

Information Item

Community Development Committee



Meeting Date: July 07, 2025

Topic

Parks Research Update: Regional Parks System 2024 Annual Use Estimate & 2026 Visitor Study update

District(s), Member(s):	All
Policy/Legal Reference:	Minn. Stat. §§ 85.53, subd. 3 and 473.351, subd. 3; <i>2040 Regional Parks Policy Plan</i>
Staff Prepared/Presented:	Ismael Ramirez, Principal Researcher (651-602-1831)
Division/Department:	Community Development / Regional Planning

Proposed Action

Information item; no action is proposed at this time.

Background

The Metropolitan Council has prepared annual use estimates for the Regional Park System since 1995 in partnership with the ten regional park implementing agencies.

The Council bases its estimates of parks and trails visits on counts of visitors entering regional parks and trails from Memorial Day to Labor Day. The count is a collaboration between all ten regional parks implementing agencies, whose staff conduct the summer counts, and Council staff who complete the analysis.

An estimated 65.7 million visits were made to the Regional Parks System in 2024, representing a 5.4% decrease from 2023. This is the first decline in the past five years, partly due to typical variations in research methodology and weather patterns, particularly the rainy summer months in 2024, as nearly half of the counts (44%) coincided with rainy days. Sixty-nine percent of the visits were to regional parks, park reserves, and special recreation features, while the rest were to regional trails—a shift from last year's 71%. The most visited regional park was Minneapolis Chain of Lakes, with 6.8 million visits. Other top-visited parks include Central Mississippi Riverfront Regional Park and Mississippi Gorge Regional Park, both with 3.5 million visits. The most visited trail was the Minnehaha Parkway Regional Trail, with about 2.6 million visits, followed by Nine Mile Creek Regional Trail and Cedar Lake Regional Trail, each with 1 million visits.

The Council uses a four-year rolling average of counts to ensure a representative sample of each park and each trail. Off-season visits (winter, spring, and fall) are based on a survey asking visitors how often they visit during off-season months. The most recent survey was completed in 2021.

The next Visitor Study will be completed in 2026. The 2026 Parks and Trails Visitor Study aims to collect data from visitors to all Regional Parks and Trails System units during the summer of 2026, with a final report due by late fall 2026.

At the Metropolitan Parks and Open Space Commission meeting, staff will provide a more detailed explanation of the methodology and findings for the 2024 use estimate.

Rationale

Minnesota Statutes (85.53, subdivision 3 and 473.351, subdivision 3) and the *2040 Regional Parks Policy Plan* specify visits to the Regional Parks System as a component in determining each regional park implementing agency's share of the Regional Parks System grant program dollars.

Imagine Lens Analysis

As a key factor in determining grant program dollars for the Regional Parks System, the annual use estimate impacts the *Imagine 2050* outcome of Stewardship. The estimate is used to ensure allocation of grant dollars are spent in a manner proportional with regional park and trail visits. The annual use estimate also provides an indication of the popularity of the Regional Parks System, which can serve as a proxy to the Thrive outcome of Livability.

Funding

The use estimate is conducted annually with staff time from Community Development Division's budget. The visitor survey is funded through funds from the Community Development Division's budget.

