition and development public investments by assuring every component in the system is able to fully carry out its designated role as long as a need for it can be demonstrated. There are several mechanisms that protect the integrity of the Regional Parks and Trails System and its individual parts, including regional park and trail long-range plans, restrictive covenants that place restrictions on park and trail land, the Metropolitan Land Planning Act, and metropolitan significance.

Met Council Review Processes

There are four review processes to support implementation of the system protection policy, including:

- Local comprehensive planning: The Local Planning Assistance review of local comprehensive plans ensures that public investments in acquisition and development are consistent with Met Council systems and policies, as well as other agency system plans.

- Land conversion process: The land conversion process considers the conversion of Regional Parks and Trails Systems lands to other uses.

- Telecommunication tower evaluation process: This process helps ensure that telecommunication towers are placed in ways that minimize impacts to the park or trail unit.

- Placement of utilities process: The placement of utilities process helps ensure that utilities are placed in ways that minimize impact to the regional park or trail unit.

Please visit Section 6 of the policy plan for more information about the policies and actions related to these topics.

Local Comprehensive Planning

The policy direction from Imagine 2050 and the Met Council's systems and policy plans – including this planning handbook – provides guidance to local governments in planning for local growth and development. Under state law, each county, city, and township in the seven-county metropolitan area must review and, if necessary, amend its local comprehensive plan at least every 10 years to ensure that the local plan, and local fiscal devices and official controls, conform with the Met Council's metropolitan system plans (Minnesota Statutes 473.864).

Following the decennial adoption of the Regional Parks and Trails Policy Plan, the Met Council will issue system statements inclusive of changes in the system plan as required under the Metropolitan Land Planning Act. Local communities will have three years to update their local comprehensive plans with the changes that are reflective of their system statement. If the Met Council issues system

statements based on a future amendment to the Regional Parks and Trails Policy Plan, local communities have nine months to amend their comprehensive plans (Minnesota Statutes, section 473.856).

Local comprehensive plans are reviewed by the Met Council based on three primary criteria:

- Conformance with metropolitan system plans

- Consistency with Met Council regional policies

- Compatibility with adjacent and affected governmental units

When a plan meets these criteria, the Met Council authorizes it to be placed into effect. If a plan does not meet the review standards, the Met Council may require the jurisdiction to modify its plan to conform to the regional system plans.

Conformance
A local comprehensive plan will conform to the metropolitan system plans if the local plan:

- Accurately reflects the components of the metropolitan system plans.

- Integrates public facility plan components.

- Addresses land use policies, plans for forecasted growth, meets density standards, and maximizes the efficiency and effectiveness of the regional systems.

In their local comprehensive plans, communities need to acknowledge and plan for Regional Parks and Trails System units in their jurisdiction as identified in the 2050 Regional Parks and Trails Policy Plan. The Met Council will review local plans to ensure they will not cause detrimental impacts to Regional Parks and Trails System units and that the plans do not preclude or substantially limit the future acquisition of lands officially identified of the system plan of the 2050 Regional Parks and Trails Policy Plan.

Consistency
Consistency is generally achieved if the local plan addresses the community role for the land use policies in Imagine 2050, including:

- Land Use Policy Plan, Objective 2: Maximize opportunities for growth in places well-served by transit, bicycle, and pedestrian infrastructure. Local communities are encouraged to plan and develop local trail connections to regional trails as identified in the 2050 Regional Parks and Trails Policy Plan and to plan for and connect to the Regional Bicycle Transportation Network as identified in the 2050 Transportation Policy Plan.

  - Policy 3: Plan for and build an interconnected system of vehicular, pedestrian, bicycle, and transit infrastructure that provides comfortable use for all modes and users.

  - Policy 5: Prioritize the preservation, restoration, and enhancement of environmental and natural systems near transportation features and areas where transit is available.

- Land Use Policy Plan, Objective 4: Prioritize land use and development activities that protect, restore, and enhance natural systems at all scales.

