

DRAFT REGIONAL PARKS & TRAILS PLANNING HANDBOOK



METROPOLITAN
COUNCIL

JUNE 2024

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The Metropolitan Council is the regional planning organization for the seven-county Twin Cities area. The Council operates the regional bus and rail system, collects and treats wastewater, coordinates regional water resources, plans and helps fund regional parks, and administers federal funds that provide housing opportunities for low- and moderate-income individuals and families. The 17-member Council board is appointed by and serves at the pleasure of the governor.

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Section One: Introduction & Use

Imagine 2050 Regional Development Guide

The Metropolitan Council (Council) implements and updates the Regional Parks and Trails Policy Chapter (RPTPC), as part of the *Imagine 2050* Regional Development Guide. The Regional Parks and Trails Policy Chapter guides the long-term planning of the Regional Parks and Trails System. The Council partners with 10 Regional Park Implementing Agencies (Agencies) who are the owners and managers of the park and trail lands within the regional system.

Purpose of the Regional Parks and Trails Planning Handbook

The Planning Handbook mirrors the organization of the Parks and Trails Policy Chapter of the *Imagine 2050* Regional Development Guide. The Parks and Trails Policy contains the high-level policies and actions that guide system implementation. The Planning Handbook contains more detailed procedural guidance on how the policies and actions are implemented.

Use

The Council's *Imagine 2050, Regional Parks and Trails Policy Area (RPTPA)* is intended to be a visionary document that sets the goals and policy for the Regional Parks and Trails System. The Regional Parks and Trails Planning Handbook (Handbook) is a complementary planning resource to the Parks and Trails Policy Chapter, on a similar level with the Regional Parks and Trails Grant Administration Guide.

Organization

The Regional Parks and Trails Planning Handbook follows the organization of the *2050 Regional Parks and Trails Policy Chapter* consisting of the following items:

- Section One: Introduction and Use
- Section Two System Plan
- Section Three: Natural Systems
- Section Four: Climate Resilience (Placeholder)
- Section Five: Planning
- Section Six: System Protection
- Section Seven: Recreation, Facilities, and Activities
- All finance procedures are contained in the Regional Parks and Trails Grant Administration Guide.

Relationship to the Regional Parks and Trails Policy Chapter

The Regional Parks and Trails Planning Handbook (Planning Handbook) and Grants Administration Guide are resources that support the Regional Parks and Trails Policy Chapter. The Regional Parks and Trails Policy Chapter is a policy document that implements Thrive 2050's vision, shared goals, and values. The Policy Chapter includes the Regional Parks and Trails System's vision, mission, and values, as well as objectives, policies and actions that describes how the Regional Parks and Trails System will actualize it's visionary and aspirational direction in partnership with the 10 Regional Parks and Trails Implementing Agencies (implementing agencies).

The Planning Handbook is a resource guide for Implementing Agencies and Council staff. It contains policy content requirements, Agency-Council processes, and planning resources. The Handbook is meant to be used as a guide for requirements and processes related to agency long-range planning

Section One: Introduction & Use

and system plan requests, as well as a resources for more information, examples, and best management practices.

The Grants Administration Guide provides an overview of the administrative processes related to applying for and managing state and regional funds administered by the Council. The Metropolitan Council (Council) administers a variety of funding sources and grant programs for the betterment of the Regional Parks and Trails System. These funds are granted to the 10 Regional Park implementing agencies (Agencies) or other recipients as directed by the Minnesota Legislature. Legal requirements for these programs vary, and the Council is responsible for ensuring compliance with all relevant requirements.

Figure 1. Metropolitan Council Planning Document Relationships



Amending the Handbook

The Regional Parks and Trails Planning Handbook will be considered by the Metropolitan Parks and Open Space Commission (MPOSC) prior to considering the *Imagine 2050* Regional Development Guide. The Handbook will be amended regularly, on a similar schedule as the once-every-four-years RPTPC timeline. Council Parks Staff will partner with Park Implementing Agencies and MPOSC on these updates. Largely, the proposed Parks and Trails Planning Handbook reflects the current practices that have been developed over the evolution of the system. The policy content requirements will be updated on the 4-year Policy Chapter update schedule. The Agency-Council processes and resources will be updated when needs arise, or new content is available.

Definitions

Long-Range Plan: A long-term planning document, revised and updated over time that provides a development concept, park or trail boundaries, an estimate of costs, as well as other elements.

Metropolitan Parks and Open Space Commission: The Metropolitan Parks and Open Space Commission (MPOSC) advises the Council on the development of the long-range plan for the Regional Parks and Trails System and on acquisition and development programs, including priorities for funding. MPOSC works in coordination with the 10 regional park implementing agencies.

Regional Park Implementing Agencies: Minnesota Statutes, section 473.351, subdivision 1(a) defines the regional park implementing agencies as follows: the counties of Anoka, Carver, Dakota, Ramsey, Scott, and Washington; the Cities of Bloomington and Saint Paul; the Minneapolis Park and Recreation Board; and Three Rivers Park District.

Regional Parks and Trails Policy Chapter: Document that puts forward policy direction to ensure the fulfillment of outdoor recreation benefits for all residents of the metropolitan region, now and into the future.

Regional Parks and Trails System: The nationally renowned collection of regional parks, regional trails, and special features across the seven-county Twin Cities metropolitan area.

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Section Two: System Plan

The Regional Parks and Trails System Plan in the Parks and Trails Policy Plan includes current regional parks and trails that are open-to-the-public, planned, and search areas/corridors.

The Planning Handbook System Plan section contains a description of the Recreational System within which the Metropolitan Regional Parks and Trails System exists.

Minnesota Outdoor Recreation System

Recreational parks and open space provided by the federal and state government generally serve similar recreational demands as the Regional Parks System. Local recreational open space facilities provide active recreation, such as playgrounds, athletic fields, courts, and aquatic centers. Private operations also make substantial contributions to the development of facilities and the provision of services and include golf courses, riding facilities, marinas, day camps, and downhill ski areas, as well as privately owned public spaces.

National Parks and Federal Lands

The Twin Cities region includes the Minnesota Valley National Wildlife Refuge as well as two national parks--the Mississippi National River and Recreation Area and the St. Croix National Scenic Riverway.

Minnesota Valley National Wildlife Refuge

The Minnesota Valley National Wildlife Refuge is a corridor of land and water along the Minnesota River that stretches from Bloomington to Henderson and is managed by the U.S. Fish and Wildlife Service. The refuge was established in 1976 to provide habitat for many migratory waterfowl, fish, and other wildlife species threatened by commercial and industrial development, and to provide environmental education, wildlife recreational opportunities, and interpretive programming for Twin Cities residents.

Mississippi National River and Recreation Area

The 54,000-acre Mississippi National River and Recreation Area was established in 1988 and is a unit of the National Park Service. The National Park Service owns very little land within its borders but partners with local governments, state agencies, and organizations to protect the significant resources along the 72-mile stretch of river running through the region. Several regional parks and trails, which are owned and operated by regional park implementing agencies, are located within the corridor. Additionally, 72 miles of the Mississippi River and four miles of the Minnesota River have been designated as the Mississippi National River and Recreation Area Water Trail, a national recreational amenity.

