

Information Item

Community Development Committee



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Committee Meeting Date: September 19, 2022
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Topic

2021 Regional Parks System Visitor Study

District(s), Member(s): All
Policy/Legal Reference: *2040 Regional Parks Policy Plan, Chapter 9*
Staff Prepared/Presented: Darcie Vandegrift, Principal Researcher (651-602-1669)
Division/Department: Community Development

Proposed Action

Information item; no action is proposed at this time.

Background

Council staff conducts the Visitor Study every five years to better understand visitor trends and needs. Additionally, the Visitor Study produces several of the funding formula inputs that are used to guide the distribution of three of the Parks Grant Programs: the Operations and Maintenance Program, the Parks and Trails Legacy Fund Program, and the Regional Parks Bonding Program. The 2021 Visitor Study surveyed over 5,400 people who visited a regional park or trail in summer 2021.

At the CDC meeting, Council staff will provide an overview of the study and findings. Topics of the visitor study include demographics and equitable use, activity patterns, visitor satisfaction and suggestions for improvement, information seeking, and new visitor experiences. 88% of visitors reported facilities very good or excellent. There was higher satisfaction in suburbs and slightly lower satisfaction in systems with older facilities. The top suggestion for parks was that no major improvements were needed. The top suggestion for trails was better trail maintenance.

The survey detailed visitation demographics by race/ethnicity, age, gender, and disability. Disparities exist in trail visitation for Black, Latino, and Asian American communities, visitors under age 35, and women. Park visitation disparities exist for all communities of color and visitors under age 25. Visitors enjoy a number of activities on parks and trails, with the top activities being hiking/walking, cycling, relaxing, dog walking, and observing nature. Activity pattern differences among social identities will be discussed.

Throughout the summer, implementing agency staff participated in workshops to review and comment on the operations implications of the data. After reviewing findings on visitor suggestions, satisfaction, activity patterns and demographic information, implementing agency staff made early recommendations. They want to deepen and expand efforts to foster equity in the regional system. They discussed the need for increased funding to maintain needed amenities valued by the public. They see value in increased investments in Council research to provide data for policy and operations decisions.

A consultant, Wilder Research, collected the data. Visitors over 12 years old who went to the regional park system during summer 2021 were eligible to participate. The survey methodology

was designed as a collaboration between the Local Technical Advisory Committee from all ten implementing agencies together with Council staff. Each Implementing Agency had at least 393 completed surveys. Surveys were administered in proportion to park or trail visitation in 2019.

The final report, including implementing agency contextualization, is scheduled for publication in November 2022.

Rationale

The Visitor Survey is required by Minnesota Statutes (Minn. Stat. §§ 85.53, subd. 3 and 473.351, subd. 3). The *2040 Regional Parks Policy Plan* committed the Metropolitan Council to conducting the visitor study survey in 2021 (Chapter 9, Table 9-1, 2020-2023 Workplan for the *2040 Regional Parks Policy Plan*).

Thrive Lens Analysis

The Visitor Study advances the *Thrive MSP 2040* outcome of stewardship by completing our statutory responsibility to develop new inputs to funding formulas. The Visitor Study advances the *Thrive MSP 2040* outcome of equity by informing the Council and Implementing Agencies about the demographics of park visitation and the visitation practices of different groups as they use the park and trail system.

Funding

Project funds were included in the Community Development Division's 2021 and 2022 budgets.