  - Policy 2: Establish and connect natural systems corridors through land use, water resources, and conservation planning.

- Addressing the link between local land uses to local parks and open space, as well as the Regional Parks and Trails System.

- An implementation plan describing public programs, fiscal devices, and other specific actions (sequencing and staging activities) that implement the comprehensive plan and ensure conformance with regional system plans.

- Addressing official controls and include a capital improvement program (sewers, parks, transportation, water supply, and open space) that supports planned growth and development.
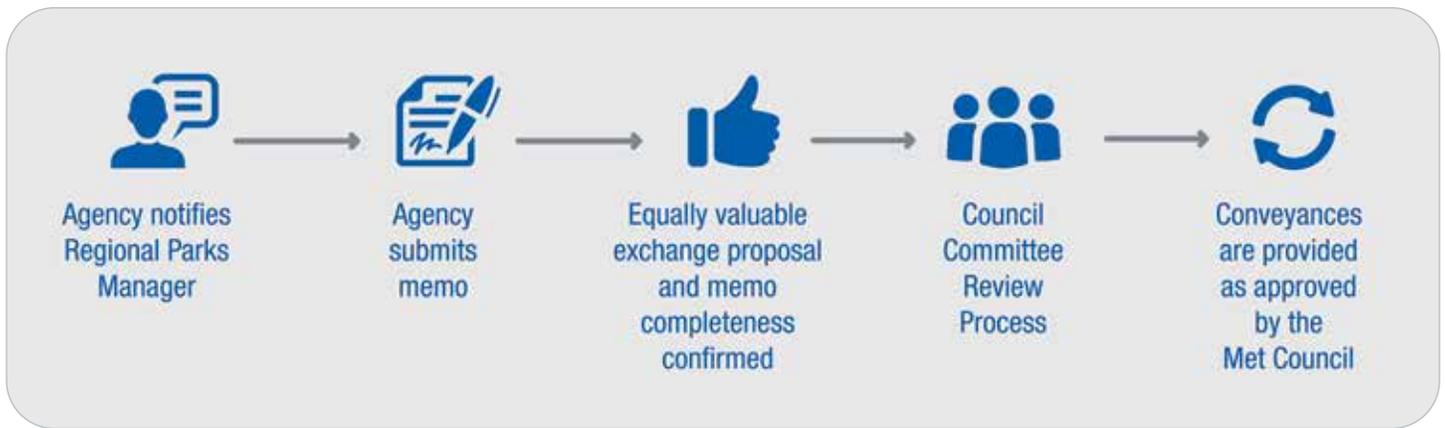
Compatibility

Compatibility with adjacent and affected governmental units is generally achieved if the local plan adequately documents that it has addressed the concern of all adjacent and affected jurisdictions, based on comments or concerns from these entities. As local communities update their comprehensive plans, the Met Council encourages them to identify locally important natural areas for protection through acquisition, conservation easements, and conservation-sensitive development practices, especially in respect to protection and ongoing resiliency of the Regional Parks and Trails System. In addition to planning for the recreational needs of its residents, the Met Council encourages communities to plan local trail connections to the Regional Parks and Trails System. Together, the region, the regional park implementing agencies, local communities, nonprofit organizations, and the private sector can preserve natural areas and enhance multimodal access to regional parks and trails.

Land Conversion Process

Conversion of Regional Parks and Trails System lands to other uses is allowed only in limited circumstances and with prior approval of the Met Council. Land conversion requests are challenging for regional park implementing agencies because they are complex and often originate from reasons outside of the agency's department and control. The Met Council's land conversion approach aims to ensure that any system impacts are evaluated and mitigated fairly and transparently as an equally valuable land exchange is determined. Met Council committees require defensible and compelling stories that include summaries of these requests and desired actions. Met Council staff work closely with regional park implementing agencies to establish workable solutions for each conversion proposal. Please visit Section 6: System Protection in the Regional Parks and Trails Policy Plan for more information about the land conversion policy, actions, and requirements.