St. Croix National Scenic Riverway

A portion of the St. Croix National Scenic Riverway is within the region. The St. Croix National Scenic Riverway is a unit of the National Park Service located on the St. Croix River and the Namekagon River in Wisconsin. The National Riverway includes the two rivers and their riparian areas and occupies the boundary between Wisconsin and Minnesota. The St. Croix National Scenic Riverway is maintained and managed by the National Park Service and the Minnesota and Wisconsin Departments of Natural Resources.

State Parks, Lands, and Trails

The Minnesota Department of Natural Resources (DNR) manages state parks, lands and trails in the region, including Afton, Fort Snelling, and William O'Brien state parks; the Minnesota Valley State Recreation Area; and the Brown's Creek, Gateway, Luce Line, and Minnesota Valley state trails. The DNR also provides wildlife management areas for hunting, trapping, fishing, wildlife viewing and other

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compatible recreational uses. Scientific and natural areas are open to the public for nature observation and education but are not meant for intensive recreational activities.

There are six state water trails, and a system of boat and canoe launches that travel through the metropolitan area along the Cannon, Crow, Minnesota, Mississippi, St. Croix, and Rum rivers. The DNR and its local unit of government partners actively manage the state water trails for canoeing, kayaking, boating and camping.

Additionally, the DNR administers the State Wild and Scenic River System program. This program works with local units of government to preserve and protect these treasured river resources in their natural beauty and quietude, while also providing access and amenities for visitors. Wild and Scenic Rivers that intersect the Metropolitan Region include the Mississippi, Minnesota, Saint Croix, Crow, and Rum Rivers.

Local Parks

Local recreational open space facilities provide for a very large number and variety of recreational activities that occur in the metropolitan area. Local parks are often more intensely developed than regional parks and provide facilities for active recreation, such as playgrounds, athletic fields, courts, and aquatic centers. Local parks are designed to serve a neighborhood or community and are frequently located in residential areas.

Local parks are usually much smaller than regional parks and are located and designed to serve the local population, rather than primarily based on natural resource amenities. Local trails typically provide connections between community destinations, such as schools, libraries, and community centers. Although local recreational open space areas are not covered by this plan, the facilities and services they offer are taken into consideration when long-range plans of the regional system are prepared and reviewed.

Private Recreation

Public recreational open space facilities do not meet all the demands for such recreation required by the area's residents. Private operations also make substantial contributions to the development of facilities and the provision of services. The most prominent facilities provided by the private sector are golf courses, riding facilities, gun clubs, marinas, day camps, and downhill ski areas. There are also multiple recreational open space areas owned and operated by corporations, employees' associations, benevolent associations, and nonprofit social agencies. These private facilities reduce the burden on the public sector, provide additional opportunities, and help to preserve thousands of acres of land in open space. They complement activities and experiences offered by the public sector.

Nonprofit Partners

Nonprofit organizations, such as the Parks and Trails Council of Minnesota, the Trust for Public Land, and the Nature Conservancy, have a long history of supporting the outdoor recreation system in the region by protecting and restoring natural areas and wetlands, helping to acquire park land, and advocating for the importance of recreation and open space.

Classification System for Local and Regional Parks and Trails

Table 3-1 below provides a classification system for local and regional facilities, including use, service area, approximate size, and site attributes.

Table 3-1: Classification System for Local and Regional Parks and Trails

Local Facilities					
Component	Use	Service Area	Size	Site Attributes	Site Location
Mini park	Specialized facilities that serve a concentrated or limited population or specific group such as tots or senior citizens	Less than 1/4-mile radius	< 1 acre		May be publicly or privately owned and/or incorporated into a development site, such as apartment, townhouse, condominium complexes, or commercial centers.
Neighborhood park/playground	Area for intense recreational activities such as field games, court games, crafts, apparatus area, skating, and neighborhood centers.	¼ to ½ mile radius to serve a population of 4,000 – 5,000 (one neighborhood)	< 25 acres	Physical geography suited for intense development.	Proximity to elementary schools or residential neighborhoods.
Community playfield	Area for intense recreational facilities such as athletic fields and swimming pools; could include a neighborhood use.	3 - 5 neighborhoods or one community	25 - 50 acres	Physical geography suited for intense development.	Proximity to secondary schools and other public facilities.
Community park	Area of natural or ornamental quality for outdoor recreation such as walking, viewing, sitting, picnicking; could have some field and court games.	3 - 5 neighborhoods or one community	25 - 100 acres	Affords natural features with varied physical geographic interest.	Proximity to community facilities and resources.

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Local Facilities					
Component	Use	Service Area	Size	Site Attributes	Site Location
County park	Area of natural or ornamental quality for outdoor recreation such as walking, viewing, sitting, picnicking; could have some field and court games.	County	25 - 100 acres	Affords natural features with varied physical geographic interest.	Proximity to community facilities and resources and/or where resource occurs.
Conservancy lands	Area of natural quality such as watercourses and wetlands that are preserved for environmental or aesthetic benefits to the community and/ or because of the negative environmental or economic effects of developing them.	Municipality, township, county	Variable, based on extent of resources	Natural resources that merit preservation and that would be negatively affected by development.	Where resource occurs.
Local linear parks, trail, corridors, and parkways	Area developed for one or more varying modes of recreational travel such as hiking, biking, snowmobiling, horseback riding, cross-country skiing, canoeing, and driving.	A neighborhood or several neighborhoods in a city or township	Contained within one city or township. Width and length minimums vary by locality.	On- or off-road trails that may or may not traverse scenic areas while assuring the trail treadway has no adverse effect on the natural resource base.	Where needed to link neighborhoods to components of the local or regional recreation system and/or community facilities such as schools, libraries, commercial areas and to link to adjacent municipalities.

Section Two: System Plan

Local Facilities					
Component	Use	Service Area	Size	Site Attributes	Site Location
County linear parks, trail, corridors, and parkways	Area developed for one or more varying modes of recreational travel such as hiking, biking, snowmobiling, horseback riding, cross-country skiing, canoeing, and driving.	Several cities and/or townships in a county.	Traverses one or more municipalities. Width and length minimums vary by county.	On or off-road trails that may or may not traverse scenic areas while mitigating impacts to assuring the trail treadway has no adverse effect on the natural resource base.	Often found adjacent to major roadways within the county. Other locations where needed to link cities to components of the local or regional recreation system and/ or community facilities such as schools, libraries, commercial areas and to link to adjacent counties.

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Section Two: System Plan

Regional Facilities					
Component	Use	Service Area	Size	Site Attributes	Site Location
Regional park	Area of natural or ornamental quality for nature-oriented outdoor recreation such as picnicking, boating, fishing, swimming, camping, and trail uses.	3 - 5 communities	200 - 1000 acres (100-acre minimum)	Complete natural setting contiguous to water bodies or watercourses where possible.	Where natural resource occurs-- particularly water.
Regional park reserve	Area of natural quality for nature-oriented outdoor recreation such as viewing and studying nature, wildlife habitat, conservation, swimming, picnicking, hiking, boating, camping, and trail uses.	County, multi-county area	1,000+ acres; sufficient area to encompass the resource envisioned for preservation.	Diversity of unique resources, such as topography, lakes, streams, marshes, flora, fauna.	Where natural resource occurs.
Regional destination trail	Area developed for one or more varying modes of nonmotorized recreational travel such as hiking, biking, horseback riding, cross-country skiing, and canoeing.	The entire metropolitan region	Sufficient corridor width to protect natural resources and safely accommodate trail use. Sufficient length to be a destination itself, or to serve as a link between Regional Parks System units.	When feasible, off-road trails that utilize human made and/or natural linear resources such as utility corridors, railroad and highway rights of way, stream / river valleys, or at the edges of forest or prairie. On-road trails are acceptable when off-road trails are not feasible.	Preferably adjacent to high quality natural areas. The trail treadway should be placed where it has no adverse impact on the natural resource base.

