

Metropolitan Regional Parks

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Regional parks enhance quality of life for residents

The seven-county Twin Cities metropolitan area boasts a regional parks system that includes 49 parks and park reserves and six special recreation features totaling about 53,000 acres open for public use. In addition, the system has 29 regional trails totaling 177 miles. The parks range from urban lake environments and suburban nature centers to a working farm and large tracts of rural open space. Preserving parkland and open space protects valuable natural resources and makes communities more attractive and livable.

Regional parks provide recreation

Visitors to regional parks can walk, bike, swim, picnic and enjoy dozens of other activities. The regional park system, open year-round, received more than 33 million visits in 2007. The most popular parks include the Minneapolis Chain of Lakes, Mississippi River Gorge, Como Zoo and Conservatory, Minnehaha Falls and Nokomis-Hiawatha Regional Park.

Local agencies operate, maintain parks

The regional parks system began with pioneering state legislation in 1974, which put the Metropolitan Council in charge of overseeing acquisition and development of regional parks. The parks are operated by 10 partnering cities, counties and special districts.

Several large parks have free admission for entrance by vehicle while others require daily or annual passes. All parks have free admission for those who walk or ride their bicycle to enter.

The Council and the agencies work together to develop regional parks policies that protect the region's water quality, promote best management practices, and help integrate the parks with housing, transportation and other regional policies.

Funding the system

The Council allocates state and regional funds for ongoing acquisition and development of the parks system. Between 1974 and 2007, the Council authorized a total of \$458 million in grant funds for

those purposes. Funds for the grants include state bonds, regional bonds issued by the Council, monies from the Minnesota Environmental Trust Fund (recommended by the Legislative-Citizen Commission on Minnesota Resources), and interest earnings.

The Council also annually allocates state funds to cover a small share of the cost of parks operation and maintenance. In 2007, the Council distributed \$8.62 million to the 10 park implementing agencies to operate and maintain the regional parks. This covered 10.1% of the \$8.5 million spent by the agencies to operate and maintain regional parks in 2007.

Expanding park and trail opportunities

In April 2007, the estimated population of the seven-county metro area was 2.85 million. The Council projects that by 2030 more than 3.6 million people will live in the region. Now is the time to identify and preserve the last, best natural resources and outdoor recreational opportunities in the region for future generations.

The Council's 2030 *Regional Parks Policy Plan* calls for a variety of changes to the regional parks system in order to meet the region's needs for outdoor recreation in 2030.

The first change was to designate two existing county parks and three local trails as regional, which was accomplished in 2006. Other proposals include:

- Acquire and develop three new parks and seven new trails.
- Acquire land within the current boundaries of 30 existing parks and four trails.
- Acquire natural-resource lands adjacent to six existing parks and six existing trails.

To meet the needs of the region *beyond* 2030, the Council proposes to acquire four new regional parks or reserves and three new trails. These parks will not be developed until after 2030, but the opportunity to acquire them will likely be lost if the lands aren't identified and purchased before 2030. The goal is to secure the last best places and

complete the acquisition of the regional parks system, securing opportunities for future generations.

In total, the Council proposes to acquire another 17,000 acres of land and 700 miles of regional trails. To read a description and see a map of proposed future regional park and trail acquisitions, visit <http://www.metrocouncil.org/planning/parks/2005/ParksPlanSummary.pdf>.

Raising private funds to acquire parkland

The Council, authorized by the Minnesota Legislature, is forming a nonprofit foundation to assist in raising funds for acquiring regional park land and trails.

The foundation will be modeled on similar, successful efforts in other large U.S. metro areas. A McKnight Foundation-funded feasibility study conducted by the Council and the Trust for Public Land showed that a foundation to raise money for parks can succeed in this region.

For more information

To locate all the parks and the recreational opportunities they contain, go to:

www.metrocouncil.org/parks/parks_partners.htm

Contact information for local park agencies is available at the same website.

For more information about regional parks planning, visit www.metrocouncil.org/parks/index.htm.

As of August 2008, an updated edition of the Council's Regional Parks Map will be available free of charge at libraries, park agency offices and from the Council's Data Center. Call 651-602-1140 for more information.

Pub. 14-08-048 July 2008