Land conversions follow a five-part process that includes the regional park implementing agency and the Met Council agreeing to an equally valuable exchange proposal. Once an agreement is reached, the agency develops a memo summarizing the proposal and the Met Council reviews the proposal. Conveyances are provided once approved by the Met Council (Figure 6-1).

Figure 6-1 Land Conversion Process

Agency notifies Regional Parks Manager → Agency submits memo → Equally valuable exchange proposal and memo completeness confirmed → Council Committee Review Process → Conveyances are provided as approved by the Met Council

Equally Valuable Exchange Proposal

Land in the Regional Parks and Trails System will only be converted to other uses if approved by the Met Council through an equally valuable land or facility exchange as defined below:

Figure 6-2: Equally Valuable Exchange Proposal

Encouraged Approach

Equally valuable exchanges that are quality park or trail land additions located within the same park unit where the land is being proposed for removal.

Equally Valuable Land is

1. Contiguous to the Regional Parks and Trails System unit containing the land proposed to be exchanged (within the same park/trail unit).

2. Comparable or better natural resource characteristics.

3. Comparable or better at providing recreation opportunities than the land being removed from the park or trail.

Agency Memo

Regional park implementing agencies should submit a memo with any land conversion request. Similar to long-range plan reviews, land conversion requests include a Met Council review. For requests to be considered complete, agreement on the equally valuable exchange is needed in addition to the required materials.

Figure 6-3: Agency Memo

Memo Content
- Description & map of the proposed removal and replacement request
- Property identification numbers of the parcels involved
- Survey or other land information
- Recorded encumbrances (Council ARCs, declarations, etc.)
- Appraisal or statement of value Copy of relevant section of Agency's long-range plan
- Any agency actions or Council resolutions
- Funding sources
- Responses to the policy plan questions related to either land conversions or utility changes

Appraisal

An appraisal is required for both the removal and replacement land.
- If the removal or replacement land is anticipated to be valued at less than $100,000, then the park agency may pursue a statement of value by the Agency's real estate office in lieu of an appraisal.
- If the implementing agency is using regional funds to complete the purchase (for any value above and beyond the replacement cost), then an appraisal is necessary.

Statement of Value

For requests that are anticipated to be valued at less than $100,000, the implementing agency may opt to provide a statement of value conducted by the implementing agency's real estate office. The statement of value must be conducted through an individualized rigorous assessment that includes documentation of an in-person visit to the specific parcels and recent comparable properties.

The Met Council prioritizes land-for-land exchanges for all system protection requests. There may be exceptional circumstances for the park agency to pursue another approach when this priority cannot be met.

If the agency is not able to replace the land within the unit from where it is removed, there may be other options for exchanges, listed in priority order:
1. Land additions in another unit managed by the implementing agency
2. Facility additions or improvements within the unit under consideration
3. Facility additions or improvements outside the unit under consideration

The second and third priorities for land conversions should be avoided to the greatest extent possible.

Telecommunication Towers Evaluation Process

Federal laws allow local governments to regulate the placement of telecommunication towers as long as there is no ban preventing reasonable market access for that communication system.

Antenna towers for telecommunication services and the regional public safety radio system are generally prohibited on lands within the Met Council-approved long-range plan boundaries of a Regional Parks and Trails System unit unless:

- The communication system is not able to function without placement of the tower on Regional Parks and Trails System land. Since each of these radio frequency communication systems relies on grid placement of towers, all other alternatives must be considered for placement within the grid in order to avoid placing a tower on Regional Parks and Trails System land. The communication service provider must demonstrate that this criterion is satisfied when requesting approval by the Met Council and regional park implementing agency to place a tower on Regional Parks and Trails System land. The only exception to this condition is that a tower for the Metropolitan Emergency Radio System may be placed on Regional Parks and Trails System land even if it could be placed on private land instead.