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Regional Facilities					
Component	Use	Service Area	Size	Site Attributes	Site Location
Regional linking trail	Area developed for one or more varying modes of nonmotorized recreational travel such as hiking, biking, horseback riding, cross-country skiing, and canoeing.	The entire metropolitan region	Sufficient corridor width to protect natural resources and safely accommodate trail use. Sufficient length to link Regional Parks System units.	When feasible, off-road trails that utilize human made and/or natural linear resources such as utility corridors, railroad and highway rights of way, stream / river valleys, or at the edges of forest or prairie. On-road trails are acceptable when off-road trails are not feasible.	Linkages between components of the Regional Parks System. When feasible, a linking trail should attempt to connect to population, economic and social centers along its route. The trail treadway should be placed where it will have no adverse impact on the natural resource base.
Special recreation feature	Area that preserves, maintains, and provides specialized or single-purpose recreational activities, such as nature center, marina, zoo, conservatory, arboretum, display gardens, hunter training education facilities, downhill ski area, sites of historic or archeological significance, and bridging facilities.	Regional-(metropolitan area)	Specific standard applicable to desired feature.	Appropriate to particular special recreation feature.	Where most advantageous for the special recreation feature and the overall park system.

Section Three: Natural Systems

The Regional Parks and Trails System serves as a nature-based recreation system that protects high-quality natural areas for the enjoyment of visitors. With this focus on the protection, restoration, and enhancement, the Council is committed to working collaboratively with the ten Regional Park Implementing Agencies to strategically locate and acquire lands into the Regional Parks and Trails System, to ensure high quality opportunities and easy access for all visitors.

Locating and Acquisition

The legislative charge to the Council is to prepare a policy plan that "...shall identify generally the areas which should be acquired by a public agency to provide a system of regional recreation open space comprising park district, county and municipal facilities, which together with state facilities, reasonably will meet the outdoor recreation needs of the people of the metropolitan area and shall establish priorities for acquisition and development" ([Minnesota Statutes, section 473.147, subd. 1](#)).

One of the main mechanisms that the Metropolitan Council uses to accomplish this legislative duty is through the work of a regular System Additions process. This process seeks to identify and include regionally significant areas into the Regional Parks and Trails to provide a balanced network of outdoor recreation opportunities across the region.

Process and Criteria Overview for System Additions

The Council will evaluate proposed additions to the Regional Parks System to determine whether the general areas are of regional importance and will help provide a balanced system of public outdoor recreation for the metropolitan area. Major considerations in deciding which lands should be brought into the Regional Parks System are organized around three primary factors:

- **Natural Systems Foundation:** Acquiring lands that protect natural features, help protect or improve water quality, provide wildlife habitat, and/or offer opportunities for outdoor recreation.
- **Geographic Balance:** Ensuring regional park and trail facilities are evenly distributed around the metropolitan area or distributed in proportion to the existing and forecasted urban development.
- **Equity:** The ability to strengthen equitable use of regional parks and trails by all our region's residents, such as across age, race, ethnicity, income, national origin, and ability.

Adding a unit to the Regional Parks and Trails System or substantially modifying a long-range plan boundary outside of a Regional Parks Policy Plan update, requires the Council to conduct a formal Regional Parks and Trails Policy Plan amendment process that includes a public hearing conducted under the requirements of Minnesota Statutes, section 473.147. For more information, see the Planning section of the Regional Parks and Trails Planning Handbook under Boundary Adjustments.

The Council's role in this effort is to convene an evaluation process where the proposed idea may be considered within a larger regional context, recognizing that all system additions increase the total cost to complete the Regional Parks and Trails System, as outlined in Section Two of the RPTPC (System Plan).

General Criteria

The following Regional Parks and Trails System criteria provide an overview of the decision-making framework to use when considering an addition to the system. The framework is broad enough to cover

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the predominant factors critical to each of the Regional Parks System units – Regional Parks, Park Reserves, Regional Trails, and Special Features – yet it is limited enough to be manageable and focus the conversation on the critical elements that matter most.

Regional Park, Park Reserves, and Special Features

To qualify for regional status, all parks, park reserves, and Special Features must fulfill the following criteria:

- Draw visitors from across the region
- Provide for geographic balance
- Have a natural systems foundation
- Be of sufficient size and suitable extent.

REGIONAL PARKS

To qualify for regional park status, an existing or proposed park:

- Conserves a diversity of high-quality natural resources, either naturally occurring or human built, that support outdoor recreation activities
- At least 100 acres; typically, 200-500 acres
- Accommodates a variety of outdoor recreation activities

PARK RESERVES

For consideration as a Park Reserve, these units must meet the following criteria:

- Conserves a diversity of high-quality natural resources that support outdoor recreation activities
- At least 1,000 acres
- 80% of unit managed as natural lands that protect the ecological functioning of a native landscape

SPECIAL FEATURES

Criteria to qualify for special feature status, an existing or proposed special feature are listed below.

- Conserves a diversity of high-quality natural resources that support outdoor recreation activities
- Provides a unique high-quality outdoor recreation experience not commonly found in the parks, park reserves, and trails
- Provides a natural resource-based and scenic setting offering a compelling sense of place
- Demonstrates the existence or potential for drawing a regional audience
- Serves as a bridging facility, intended to attract and introduce new outdoor recreation users to the Regional Parks System
- Protects and honors a cultural landscape that possesses significant or sacred cultural meaning, including American Indian burial grounds. Recreation in these spaces is not a requirement and may be inappropriate.
- Has a unique managing or programming effort
- Complements the Regional Parks and Trails System

Does not duplicate or compete with recreation facilities adequately provided by the public or private sector

Section Three: Natural Systems

Does not deplete funds from other facilities in the system either because they have an existing or committed financial base or because a prior agreement for a public subsidy has been reached that is in the public's interest

- Be approved by the Council through the long-range planning process
- Contributes to the inventory of available and needed recreation opportunities

For Special Features – Bridging Facilities, the following criteria will be used to evaluate proposals for inclusion in the Regional Parks and Trails System.

Bridging facilities will:

- Require a Council-approved long-range plan, whether it is a stand-alone facility or part of an existing regional park, park reserve, special recreation feature, or trail.
- Provide a clear statement of purpose for what it is intended to accomplish, consistent with the above defined purpose, recognizing that these facilities will differ within and across agencies, and must evolve and change over time, in order to stay relevant and effective.
- Identify the population to be better served and the inequity that will be addressed, working directly with the community to create, design, and develop them.
- Be sited close to the desired population (e.g., within the defined service area).
- Include a plan for an awareness-building, programming, or marketing component, to promote regional parks and trails to users facing obstacles to access the Regional Parks System.
- Include programming as an essential component of the design, such as outdoor skill-building or natural resources stewardship education. It may include active and/or passive programming approaches.
- Provide a programming plan through park agency staff or through a partnership arrangement.
- Not be included in the annual Regional Parks System use estimate. If designed to meet their purpose of attracting new users and connecting them to regional parks and trails, a facility's success will be reflected in increased visitation in future annual regional park and trail use estimates.

