

Information Item

Metropolitan Parks and Open Space Commission



Meeting Date: August 1, 2022

Community Development Committee: September 19, 2022

Topic

2021 Regional Parks System Visitor Study Discussion

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.

Parks research staff will bring learnings to MPOSC over the next few months to unpack key findings and hear Commissioners' insights about the data. These ongoing conversations are parallel to a five-workshop series held for regional park implementing agency and Council staff in summer 2022. Topics of the visitor study include demographics and equitable use, activity patterns, visitor satisfaction and suggestions for improvement, information seeking, and new visitor experiences.

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.

At the Commission meeting, Council staff will provide an overview of the study as well as findings on visitor suggestions, satisfaction, and activity patterns. 88% reported facilities very good or excellent. There was higher satisfaction in suburbs and slightly lower 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 availability of bathrooms, water, signage, and shade are important themes. The most popular activities were hiking/walking, biking, relaxing/doing nothing, and dog walking/dog park. Activity pattern differences among social identities will be discussed.

Rationale

The Visitor Survey is required by Minnesota Statutes (*Minnesota Statutes 2021*, section 85.53, subd. 3 and section 473.351, subd. 3). The 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.