- The tower's impact on the Regional Parks and Trails System land must be minimized.

- The tower must be screened from view of regional park or trail visitors as much as possible through tower placement and design features agreed to by the regional park implementing agency.

- The tower must be located on land that has already undergone regional park or trail development and is accessible through the existing park road system. Land in park reserves or regional parks conserved for habitat restoration and interpretation must be avoided.

- Co-locating multiple antennas on fewer towers is preferred. The Met Council acknowledges that co-location is not always possible due to potential interference.

- Payments for placing telecommunication towers in regional parks or park reserves should be dedicated to the regional park implementing agency that owns the land for acquisition, redevelopment, development, or operation and maintenance of its Regional Parks and Trails System units.

All telecommunication tower proposals for the Regional Parks and Trails System require regional park implementing agencies to submit a focused long-range plan amendment. The focused long-range plan amendment should state how the conditions listed above have been met. The Met Council will then review the focused long-range plan amendment for consistency with the conditions of this policy and either approve, modify, or reject the long-range plan amendment.

If the land for the tower's location has a restrictive covenant on it (required for land acquired with regional funds), the regional park implementing agency shall amend the covenant to recognize the temporary use of the tower with any conditions required for the tower's lease and submit the amended covenant to the Met Council as part of the long-range plan amendment.

The Met Council will consider the focused long-range plan amendment and the restrictive covenant amendment concurrently and either approve or deny them based on whether the tower will negatively affect the Regional Parks and Trails System unit. If a regional park implementing agency believes that a tower should not be placed on Regional Parks and Trails System land because the tower could not meet the conditions of this policy, the regional park implementing agency has the authority to deny the application.

Tower placement on Regional Parks and Trails System land shall be considered a temporary nonrecreational use. As stated previously, any lease revenues for the tower easement must be used by the regional park implementing agency to further the acquisition, redevelopment, development, or operation and maintenance of that regional park implementing agency's portion of the Regional Parks and Trails System. Implementing agencies are encouraged to charge "at cost" fees for public safety radio equipment on towers located on Regional Parks and Trails System land.

Placement of Utilities

Please refer to Section 6, Action 4 of the Regional Parks and Trails Policy Plan for information about the placement of utilities policies, actions, and procedures for both regional wastewater infrastructure and other utilities, as well as utility easement.

SECTION 7: RECREATION, FACILITIES, AND PROGRAMMING

The Regional Parks and Trails System includes more than 60,000 acres of unique natural spaces that provide a variety of benefits to visitors and natural systems.

Since 1974, activities and facilities in the Regional Parks and Trails System were guided by a static list of eligible recreational activities. Today, regional park implementing agencies, in partnership with the Met Council, seek to build upon its nature-based recreational foundation and expand into activities and facilities that better meet the evolving needs of a more diverse audience, including youth, Black, Indigenous, people of color, people over 65 years of age, and more.

As the region's population diversifies, there is a growing need to move toward a more flexible system of recreational activities and facilities that increases equitable access to a more diverse audience. It is important to note that the activities and facilities included in the original eligibility list remain an important part of the Regional Parks and Trails System.

Additionally, there is a desire to provide a range of recreational opportunities that include park and trail facilities designed with nature-based, context sensitive approaches that fit the regional setting while improving and enhancing natural systems. Examples include skate parks with built-in infiltration basins, green roofs, and permeable surfaces.

Recreational Activities Evaluation Process

Regional park implementing agencies are responsible for conducting long-range planning to guide the acquisition and development of the Regional Parks and Trails System. Part of this process includes performing an initial evaluation to determine what activities and facilities should be supported by the unit, including new types of activities and facilities. When considering whether to accommodate a new use, the implementing agency must first assess and connect how well the proposed activity or facility meets their engagement findings.