Bridging facilities may:

- Be a stand-alone facility, located in an area not currently well-served by existing regional parks, park reserves, and trails. "Stand-alone" bridging facilities that exist outside of a regional park, park reserve, special recreation feature, or trail, are eligible for Regional Parks System funding, as permitted through the appropriate state laws and statutes.
- Be nested within an existing regional park, park reserve, special recreation feature, or trail, welcoming new users to the unit and then connecting them with the opportunities that the broader facility provides.
- Have a mobile element, to allow outreach to extend beyond the existing boundaries of the Regional Parks System, going into communities that have been historically underserved. Mobile bridging programming must be connected to a base Regional Park System facility and will need to articulate, track, and report their results.
- Include a programmatic element embedded in a partner facility, such as a school or non-profit organization, allowing the implementing agency to access and build on the organization's existing relationships with communities.

Special Feature – Cultural Landscapes

To qualify for Special Feature – Cultural Landscape, the existing or proposed unit shall:

Section Three: Natural Systems

- Recognizes and protects culturally significant landscapes including American Indian burial grounds.
- Does not require that recreation be part of the unit.
- May be designed to protect areas of significant cultural or sacred meaning to groups. This includes protecting these spaces and designing them to limit public access and foot traffic.

Special Feature – Historical Landscapes

To qualify for Special Feature – Historical Landscape – the existing or proposed unit shall:

- Recognize or protect a historically significant landscape associated with a notable design style; historic event, activity, or people; or reflects development patterns over time.
- Does not require that recreation be part of the unit.
- May be designed to protect areas of significant historic meaning to groups. This includes protecting these spaces and designing them to limit public access and foot traffic.

Regional Trails

To qualify for regional trail status, an existing or proposed trail:

- Must serve a regional audience, based on visitor origin and service-area research on regional trails
- Should not duplicate an existing trail
- Should connect two or more units of the Regional Parks System
- Should connect state or federal recreational units
- Should serve as a backbone to the local trail network
- Fill a gap in the regional recreation system
- Should connect to multiple public interest destinations such as schools, job centers, tourist destinations, historical, cultural, and architectural buildings and sites and commercial districts
- When determining the boundaries of regional trail corridors, regional park implementing agencies should consider high-quality natural resource lands adjacent to the trail treadway to enhance the natural resource values of the trail.
- Regional trails may pass through local parks along their route. The regional trails can enhance access to these local parks, and the parks may provide amenities for trail users... In determining whether an existing local park should become part of the regional trail corridor, the Council will evaluate the request in terms of its regional importance and whether the park itself serves a regional or local audience.

DESTINATION REGIONAL TRAILS OR GREENWAYS

- Should be located to reasonably maximize the amount of high-quality natural resources within the trail corridor boundaries.
- There should be no spacing minimums or maximums between them; instead, the decision to locate the trail should be based on the availability of existing high-quality natural resources or the opportunity to restore, enhance, protect, or re-create natural resources.
- Extensively visually separated from road system (more than 50% off-road)

LINKING REGIONAL TRAILS

- Should be located to reasonably maximize inclusion of high-quality natural resources and connections to local trails, areas of lifecycle and affordable housing, the transit network, and areas of infill and redevelopment.
- In the Metropolitan Urban Service Area, the siting of linking regional trails should consider both high quality natural resources and connections to major human-built or developed resources in the fully developed areas.
- Should be at least 1.5 miles apart so as not to overlap the localized service area of those trails.

Regional Park Study Areas

Typically, new regional parks are proposed as search areas that have been identified based on high-quality natural resources located in portions of the region where population growth is expected. However, there are times when a regional park implementing agency may want to propose including existing parks into the Regional Parks System. In an effort to make an informed decision, further study is required to assess whether the proposed addition is of regional significance. The proposed area for consideration is called a Regional Park Study Area. Designation as a Regional Park Study Area does not guarantee that a park will become part of the Regional Parks System. It acknowledges that studies would need to be conducted to determine whether the facility warrants regional status. Once these studies are complete, the information will be presented to the Metropolitan Parks and Open Space Commission and the Council for evaluation.

The Council conducts regularly scheduled visitor use studies to understand, among other things, visitor use patterns. The most recent study conducted in 2021 shows that the number of non-local visits (visits to regional parks made by people who do not live in the jurisdiction of the respective regional park implementing agency where the park is located) across the system were reported around 38 percent. As non-local visits face a decline, the Council will watch this important trend in the coming years. Currently, study areas must meet a 40% non-local visitor threshold to qualify for regional park designation. Non-local visitation is determined through collecting data from existing visitors in the proposed park.

Regional Parks and Trails Boundary Adjustments

- INSERT RAMSEY COUNTY REQUEST TO ADD 1,000 acres to Rice Creek North Regional Trail. For organization and formatting help, see Table 8 on page 52 in the original 2040 Parks Policy Plan.

Section Four: Climate Resilience Procedures

This section was added as a placeholder for future Climate Resilience procedures. As the Climate Resilience policies and actions are new with the update of the *Imagine 2050* process, it will take time to develop and operationalize the procedures necessary to implement them.

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Section Five: Planning


The *2050 Regional Parks and Trails Policy Plan* underscores the importance of long-range planning in fostering a welcoming, vibrant, and resilient parks and trails system. By promoting integrated resource planning across jurisdictions, we help ensure that our region's natural and cultural resources are preserved and enhanced for current and future generations. Collaborative efforts and long-range planning are essential to addressing the evolving needs of our diverse communities, caring for our natural systems, and enhancing the quality of life for all residents and visitors of the Twin Cities Metropolitan Area.

Long-Range Plan Requirements

Each long-range plan for regional parks, park reserves, Special Features, and regional trails must include information for each of the following items. When requirements differ from one classification to another – for example, where the requirements for regional parks, park reserves, and Special Features differ from regional trails - this will be noted.

Requirements specific to regional parks, park reserves, and Special Features are accompanied by a

tree symbol: 

Requirements specific to regional trails are accompanied by a bicycle symbol:  Long-range plan requirements are grouped into three major areas and include a subset of required content areas, which will be detailed below:

- Engagement
 - Demand Forecast
 - Public Awareness
 - Engagement, Participation, and Equity Analysis
- Development Concept
 - Boundaries
 - Acquisition Costs
 - Development Concept
 - Accessibility
 - Public Services
- Natural Systems and Cultural Landscapes
 - Stewardship Plan
 - Natural and Cultural Resources
 - Mississippi Corridor Critical Area

Engagement

Demand Forecast

The recreational demand to be met by the site as identified by the Council, the regional park implementing agency, or other sources. This requirement is typically met by including the following information:

- A current or recent visitor estimate or a service area population.
- Projection of how the visitor estimate or service area population is expected to grow.

Section Five: Planning

- A statement that the regional park or trail serves that need, or that the proposed expansion responds to that need.

Public Awareness

Plans for making the public aware of services available when the regional park, park reserve, special recreation feature or regional trail is open, including how to access the location by transit, if applicable.

Engagement, Participation, and Equity Analysis

Comprehensive Engagement Process: Describe the process for involving affected agencies; local units of government; local, state, and/or federal recreation providers; and the public in the development of the long-range plan or plan amendment. This process should:

- Engage affected agencies and recreation providers to present and address concerns related to the long-range plan.
- Include strategies to mitigate racial, ethnic, cultural, and linguistic barriers and ensure participation from diverse demographic groups such as different ages, races, ethnicities, incomes, national origins, and abilities.
- Ensure that all stakeholders and the public have opportunities to be heard and to influence the plan's contents.

