

September 26, 2018

Metropolitan Council
390 Robert Street North
Saint Paul, MN 55101

SUBJECT: Equity Advisory Committee Comments on the 2040 Regional Parks Policy Plan 2018 Update

To the Metropolitan Council:

The Equity Advisory Committee (EAC) met with Community Development staff at four meetings in 2018 to learn more about the regional parks system and the draft 2018 Update to the 2040 Regional Parks Policy Plan. On September 25, 2018, Equity Advisory Committee members voted to submit the following comments for the public comment record.

Overview of the Committee's recommendations:

The EAC recommends the Metropolitan Council and regional parks system prioritize:

- Engaging people of color and indigenous peoples (POCI)
- Hiring diverse staff who reflect the diverse makeup of our region
- Identifying and mitigating barriers to POCI using parks and trails
- Making the regional parks more accessible for people with disabilities

In the *2040 Regional Parks Policy Plan 2018 Update*, the EAC further:

- Supports the creation of the equity grant program
- Supports maintaining and strengthening the language in the 2040 Regional Parks Policy plan regarding the Equity Toolkit on page 107 of the draft released for public comment: "The toolkit may be used, on occasion, to reprioritize the list of capital projects as submitted by the agencies for state and regional bonds and other funding sources as appropriate and allowable."

More detailed information about the EAC's discussion:

During the August 28th meeting, Community Development staff asked the committee to weigh in on three central questions.

1. Staff question to EAC: Beyond engagement and convenings, what else could we do around equitably planning parks in the region?

Committee response: The metropolitan regional parks system needs to create more awareness among residents to increase participation in planning and to increase the use of parks and trails among residents from diverse backgrounds. A well-intentioned, well-designed study is needed that would capture the views of respondents from as many diverse groups of people as possible to obtain their views on how to make regional parks to meets the needs of all residents. This work should include identifying the barriers to accessing the parks/trails and strategies to address overcoming barriers in plans.

The committee notes that it is difficult to make a recommendation on how to assess or measure progress on equity if there are not clear equity goals in the plan. The committee recommends adding clear equity goals to the plan. Additionally, in the plan, one of the equity strategies changed from 'strengthen equity' to 'promoting equity'. EAC members noted that this language change dilutes the

intention from something that is measurably more intensive to did you make an attempt to promote equity or not.

2. Staff question to EAC: What advice do you have as we start designing the equity grant program?

Committee response: We request that Community Development staff return to the EAC as they develop the equity grant program. The committee has several questions we want to explore further, including:

- Will community members be at the table to decide who receives the equity grants?
- Can the grant program give preference to applications located in areas of concentrated poverty, including areas of concentrated poverty where 50% or more of the population is people of color and indigenous people?

While we hope to have more opportunity to discuss the formation of this program, our initial advice is:

- It is important to develop scoring points to determine how those responsible for distributing the grants have created opportunities that would enable organizations from POCI groups to take part in the equity grants. This would create accountability in the selection process.
- Applicants should have to submit their plan to recruit and make their parks accessible. Questions would address: What would you like your usage to be? What is your plan?
- Geographic preference should be an additional consideration for the grant. For example, the difference between quality of parks in South and North Minneapolis is severe.
- Think about a matching program. If the Council funds can only be put towards capital improvements, Implementing Agencies should be required to match this funding with their own dollars. Then the matching funds can cover what the Council cannot.
- The plan does not speak to how they plan to overcome capital funding limitations.

Regarding other finance strategies in the plan, while Community Development staff did not ask the committee about the use of the equity tool kit and the option to reprioritize capital projects, EAC members support maintaining and strengthening the language in the 2040 Regional Parks Policy plan regarding the Equity Toolkit on page 107 of the draft released for public comment: “The toolkit may be used, on occasion, to reprioritize the list of capital projects as submitted by the agencies for state and regional bonds and other funding sources as appropriate and allowable.”

The committee further recommends establishing comprehensive guidelines, instructions, and support (such as trainings and mentoring) for how the Equity Toolkit is expected to be used by implementing agencies, noting that the Met Council may reprioritize projects if the toolkit is not used effectively. This would provide a measure of transparency and accountability to racial equity that is not currently present. Meaningful gains towards racial equity require institutionalized policies that do not leave decisions up to goodwill and chance. This language must be kept and strengthened, or it will be a disservice to the people of our region and the regional park system.

3. Staff question to EAC: What else could the regional system do to attract non-parks users?

Committee response: The committee would like the to see the plan address what type of programming and amenities are offered in the parks, and how these can be used to make the parks more user friendly for people of various ages, abilities, races and cultures.

As noted above, the regional parks system needs to engage in more education and awareness about the amenities available in regional parks and trails to increase visits. Committee members asked: How are

you doing the community engagement? What is your measuring tool? What is the goal for park usage by communities of color? How are you coming up with that goal?

Furthermore, across the regional system, committee members noted that parks don't offer the same amenities in the suburbs and urban areas. The committee would like to learn what the Metropolitan Council is doing to make amenities equitable across the region. We shouldn't be talking about equity and then go back to talking about regional balance. That is changing the conversation to be focused on equality and equal distribution.

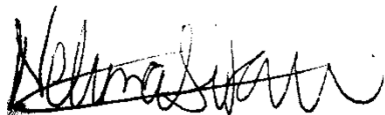
The Metropolitan Council and Implementing Agencies should understand the barriers for people accessing regional parks. For example, if fees are a barrier, can implementing agencies implement a sliding scale? Disaggregating data will be important in understanding barriers.

The committee recognizes the importance of Implementing Agencies in working towards creating a welcoming environment. An important component of creating a welcoming environment is hiring diverse parks staff. There is an identified need to hire and engage Native American communities in particular. With the park ambassador program, it is important to create equitable employment opportunities for all residents. People from diverse background would feel at ease or more at home when they feel they can relate with employees of the parks. Beyond hiring, developing recreation activities require deliberate efforts to create culturally appropriate activities to make the parks more inclusive for everyone.

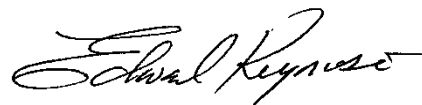
Additionally, the committee recognizes that parks have a long way to go in ensuring parks are accessible for people with disabilities. As a committee, we would like more information about the degree to which parks are complying with the Americans with Disabilities Act (ADA), and how the Council measuring progress. Committee members note that while not all parks are fully accessible today, staff are working towards that goal.

On behalf of the Equity Advisory Committee, thank you for the opportunity to review and comment on the draft 2040 Regional Parks Policy Plan Update. Please contact us if you have any questions about the committee's recommendations or comments.

Sincerely,



Nelima Sitati Munene, EAC Co-Chair



Edward Reynoso, EAC Co-Chair,
Metropolitan Council Member District 9