Process for Including New Activities or Facilities

If an implementing agency is interested in proposing a new activity or facility that is not included in the current regional park or trail long-range plan, or the activity or facility requires physical changes or construction beyond adjustments to park management rules or policies, the implementing agency should pursue one of two paths:

1. Amend the plan for a new activity or facility proposal not in the current long-range plan.

2. For proposals made in a park or trail unit with a long-range plan updated within the last five years, the implementing agency may seek approval of the proposed activity and design through a formal request that includes:

   - Description of the request

   - How the request fits within the regional park or trail unit and overall Regional Parks and Trails System

   - How the request meets the Activities and Facilities criteria defined in Section 7 of the Parks and Trails Policy Plan, Action 1, and included below:

     - All proposed activities and facilities for regional parks and trails should be consistent with the community engagement findings of the Agency-led long-range planning processes

     - Serve a regional audience

     - Should not duplicate neighborhood parks and trails systems

     - Should connect and support the system's nature-based foundation

     - Be compatible with the other uses and activities, minimize user conflicts, and preserve user experiences

     - Be consistent with the expectations of the Met Council's review and approval process

   - Development concept and schematic design

   - Identification of conflicts and steps necessary for their resolution

   - Known opposition

Figure 7-1: Recreational Activity or Facility Requirements

Recreational Activity or Facility Proposal Options

If park or trail unit is less than five years old, amend the plan to include the activity or facility

→ OR →

Submit formal request for Council Approval

Required Materials

- Description of request
- How the request fits within the regional park or trail unit and overall regional parks and trails system
- How the request meets the Activities and Facilities criteria described in Section 7 of the Parks and Trails Policy Plan, Action 1
- Development concept and schematic design
- Identification of conflicts and steps necessary for their resolution
- Known opposition

Proposal Criteria

- All proposed activities and facilities for regional parks and trails should be consistent with the community engagement findings of the agency-led long-range planning processes
- Serve a regional audience
- Should not duplicate neighborhood parks and trails systems
- Should connect and support the system's nature-based foundation
- Be compatible with the other uses and activities, minimize user conflicts, and preserve user experiences
- Be consistent with the expectations of the council's review and approval process

Depending on whether the Met Council finds the proposal to be compatible with the above criteria, they will determine if the proposal is approved, will require improvements, or be rejected completely (Figure 7-2). If the Met Council finds the proposal to be compatible, then the long-range plan/request will be approved without conditions. If the Met Council deems an activity or facility as incompatible, it may ask the implementing agency to modify or improve the approach or design. If it's deemed the proposal is incompatible, then the Met Council reserves the right to exclude the activity or facility from regional funding, including calculations of the annual parks use estimates and the agency's acreage total, similar to the treatment of incompatible facilities that pre-dated the Regional Parks and Trails System.