Equity Analysis:

- **Project Data:** Define the boundaries and demographics of the engagement area, including neighborhoods adjacent to the park or trail, travel sheds, and agency/regional boundaries. Provide context on underserved populations and the historical factors leading to present-day inequities. Council staff encourage the use of the Regional Parks and Trails Equity Tool available here: <https://metrotransitm.nshinyapps.io/regional-parks-equity-tool/>
- **Public Engagement and Participation:**
 - Identify stakeholders, including youth, Black, Indigenous, and people of color communities, people with disabilities, low-income populations, populations aged 60 and over, and relevant community groups.
 - Detail engagement strategies used for each stakeholder group, ensuring culturally competent and representative staffing, appropriate training, convenient locations and times, and effective communication methods.
 - Summarize the themes and advice received from stakeholder engagement, specifying the contributing groups.

Summary and Response:

- Before submitting the plan to the Council, address concerns raised by engaged parties.
- Include a summary of comments received, identifying issues raised and how the engagement influenced the plan's content.
- Provide an evaluation summary detailing how public participation impacted decisions and policies, with consideration of advancing, supporting, coinciding, or diverging inputs.
- Outline accountability measures for creating better outcomes, including regional and local access, quality of experience, facility rules/policies, and reporting back to stakeholders.

Development Concept

Boundaries



A map showing the administrative boundary for the unit that includes owned acres and private inholdings that together represent the desired boundary of the proposed parkland managed by the agency.



A map showing the administrative boundary that includes agency-owned acres and anticipated private inholdings associated with the trail route that together establish the desired management boundary of the land to be managed by the agency.

Acquisition Costs



A list of parcels or real property to be acquired, estimated total cost, and schedule for their acquisition. A description of the natural resources, site suitability, special assessments, potential contamination based on data from the Minnesota Pollution Control Agency, and other conditions that affect acquisition of the site or location of the boundaries. A description of the agency ownership and management arrangement.



A list of anticipated parcels or real property to be acquired when known, and their estimated total acquisition cost. A description of the natural resources, site suitability, special assessments, potential contamination based on data from the Minnesota Pollution Control Agency, and other conditions that affect acquisition of the site or location of the boundaries should be included for those parcels. A description of the ownership and management arrangement.

Development Concept



A plan for recreational development and natural resource management that should include:

- Description and a map showing the location of planned development and natural resources management projects
- Approximate capacity of each facility
- Mapping of existing and planned local and regional trail connections to the site and information on how they relate to development within the park
- Wayfinding signage plan, indicating the types of signs and general locations within the park
- Information on the source and location of drinking water that is adequate for the recreational uses of the park
- Schedule and cost estimates for each project
- Conflicts between recreational and natural-resource management needs in developing the park/trail unit should be addressed and resolved.



A plan for development, including schedule and cost estimates for the project. The plan should include:

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- A map showing the regional trail alignment in relation to the roadway or other land uses, intersection crossings, and other regional and local parks and trails.
- A section graphic showing the trail separation from the road.
- Wayfinding signage plan, indicating the types of signs and general locations along the trail corridor.

Accessibility



A plan that addresses accessibility, affordability, and other measures designed to ensure that the facility can be used by people with limited mobility. All new and updated master plans for the Regional Parks System must address compliance with ADA. As stated in Chapter 7, Recreation Activities and Facilities, regional park implementing agencies are encouraged to use U.S. Access Board guidelines for Outdoor Developed Areas as a minimum standard of accessibility on all new or substantially altered capital projects within the Regional Parks System.



A plan that addresses accessibility, affordability, and other measures designed to ensure that the facility can be used by people with limited mobility.

Public Services



A description of any non-recreational public services and facilities, such as roads or sewers, needed to accommodate the proposed recreational use, including the timing of these services and the arrangements necessary to provide them. Regional park implementing agencies are encouraged to include transportation and transit planners in the development of a master plan.



A description of any non-recreational public services and facilities, such as roads or sewers, needed to accommodate the proposed trail, including the timing of these services and the arrangements necessary to provide them.

Natural Systems and Cultural Landscapes

Stewardship Plan



A program for managing park property, including activities, expenses, and anticipated revenue prior to developing the property for recreation purposes. Planned non-recreation uses and disposition of revenue from such use should be detailed.



This requirement only applies to Regional Destination Trails or Greenways: A program for managing the surrounding greenway areas and natural resource features.

Natural and Cultural Resources

Natural Resources Inventory (NRI):

- Land Cover Inventory: Align with the Minnesota Land Cover Classification System (MLCCS) by the Minnesota Department of Natural Resources and MetroGIS
- Native Plant Communities: Include mapping from the Minnesota County Biological Survey

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- Listed Species: Document rare, endangered, and threatened species from the Natural Heritage Information System
- Additional data: Optionally include other land-based information.

Cultural Resources Inventory

- Historical and Archeological Sites: Document historical and archaeological sites
- Cultural Significance: Identify areas of cultural significance to local communities, including indigenous and other cultural groups
- Consultation: Engage with local historical societies, indigenous groups, tribal historic preservation officers, and other relevant stakeholders to gather comprehensive cultural data

Restoration and Maintenance

- Project Basis: Use the NRI and cultural resources inventory as foundations for proposals to restore degraded resources and maintain high-quality natural and cultural resource features.
- Cost Estimates: Include estimated capital costs for natural and cultural resource restoration projects.
- Consultation: Engage natural resource and cultural heritage professionals in designing and constructing park facilities, especially trails near or crossing natural or cultural resource areas.
- Public Interaction: Ensure designs allow public enjoyment of natural habitats and cultural sites with minimal adverse impact.
- Climate Adaptation and Mitigation: Incorporate climate-resilient species and habitats and prioritize restoration projects that enhance ecosystem resilience to climate change impacts.

Water Resource Protection

- Surface and Groundwater: Include protection measures for surface water and groundwater resources, including wetlands.
- Compliance: Follow the Minnesota Pollution Control Agency's best management practices for stormwater management. (*Minnesota Stormwater Manual*)
- Wetland Management: Prioritize avoiding impacts, minimizing them, and mitigating them when unavoidable.
- Climate Adaptation: Integrate water management practices that enhance the area's resilience to extreme weather events and climate variability.

Vegetation Management

- Management Plan: Provide information on vegetation management strategies within the unit.
- Climate Resilience: Select and manage vegetation to enhance resilience to climate changes, including using native species that are more tolerant of climate variability.

Integration of Cultural Resources

- Cultural Awareness: Ensure that park facilities, signage, and educational materials reflect the cultural heritage of the area.
- Community Engagement: Involve local communities in the planning and preservation of cultural resources.
- Preservation: Implement measures to protect and preserve cultural sites during park development and maintenance

Mississippi River Corridor Critical Area

This requirement only applies to *Regional Parks, Park Reserves, Special Features, and Regional Trails located in part or wholly within the Mississippi River Corridor Critical Area (MRCCA)*: Long-range plans must address the following:

- Acknowledge the purposes of the MRCCA designation as detailed in Minnesota Statutes, section 116G.15, subd. 1.
- Acknowledge the standards and criteria for the preservation, protection, and management of lands within the MRCCA in Minn. Rule Chapters 6106.0010 – 6106.0180.
- Map the location of the parkland and its relationship with the MRCCA boundary.
- Recognize that the design and construction of park facilities must comply with the standards contained in Minn. Rules 6106.0130.
- Plan, design, and construct facilities and projects in a manner that protects primary conservation areas and public river corridor views identified by local units of government in their comprehensive plans.

