

# Information Item

Metropolitan Parks and Open Space Commission



Meeting Date: July 7, 2022

Community Development Committee: August 1, 2022

## Topic

Regional Parks System 2021 Annual Use Estimate

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

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

**Staff Prepared/Presented:** Darcie Vandegrift, Principal Researcher (651-602-1669)

**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 estimate of park visits on counts of visitors entering regional parks and trails from Memorial Day to Labor Day. No use estimate was done in 2020 due to the pandemic. 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 64.9 million visits were made to the Regional Parks system in 2021 representing a 2.6% increase from 2019. This increase was due entirely to increased trail use, up over 12%. Park use declined slightly overall. Slightly less than three-quarters of the visits were to regional parks, park reserves, and special recreation features. The rest were to regional trails. The most visited regional park was Minneapolis Chain of Lakes, with 7.5 million visits. This total is slightly lower than the 2019 estimate of over 8 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 and incorporated into the estimates for the first time this year.

The 2021 use estimate draws from updated inputs from the 2021 Visitor Study, including person per vehicle (PPV) multipliers for counted cars and the expansion from summer counts to year-round estimates. There were significant decreases in PPV multipliers, but little change in seasonal multipliers. These updated inputs will be presented in August.

At the Metropolitan Parks and Open Space Commission meeting, staff will provide a more detailed explanation of the methodology and findings for the 2021 use estimate. Staff will return to MPOSC in August to provide further information on the findings from the Visitor Study.

## 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.

## Thrive Lens Analysis

As a key factor in determining grant program dollars for the Regional Parks System, the annual use estimate impacts 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.

## Funding

The use estimate is conducted annually with staff time from Community Development Division's budget.