Figure 7-2: Recreational Activity or Facility Approval Flowchart
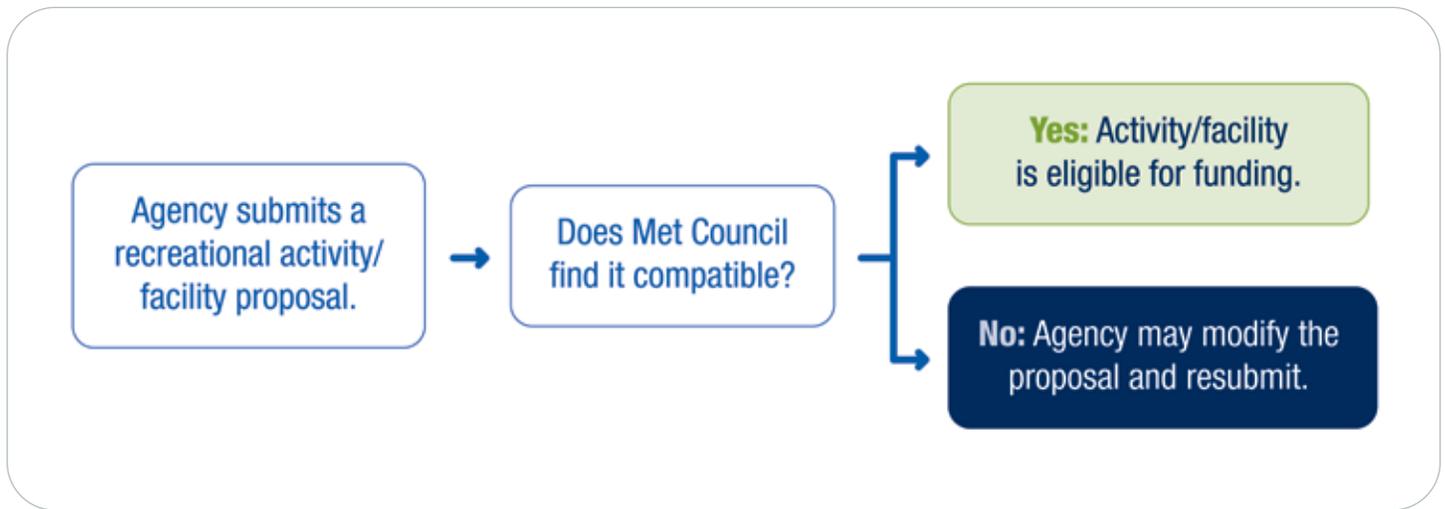
Desired outcome examples for Action 1: Increase equity in programs, activities, and places

Below are examples of how to carry out Action 1. These are not requirements, but rather examples of approaches that emerged during recent community engagement, research, and work group discussion. They illustrate what our partnerships strive for in a changing region. A static list of eligible activities no longer sufficiently encompasses the needs of our future Regional Parks and Trails System. To remain relevant and equitable, our system must continue to evolve.

- Honor cultural considerations across diverse communities in our regional system.

  - Continue engaging across all communities of color and other prioritized communities around their specific and personal cultural connections to parks and trails.

  - Remove barriers to American Indian cultural activities within parks and trails.

    - Provide access to sacred sites.

    - Strive to support American Indian ceremonies in welcoming, private, and obtainable ways.

    - Provide harvesting opportunities for traditional cultural practice, for personal use.

  - Recognize the historic exclusion of American Indian and Tribal groups from parks and trail systems, educate parks and trails staff and decision makers to center American Indian communities in parks and trails management.

  - Amplify American Indian perspectives through programming and interpretation.

  - Prioritize the development and use of accurate and inclusive historical and cultural information.

- Equitable Infrastructure:

  - Use universal design in regional park and trail facility designs.

  - Create gender neutral bathrooms.

    - During the LGBTQ+ Perspectives on Parks Focus Group (2023), participants stated that having access to restrooms, specifically gender-neutral restrooms, in the parks is important for making people feel more secure. Additionally, it is important to make sure that park patrons have access to detailed information to help plan comfortable outings into parks and trails. This is particularly important for individuals with Attention Deficit Hyperactivity Disorder, Obsessive-Compulsive Disorder, and other neurodivergent conditions.

  - Ensure bathrooms with running water are available throughout the Regional Parks and Trails System.

  - Provide more benches and improved lighting along regional trails.

- Enhance wayfinding across the Regional Parks and Trails System, making it easier for visitors to navigate within and across systems. This includes information that is accessible to blind and low-vision visitors.

- Create design practices that increase equity and inclusion, reflect the diversity of our region's cultures and ethnicities, and promote social cohesion:

  - Create signs that use Indigenized and non-Western design elements developed in consultation with American Indian people, youth, and historically excluded communities.

  - Invite artists into park design processes to emphasize the importance of cultural and racial representation in the Regional Parks and Trails System. For an example, see the Ramsey County and Met Council partnership project that invited five artists representing different racial and ethnic backgrounds to develop art that creates a sense of belonging for all and advances racial equity and inclusion: https://metrocouncil.org/News-Events/Parks/Newsletters/Ramsey-County-parks-art-signs-2023.aspx

- Develop park programming in partnership with affinity groups centering safety and belonging.