Acquisition Long-Range Plan Criteria and Process

Once the Council designates a unit to be a part of the Regional Parks and Trails System, the next step is usually the regional park implementing agency conducts a long-range planning process, as described above. There are times when a regional park implementing agency has an opportunity to acquire – or protect under an option to purchase – land that does not yet have a development concept, which is one of the requirements for long-range planning. In these situations, the regional park implementing agency may choose to develop an acquisition long-range plan, to establish the long-range plan boundary or to adjust an existing Council-approved long-range plan boundary. The acquisition long-range plan or amendment may focus solely on the land under option to purchase. The Council must approve the acquisition long-range plan prior to acquisition. Acquisition long-range plans shall include:

- A demonstration of the proposed regional park system unit's consistency with Chapter 4: Siting and Acquisition – Strategy 1, including size/service area requirements.
- Boundaries: A map showing the parcels to be added to the long-range plan boundary in relation to the existing administrative and management boundaries of the park or trail. Additionally, a description of the ownership and management arrangement.
- Acquisition costs: A list of parcels to be acquired and the estimated total cost and schedule for their acquisition, and information on natural resources, site suitability, special assessments, potential contamination based on data from the Minnesota Pollution Control Agency and other conditions that affect acquisition of the site or location of the boundaries.
- A demonstration of implementing agency board approval and other support from partner agencies.

Before any development occurs and before the Council provides any financial assistance for development to the new or existing regional park system unit, agencies must gain a Council-approved development long-range plan that includes all the additional required elements outlined in the Long-range Plan Content Requirements section above.

Boundary Adjustments Criteria and Process

Minor boundary adjustments are additions or removals of smaller acreages of land, usually from a single property owner, to an existing Council-approved long-range plan boundary. Minor boundary adjustments are handled by updating a Council-approved long-range plan or an acquisition long-range plan.

Realignments for existing and planned regional trails are considered minor boundary adjustments and are handled through the long-range plan amendment process.

Minor boundary adjustments for additions to regional park or trail long-range plans must meet one of the following two criteria, whichever is greater:

1. For parks, affect less than a total of 100 acres.
2. Affect less than 20% of the area within the Council-approved long-range plan administrative boundary.

Concurrent with a long-range plan or acquisition long-range plan amendment process, minor boundary adjustment proposals must also include the following:

1. A description of the purpose for the change and the extenuating circumstances.
2. A map identifying the current boundary and the proposed boundary.
3. A demonstration of the proposal's consistency with the general locating and acquisition criteria, located Chapter Four of the Regional Parks Policy Plan, tables 4-1 and 4-2, and other applicable strategies in Chapter Four.

As stated above, minor boundary adjustments are considered concurrent with a long-range plan amendment or acquisition long-range plan amendment. Requests should include a description of the above criteria along with the long-range plan or acquisition long-range plan requirements in Chapter 5, Strategy 1, Long-range Plan Requirements. If the Council approves the boundary adjustment, then the new parcel will be eligible for applicable regional funding sources.

Design Considerations for Long-Range Plans

The RPTPC incorporates the policy direction provided by *Imagine2050* to:

- Promote expanded multimodal access to regional parks, regional trails, and the transit network, where appropriate.
- Acknowledge the range of recreation opportunities throughout the region by encouraging context-sensitive and nature-based approaches to designing facilities.
- Develop opportunities, programs, and spaces that strive to uplift community connections to the outdoors while counteracting barriers and harm placed on underrepresented communities found in the most recent visitor study.

To respond to these goals, regional park implementing agencies are encouraged to consider the following design elements in a regional park or trail long-range plan.

Promote expanded multimodal access:

- Provide connections to transit stops or park-and-rides when designating the alignment of a regional trail, where appropriate.

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- Provide bike racks and lockers located near activity areas in regional parks so visitors can safely store their bikes as they recreate.
- Design multiple entrance points to a regional park to make it easier for bicyclist or pedestrian to access the park, where appropriate

Acknowledge the range of recreation opportunities:

- Regional park and trail facilities designed with a nature-based, context sensitive approach fit its setting while utilizing innovative approaches to improve or enhance natural systems. Examples include infiltration basins, green roofs, and permeable surfaces.
- Offer recreational activities that play to the strengths of the regional park or trail's location instead of trying to offer all things to all people. An example is the incorporation of watercraft and swimming in a regional park located on a lake.
- Encourage more development in regional parks and trails within the Metropolitan Urban Service Area (MUSA) for more recreational opportunities and high capacity.

Develop opportunities, programs, and spaces that strive to uplift community connections to the outdoors:

- Use universal design in regional park and trail facility designs.
- Create gender neutral bathrooms and ensure bathrooms with running water are available.
- Provide more benches and improved lighting on trails.
- Enhance wayfinding to make it easier for visitors to navigate within and across systems.
- Create signs that use Indigenized and non-Western design elements developed in consultation with Indigenous people, youth, and historically excluded communities.

Long-Range Plan Amendments Criteria and Process

Minnesota Statutes, section 473.313 requires long-range plans be developed by the park implementing agencies consistent with this plan; however, it does not specify when revisions are necessary. As discussed earlier in this Plan, the regional park implementing agency will submit a long-range plan amendment to the Council to change its original proposal for acquisition and/or development, or when the agency has developed significant additional details that needs to be reflected in the long-range plan. The Council may approve or reject the long-range plan amendment for cause and return the plan to the regional park implementing agency for revisions to address the Council's concerns.

Regional park implementing agencies must provide an opportunity for the public and affected local units of government near the particular park or trail to participate in the process to amend a long-range plan. With regard to financing the construction of recreation and visitor support facilities proposed in a long-range plan, it is important that there is sufficient detail about the facility in the long-range plan and that the regional park implementing agency is ready to construct the facility when funds become available. If a long-range plan amendment is needed before funding the construction of a facility, the regional park implementing agency must provide the public and affected local units of government an opportunity to participate in the process, as well.

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There are several reasons when long-range plan amendments are required to demonstrate how changes to the Regional Parks System remain consistent with the Council's expectations as outlined in this plan. They include, but are not limited to:

- Improvements that substantially differ in type, size, scale, or cost from those in the Council-approved long-range plan and the adopted capital improvement program to meet expanded local recreational demands or satisfy above-average quality standards (see Planning – Strategy 4, later in this chapter)
- Changes to a park or trail boundary (see Chapter 5: Boundary Adjustments)
- Significant changes or additions to a regional park concessioners' agreement (see Chapter 7: Recreation Activities and Facilities – Strategy 1)
- Proposals for placement of telecommunications towers on Regional Parks System land (see Chapter 6: System Protection – Strategy 5)

The Metropolitan Parks and Open Space Commission and Council will then review the long-range plan amendment for consistency with the conditions of this policy and either approve, modify, or reject the long-range plan amendment.

Focused Long-Range Plan Amendments

Occasionally Regional Park Implementing Agencies seek to make minor changes to a long-range plan that may only impact a subset of long-range plan requirement areas. In those instances, Regional Park Implementing Agency staff should discuss the scope of the desired plan amendment with Council Parks and Trails staff prior to commencing the amendment process to determine the required subset of long-range plan requirements.

