

Information Item

Metropolitan Parks and Open Space Commission



Meeting Date: September 1, 2022

Community Development Committee: September 19, 2022

Topic

2021 Regional Parks System Visitor Study Discussion 2: Implementing agency analysis in early workshops and what the visitor survey shows about visitor demographics.

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.

Throughout the summer, implementing agency staff have participated in workshops to review and comment on the operations implications of the data. At the Commission meeting, Council staff will share observations from these workshops. After reviewing findings on visitor suggestions, satisfaction, activity patterns and demographic information, implementing agency staff made early recommendations. They wanted a more comprehensive future visitor study to provide more park and trail level data. Visitor suggestions for improvement supported their observation that more funding and staffing is required for maintaining natural resources, facilities, and amenities. For example, investments are required in trail maintenance, bathrooms, water, signage, and shade.

A second topic to be discussed at this month's MPOSC meeting are visitor demographics by race/ethnicity, age, gender, and disability. Disparities exist in trail visitation for all communities of color, visitors under age 35, and women. Park visitation disparities exist for all communities of color and visitors under age 25. Because of census data and visitor survey design, disparities cannot be calculated for transgender and nonbinary visitors nor visitors with disabilities, but some data offers insights about visitation and activity patterns for these groups.

This is the second of three scheduled conversations about the 2021 Visitor Survey. 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 being 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.

Rationale

The Visitor Survey is required by Minnesota Statutes (Minn. Stat. §§ 85.53, subd. 3 and 473.351, subd. 3). The *2040 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.

