

## Metropolitan Parks and Open Space Commission

Meeting date: April 9, 2020

**Subject:** Regional Parks System Research Update

**District(s), Member(s):** All

**Policy/Legal Reference:** Minn. Stat. §§ 85.53, subd. 3 & 473.351, subd. 3; *2040 Regional Parks Policy Plan*

**Staff Prepared/Presented:** Darcie Vandegrift, Research Analyst (651-602-1669)

**Division/Department:** Community Development/ Regional Planning

### Proposed Action

None; information and discussion only.

### Background

The Metropolitan Council conducts research about the Regional Park and Trail System to meet statutory requirements, inform implementing agencies about the System's users, and to meet the goals outlined in the *2040 Regional Parks Policy Plan*. This information item will update MPOSC on current research and how Parks Research will be affected by the COVID-19 pandemic. Four research items will be discussed:

1. The 2019 use estimate will continue as scheduled. The Council has prepared annual use estimates for the Regional Park System since 1995 in partnership with regional park implementing agencies. The Council bases its estimate of park visits on counts of visitors entering regional parks and trails from Memorial Day to Labor Day. The Council estimates visitation for each implementing agency from a formula that takes into account average use over four years, non-summer visits, and estimated people per vehicle.
2. The 2020 use estimate is canceled. Given the operational reality of coordinating a research study considering the current environment, it would be very difficult to complete. Minnesota Statutes (85.53, Subdivision 3 and Statute 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. The cancellation of the 2020 use estimate will result in the 2019 use estimates being used for two years.
3. Council staff have postponed the 2020 Visitor Study until 2021. The Visitor Study is an in-person survey administered by field staff to park visitors. We do not know at this time if such close contact will be possible. Furthermore, current public health recommendations and input from community partners inform us that the COVID-19 outbreak could distort park visitor demographics. For these reasons, the study will be postponed. The multipliers from the 2016 Visitor Study will continue in effect for an additional year.
4. Youth and parks research data was generated in fall 2019. The research team includes the Parks Researcher, four research interns, five youth-serving organizations, and four park implementing agencies. Together, they generated data and findings about ways to connect youth (age 14-19) to the regional park

system. The work emphasized collaboration with constituent led organizations. The research created the outcome of directly connecting youth to parks through park visits and civic engagement with the Regional Park System. And, everyone had a lot of fun! Members of the research team are schedule to present findings to MPOSC in June.

### **Thrive Lens Analysis**

As a key factor in determining grant program dollars for the Regional Parks System, the annual use estimate and the upcoming visitor study impact the *Thrive MSP 2040* 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. The youth & parks research was undertaken to enhance equitable access to parks by young people, particularly youth of color, impacting the *Thrive MSP 2040* outcome of equity.