Examples of Focused Long-Range Plan Amendments include Battle Creek Regional Park – Pigs Eye Lake ([2021-68](#)) and Minnesota River Greenway Regional Trail – Fort Snelling State Park segment ([2021-342](#)). The Battle Creek Regional Park – Pigs Eye Lake amendment followed a feasibility study on the implementation of islands within Pigs Eye Lake, which are intended to improve aquatic habitat, improve the quantity and quality of habitat for migratory bird species, and enhance the quantity of shoreline habitat. The amendment focused primarily on natural resources and public safety improvements, and did not address park acquisition, boundary adjustments, recreation infrastructure, or access.

The Minnesota River Greenway Regional Trail – Fort Snelling State Park segment amendment followed Council review of an Environmental Assessment Worksheet submitted by Dakota County. The amendment included a cooperative use agreement between Dakota County and the Minnesota Department of Natural Resources that allows for the regional trail segment to travel through state property. The amendment focused on the development concept, conflicts, and accessibility. Other typical long-range plan elements were not required as the existing regional trail plan was deemed sufficiently complete in these areas.

Prior to the submittal of each of these long-range plan amendments to the Council for consideration, Regional Park Implementing Agency staff worked closely with Council staff to identify the requirements of the focused amendment.

Focused long-range plan amendments are considered through the Metropolitan Council Committee process that typically has a 60-day duration.

Administrative Process for Minor Long-Range Plan Amendments

Administrative reviews of minor long-range plan amendments will be conducted by Council staff with delegated authority granted by the Met Council, and they are not required to be presented to the regular Council committees for review and approval. Amendments reviewed administratively must meet all the relevant proposed criteria adopted by the Metropolitan Council:

1. **Consistent:** Is consistent with Minn. Stat. § 473.313 requirements and be determined to be complete for review by the Council.
 - Conform to the regional systems plans.
 - Consistent with Council policies, including *Thrive MSP 2040* and parks policies.
2. **Minor in Scope:** Does not change the acquisition and/or development concept.
3. **Subject of the Amendment:**
 - a. **Corrections:** Proposes corrections to a minor mapping or design error affecting less than 1% of the unit's total acres of the administrative boundary.
 - b. **Minor Regional Trail Realignment:** Proposes regional trail implementation realignments that alter up to 1 mile of trail and are within 1 mile of the original alignment but do not alter the start and end points of the trail.
 - c. **Boundary Changes:** Proposes a boundary adjustment, public-to-public land exchange, or an acquisition long-range plan amendment that changes the administrative boundary by less than 5 acres; and the land addition/removal is valued up to \$750,000 total.
 - d. **Natural Area/Utility Council Consents:** Proposes land and/or easement conveyances for:
 - Natural area monitoring.
 - Conveys an easement for a natural area restoration, or enhancement project that affects the administrative boundary by less than 5 acres.
 - Underground utility that has no material long-range impacts to the park or trail and affects the administrative boundary by less than 1 acre.
4. **No impacts:** Does not have the potential for a cumulative or material impact to the regional park or trail's recreational opportunities, natural areas, or cultural resources.

**Please note, Council staff will consider the requirements of any Council or State funding restrictions in determining whether a proposed candidate is eligible for administrative review.*

***Amendments meeting the criteria above may still be required to have full Council review if determined necessary by Council staff.*

There may be instances when Council staff direct minor amendment proposals to the regular Council Committees, due to political sensitivity or other contextual factors. Administrative review is proposed to be completed within 15 business days once the long-range plan amendment has been deemed complete.

Council review of this administrative review program is proposed to take place after two years of its approval; then transition to the 4-year Policy Plan update cycle. The Community Development Committee will be updated annually of the administrative approvals reviewed as part of this program and the Metropolitan Parks and Open Space Commission will be updated more frequently.

Joint powers agreements

Joint powers agreements for Regional Parks System units are encouraged.

Regional park implementing agencies are encouraged to enter into joint powers agreements with local governments regarding the acquisition, use, and operation and maintenance for focused improvements within Regional Parks System units.

Joint powers agreements need not be identical, but regional park implementing agencies are encouraged to negotiate arrangements that:

- Address who owns, controls, and manages the land under the parks system unit improvement
- Ensure that the parks system unit improvement will be open to all people (not restricted by residence)

The parks system unit improvement should be a truly regional facility since it will be eligible for regional and state funds to finance its acquisition, use, development, and operations/maintenance once the Council has approved a long-range plan for the parks system unit.

The duration of the joint powers agreements should last the expected life of the parks system unit improvement, at a minimum, and should be included in the parks system unit long-range plans submitted to the Council as an assurance that any funds provided by the Council for the park unit improvement would be spent consistent with the Council-approved long-range plan.

Regional trails usually extend through several communities requiring coordination for segment implementation. Regional parks, park reserves, and Special Features may coordinate with one or two local governments on specific facility improvements to enhance a Council-approved long-range plan. If an improvement to a Regional Parks System unit occurs on land owned by a local government instead of the regional park implementing agency, the regional park implementing agency may lease the park unit land and manage it through a joint powers agreement with the local jurisdiction.

Regional park implementing agencies should include a copy of any joint powers agreements as part of the Regional Parks System unit long-range plan. This assures the Council that any funds it provides or passes on for the parks system unit's acquisition, development, use, or operation and maintenance will be consistent with the Council-approved long-range plan.

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The Metropolitan Council protects public investment in acquisition and development by assuring that every component in the system is able to fully carry out its designated role as long as a need for it can be demonstrated. There are several mechanisms that protect the integrity of the Regional Parks System and its individual parts of the system including regional park and trail long-range plans, Council restrictive covenants that place restrictions on parkland, the Metropolitan Land Planning Act, and Metropolitan Significance.

Council Review Processes

Two main Council review processes implement the Council's System Protection policy including the local comprehensive plan process and the land conversion process. The Council's Local Planning Assistance review of local comprehensive plans ensures that public investment in acquisition and development are consistent with Council systems and policies, as well as other agency system plans. The Council's Regional Parks and Trails System Land Conversion process considers the conversion of Regional Parks and Trails Systems lands to other uses.

Local Comprehensive Plans

The policy direction from *Imagine 2050* and the Council's systems and policy plans – including this *2050 Regional Parks and Trails Planning Handbook* – provides guidance to local governments in planning for local growth. Under state law, each county, city, and township in the seven-county metropolitan area must review and, if necessary, amend its local comprehensive plan at least every 10 years to ensure that the local plan, and local fiscal devices and official controls, conform with the Council's metropolitan system plans ([Minnesota Statutes 473.864](#)). Following the decennial adoption of the *2050 Regional Parks and Trails Policy Chapter* and once the Council issues system statements, as required under the [Metropolitan Land Planning Act](#), local communities have three years to update their local comprehensive plan. If the Council issues system statements based on a future amendment to the *2050 Regional Parks and Trails Policy Chapter*, local communities have nine months to amend their comprehensive plans (Minnesota Statutes, section 473.856).

Local comprehensive plans are reviewed by the Council based on three primary criteria:

- Conformance with metropolitan system plans
- Consistency with Council regional policies
- Compatibility with adjacent and affected governmental units.

When a plan meets these criteria, the Council authorizes it to be placed into effect. If a plan does not meet the review standards, the Council may require the jurisdiction to modify its plan to conform to the regional system plans.