  - Affinity groups are invitational spaces that provide safety for individuals that have been historically excluded, such as LGBTQ+ or Black, Indigenous, and People of Color communities.

  - Affinity groups are an integral strategy in the Regional Parks and Trails System, such as programs developed exclusively for children or women. Develop programs that are specifically geared toward LGBTQ+ and Black, Indigenous, and People of Color communities as an effective strategy to prioritize equity and belonging in our system.

    - The findings from the LGBTQ+ Perspectives on Parks Focus Group (2023) recommend creating more affinity groups across the region. This approach increases a sense of connection, belonging, and safety for LGBTQ+ park users.

- Use Black, Indigenous, and People of Color-led media outlets to create awareness and spread the word about regional parks and trails in communities of color.

  - Encourage new approaches that deliver information and marketing to Black, Indigenous, and People of Color communities, especially those that do not speak English.

- Hire more diverse staff and intentionally listen to them for insights and guidance on how to increase welcoming and belonging.

  - Encourage opportunities for support, innovation, and growth among staff that are Black, Indigenous, and People of Color.

  - Involve youth as leaders and decision makers.

Desired outcome examples for Action 2:
Build relationships between people and natural systems

The examples listed below are not meant to be an exhaustive list, but rather as inspiration for implementing agencies as they plan for future programming and activity needs.

- Our Regional Parks and Trails System is made up of a wide array of unique and complementary opportunities.

  - Not all parks and trails need to encompass the same activities, facilities, or natural areas.

  - Encourage place-based appropriateness.

    - Example: Turning underutilized parking lot into a pop-up skatepark

  - Provide a geographic distribution of activities and protection systemwide.

- Stacked functions are the future:

  - Nature and people can share space.

  - Promote flexible spaces that support a variety of activities. Examples include:

    - Open, grass fields in a floodplain to provide space for games, fun, and water storage

    - Pop-up programming

    - Plant forests of fruits and nuts for harvesting for personal use

    - Community gardens

    - Reuse of hard surfaces for skate parks or pop-up programming

    - More amenities in regional trails

    - Culturally specific programs or facilities to meet shifting demographic needs

- Programing is key to connecting:

  - Support and provide leisure, educational, and programming opportunities that recognize the way people interact with our system.

  - Prioritize and program activities that are more contemplative, restful, socially or spiritually focused, or non-equipment based.

  - Support recreation activities that resonate with communities of color and age groups that have not been well served in the past, such as teenagers.

  - Hire more diverse programming staff that reflect the community.

- Moving from protecting to restoring:

  - Invite park and trail visitors to learn more about the natural world through storytelling, educational opportunities, and other programming.

  - Increase understanding of the role parks and trails play in creating a resilient natural environment.
    - Examples: Heat island mitigation, water storage, carbon capture.

  - Incorporate American Indian practices.
    - Examples: Reintroducing bison, using prescribed fire on the landscape, and promoting harvesting for personal use.

Improve storytelling around the benefits that parks and trails provide in increasing the region's climate resilience.

Desired outcome examples for Action 3: Establish and broaden cross-sector opportunities

- Promote parks and trails to play an important role in sustaining mental and physical health.

  - Shape nature-based programs to increase human connections and combat loneliness.

  - Design quiet spaces for spiritual connections, creating a sense of awe in nature.

  - Create places and programming for multigenerational play.

  - Partner with public health departments to co-create and fund mental health programming.

  - Use social media as a promotional tool.
    - Example: St. Paul Parks hosts "Mental Health Mondays." Their social media posts highlight how nature can increase health and happiness.

- Promote our transportation system as a viable way to connect people to parks and trails.

  - Prioritize public transportation routes that connect to nature in partnership with Metro Transit.

