

Community Development Committee

For the Metropolitan Council meeting of May 27, 2020

Subject: Authorization to Negotiate and Execute a Joint Powers Agreement for a Research Partnership on location-based services data between Minnesota Department of Natural Resources, Greater Minnesota Regional Parks and Trails Commission, and the Metropolitan Council

Proposed Action

That the Metropolitan Council authorize the Regional Administrator to negotiate and the Chair to execute a Joint Exercise of Powers Agreement with the Minnesota Department of Natural Resources and Greater Minnesota Regional Parks and Trails Commission to provide analysis of location-based services data to regional and state parks.

Summary of Committee Discussion/Questions

Research Manager Huting presented the staff's report to the Committee. Council Member Chamblis expressed concerns related to data privacy and the cost of the project. Council Member Atlas-Ingebretson expressed her view that the use of this technology will result in cost effective data that can be used to challenge the status quo and help make more equitable decisions. She noted that current data in parks is insufficient for making decisions and expressed her excitement for a tool that will create change across the whole state.

Huting clarified the cost of the project and that funding will be transferred from Minnesota DNR to the Metropolitan Council to cover the cost. He further clarified that the data are aggregated and anonymized and that it is impossible to track individuals with this data source. Council Member Wulff expressed her support for the research and her view that this data source protects privacy more than traditional survey research. Council Member Chamblis further expressed her concerns that multiple data sources may be able to be combined to identify individuals.

Council Member Johnson shared her previous discussions with the Three Rivers Park District Commissioners on the data source and privacy concerns and expressed her view that the data provides cost-effective information and that she feels confident the proposal can move forward as is.

The Committee passed the proposed actions with eight ayes and one nay at its meeting on May 4, 2020.

Community Development Committee

Meeting date: May 4, 2020

For the Metropolitan Council meeting of May 27, 2020

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District(s), Member(s): ALL

Policy/Legal Reference:

Staff Prepared/Presented: Joel Huting, Research Manager, 651-602-1349

Division/Department: Community Development

Proposed Action

That the Metropolitan Council authorize the Regional Administrator to negotiate and the Chair to execute a Joint Exercise of Powers Agreement with the Minnesota Department of Natural Resources and Greater Minnesota Regional Parks and Trails Commission to provide analysis of location-based services data to regional and state parks.

Background

The Minnesota Department of Natural Resources, Greater Minnesota Regional Parks and Trails Commission, and the Metropolitan Council are all responsible for collection and analysis of parks and trails visitation data in Minnesota to provide a basis for sound planning, programming, investment, and fiscal allocation decisions. These data collection efforts inform our understanding of overall visitation, demographics of visitors, where visitors come from, how they travel to our systems, and more.

Current data collection efforts range from intercept-based surveys and in-field visitation counts to automated trail counters. In most cases, there is limited or no information on park or trail visitation that is valid at the individual park level. Additionally, there is not a lot of shared research that allows for a better common understanding of how use occurs across our state and regional park and trail systems.

Over the last three years, the Council staff have extensively used anonymized and aggregated location-based services data from cell phones to analyze travel patterns in the Twin Cities region. Recently, this analysis has been successfully expanded to demonstrate the feasibility of analyzing visitation to regional parks across the region. This data source shows substantial promise in providing park-level visitation data on many key indicators such as usage, demographics, travel mode, and local/non-local visitation. Park-level visitation data is key to making more effective and equitable programming, planning, and investment decisions for all three agencies. Additionally, there is a desire to explore the feasibility of using this data source to better understand trail use.

This project would be funded by the Parks and Trails Legacy Fund, specifically the Coordination Among Partners fund that is managed by the Minnesota Department of Natural Resources. This proposal is consistent with the Parks and Trails Legacy Plan, the 25-year long-range plan for Minnesota, because it supports implementation of the coordination work across the Legacy partnership, which includes shared research. Funds would pay for the salary and benefits of a long-term temporary staff member for two years from approximately June 2020 to June 2022. The position would be employed by the Council to analyze visitation to all parks and trails for each of the three agencies (across the State of Minnesota). Deliverables will include an

interactive data visualization and mapping application that displays key visitation information as detailed above along with a methodology and key findings report.

Rationale

Data collection using traditional methods is prohibitively expensive. For example, staff estimate that it costs around \$15,000 per park or trail to collect representative intercept survey data over a summer. Implementing an intercept survey to collect unit-level data for all parks and trails in our systems would cost millions of dollars for a one-time data collection effort.

In contrast, there are no additional costs other than staff analysis time to provide similar information using the location-based services data. Further, the location-based services data are always being updated and do not require a large-scale survey effort to get up to date information. This also means analysis of seasonal visitation patterns or changes in visitation following an intervention can be provided in near-real-time.

The authorization to negotiate and execute a joint powers agreement with Minnesota Department of Natural Resources and Greater Minnesota Regional Parks and Trails Commission is required to allow Council staff to conduct analysis with our partner agencies outside of the Council's jurisdiction of the seven-county region.

Thrive Lens Analysis

This project supports the Thrive outcome of Equity because it provides demographic data at the park- or trail-level, which will allow for much more granular analysis of who benefits from park and trail visitation. It also advances the Thrive Livability outcome, because it enables better understanding of parks visitation patterns and will result in better planning and programming for the regional and state parks and trails system.

Funding

The project will be funded by \$220,000 of the Parks and Trails Legacy Fund, Coordination Among Partners funding, that will be transferred to the Metropolitan Council from the Department of Natural Resources. Legacy funds will be adopted into the Council Authorized Operating Budget once the JPA is executed. There are no operating tails to this project.

Known Support / Opposition

Under state law, joint powers agreements between governmental units must be "entered into through action of their governing bodies." The Minnesota Department of Natural Resources and Greater Minnesota Regional Parks and Trails Commission will also need to approve the joint powers agreement.