  - Strengthen active transportation connections to parks and trails with improved biking and walking access.

  - Create better maps and signage to highlight transit and trail connections.

- Use arts and culture to bring people to parks and trails, enhancing belonging.

  - Find ways for parks and trails to honor, hire, and pay more artists to bring people to parks for music, dance, festivals, and more.

- Inventory current memorials in parks and trails and clarify whose history is being told. Hire artists to imagine new ways of telling broader and more inclusive histories.

  - Example: Support projects like Cloud Man Village at Bde Maka Ska, including Dakota language sidewalk stamps.

- Encourage agencies to make art and culture plans, and to examine how to use existing and new art to better connect people to the outdoors.

  - Explore new funding sources for art.

- Support programming to increase visitation, visibility, and connection to parks and trails. Fund programs and programmers to dream big in cross-sector ways.

  - Create environmental education programming as a way to connect the next generation to parks and trails, creating the future stewards of the system

  - Continue to grow stewardship programs that connect community members to parks by allowing them to actively care for them, fostering deeper relationships and love for these spaces.

Desired outcome examples for Action 4: Raise awareness

- Support, create, and provide space for affinity groups and affinity-focused programming to continue growing connections between agencies and communities.

  - Regional park implementing agencies continue to grow genuine relationships and financially support the knowledge, expertise, and lived experience that affinity groups are bringing to our system.

  - Find more ways to support affinity groups whose mission is to build trust and bring disenfranchised groups to parks and trails. Find creative ways to financially support these groups and expand this work.

  - Create more programs focused on specific communities.

- Example: Find ways to support programming for Black people, Indigenous people, People of Color, and LQBTQ+ communities as part of regular programming efforts.

- Build trust and relationships with communities of color, especially community leaders of color.

- Develop intentional communication strategies and marketing materials that center racial justice and demonstrate sensitivity to overburdened communities.

- Promote programming that increases awareness of opportunities and creates welcoming spaces.

  - Hire staff that reflect the racial make-up of desired audiences.

  - Provide staff cultural competency training.

  - The details of programming matters. Consult community members on matters of program times, costs, and other factors to ensure that programs are accessible.

  - Ensure that programs and engagement are done in ways that demonstrate respect and appreciation. Avoid transactional, one-time interactions.

- Art amplifies awareness. Hire artists that look like the community members that Agencies are trying to better serve.

  - Incorporate non-Western design practices into art and culture in regional parks.

Better Coordinate the Regional Trail System with the Regional Bicycle Transportation Network

During the Imagine 2050 planning process, the Trail System Coordination workgroup identified the following efforts to frame future discussions with Met Council, implementing agencies, and others. These conversations will occur during the 2025-2028 implementation time frame.

- Establish and regularly convene an Agency-Met Council workgroup focusing on better coordinating the Regional Bicycle Transportation Network (RBTN) and regional trails. Topics include the development of a shared vision that results in a more coordinated, integrated, and interconnected regional system that that is easy to use for all residents of the region.

- Improve wayfinding, including establishing minimum requirements and other low-cost solutions that promote a more coordinated and accessible system.

- Foster relationships between regional park implementing agencies and Met Council staff to improve communication and coordination during planning for the RBTN and regional trails.

- Build on the strengths and coordinate the growth of the existing RBTN and regional trail system and find opportunities to better coordinate and align the RBTN and regional trails in rural and exurban areas.

- Coordinate with outreach and communications staff across the Met Council and within the regional park implementing agencies to increase awareness and accessibility of the regional trail system.

SECTION 8: FINANCE

For Finance procedures, please visit the Regional Parks and Trails Grant Administration Guide

ENDNOTES

1   Metropolitan Met Council (2021) Adventure Close to Home: Connecting Youth to the Regional Park System (1):1.

2   Metropolitan Met Council (2021) 2021 Parks and Trails Visitor Study.

3   https://irma.nps.gov/DataStore/DownloadFile/444069

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