Conformance

A local comprehensive plan will conform to the metropolitan system plans if the local plan:

- Accurately reflects the components of the metropolitan system plans
- Integrates public facilities plan components
- Addresses land use policies, plans for forecasted growth, meets density standards, and maximizes the efficiency and effectiveness of the regional systems.

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In their local comprehensive plans, communities need to acknowledge and plan for the Regional Parks System facilities in their jurisdiction as identified in the *2050 Regional Parks and Trails Policy Plan*. The Council will review local plans to ensure they will not cause detrimental impacts to Regional Parks System facilities and that the plans do not preclude or substantially limit the future acquisition of lands officially identified for the Regional Parks System in the *2050 Regional Parks and Trails Policy Plan*.

Consistency

Consistency is generally achieved if the local plan:

- Addresses the community role for the land use policies contained in *Imagine*, including:
 - Natural Resource Protection: Conserve, restore, and protect the region's natural resources to ensure their ongoing availability, to support public health, and to maintain a high quality of life.
 - Access, Mobility and Transportation Choice: Sustain and improve a multimodal transportation system to support regional growth, maintain regional economic competitiveness and provide choices and reliability for the system's users. To help meet this policy, local communities are encouraged to plan and develop local trail connections to regional trails as identified in the *2050 Regional Parks and Trails Policy Plan* and to plan for and connect to the Regional Bicycle Transportation Network as identified in the *2050 Transportation Policy Plan*, where appropriate.
- 1. Addresses the linkage of local land uses to local parks and open space, as well as the Regional Parks System.
- Includes an implementation plan describing public programs, fiscal devices, and other specific actions (sequencing and staging activities) that implement the comprehensive plan and ensure conformance with regional system plans.
- Addresses official controls and includes a capital improvement program (sewers, parks, transportation, water supply and open space) that supports planned growth and development.

Compatibility

Compatibility with adjacent and affected governmental units is generally achieved if the local plan adequately documents that it has addressed the concern of all adjacent and affected jurisdictions, based on comments or concerns from these entities.

As local communities update their comprehensive plans, the Council encourages them to identify locally important natural areas for protection through acquisition, conservation easements, and conservation-sensitive development practices. In addition to planning for the recreational needs of its residents, the Council encourages communities to plan local trail connections to the Regional Parks System. Together, the region, the regional park implementing agencies, local communities, nonprofit organizations, and the private sector can preserve natural areas and enhance multimodal access to regional parks and trails.

Land Conversions Process

Conversion of Regional Parks Systems' lands to other uses is allowed only in limited circumstances and with approval of the Metropolitan Council. Land conversion requests are challenging for the Regional Park Implementing Agency (Implementing Agency) because they are complex and often originate from reasons outside of the agency's parks department control. The Council's Regional Parks System land conversion work aims to ensure that any system impacts are evaluated and mitigated fairly and transparently as an equally valuable land exchange is determined. Metropolitan Council

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committees require defensible and compelling stories that include summaries of these requests and desired actions. Council-Agency coordination throughout this process is essential to establishing workable solutions for every conversion proposal.

Lands in the Regional Parks System will only be converted to other uses if approved by the Metropolitan Council through an equally valuable land or facility exchange as defined below:

“Equally valuable land” is defined as land that:

- Is contiguous to the Regional Parks System unit containing the land proposed to be exchanged (within the same park/trail unit)
- Has comparable or better natural resource characteristics
- Could provide comparable or better recreation opportunities than the land being released from the covenant.

In exceptional circumstances, the Metropolitan Council may accept as equally valuable land the addition of land to another unit of the Regional Parks System where:

- The replacement land has comparable or better natural resource characteristics
- The replacement land has comparable or better recreation opportunities than the land being converted
- No other reasonable alternative exists and where all other provisions of this policy can be met.

“Equally valuable facility” is defined as an exchange of land for facilities when recreational benefits and/or natural resource benefits are increased as a result of the exchange. For example, some land within a regional trail corridor may be exchanged to widen a highway if a highway department constructs a trail overpass or underpass of the widened road at no cost to the regional park implementing agency.

The Metropolitan Council will consider conversion of regional park land to other uses only if the conversion will not harm the Regional Parks System. The Council will review land conversion requests using the criteria below. If the Council approves the conversion request, then the long-range plan boundary will be updated in the System Plan and the Council’s Geographic Information System dataset, to reflect the changed boundary.

Land Conversion Criteria

The following criteria will be used to determine whether Regional Parks and Trails System lands may be exchanged for other land or a facility.

Issues with respect to the existing park system unit:

- Whether the regional park system unit can continue to function as originally planned, meeting Council standards for sites and site attributes established for the particular type of park system unit (regional park, park reserve, trail greenway or special feature)
- Whether environmental features (wildlife habitat, water quality) will be adversely affected and can be protected with the new use
- Whether the loss of site or function will be made up through acquisition of a site with comparable characteristics adjacent to or in the immediate area of the current location

Issues with respect to the alternative use:

- The land area needs of the proposed project

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- Whether the specific site requirements for the proposed project are unique to the area proposed for conversion
- Whether the proposed project is consistent with Council policies
- Whether the proposed project is of greater benefit to the region than having the regional park system unit remain in place

Telecommunication Towers: Process

Federal laws allow local governments to regulate the placement of telecommunication towers as long as there is no ban preventing reasonable market access for that communication system.

Antenna towers for telecommunication services and the regional public safety radio system are generally prohibited on lands within the Council-approved long-range plan boundaries of a Regional Parks System unit unless:

- The communication system is not able to function without placement of the tower on Regional Parks System land. All other alternatives must be considered for placement within the grid in order to avoid placing any tower on Regional Parks System land. The communication service provider must demonstrate that this criterion is satisfied in requesting approval by the Council and regional park implementing agency to place a tower on Regional Parks System land. The only exception to this condition is that a tower for the Metropolitan Emergency Radio System may be placed on Regional Parks System land even if it could be placed on private land instead, upon meeting the following mitigation conditions:
 - If there is no feasible alternative to placing the tower on park land, the tower's impact on the Regional Parks System land must be minimized.
 - The tower must be screened from view of regional park/trail users as much as possible through tower placement and design features agreed to by the regional park implementing agency.
 - The tower must be located on land that has already undergone regional park or trail development and is accessible through the existing park road system. Land in park reserves or regional parks conserved for habitat restoration and interpretation must be avoided.
 - Co-location of antennas on one tower is preferred over constructing several towers if co-location has less visual and other environmental impacts on Regional Parks System land. The only exception to this condition is if co-location would result in frequency interference between antennas.
 - Payments for placing telecommunication towers in regional parks or park reserves should be dedicated to the regional park implementing agency that owns the land for acquisition, redevelopment, development, or operation and maintenance of its Regional Parks System units.

Regional park implementing agencies must submit a long-range plan amendment to the Council for review that proposes a tower placement. The long-range plan amendment should state how the conditions listed above have been met. The Metropolitan Parks and Open Space Commission and the Council will then review the long-range plan amendment for consistency with the conditions of this policy and either approve, modify, or reject the long-range plan amendment.

If the land for the tower's location has a restrictive covenant on it (required for land acquired with regional funds), the regional park implementing agency shall amend the covenant to recognize the

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temporary use of the tower with any conditions required for the tower's lease and submit the amended covenant to the Council as part of the long-range plan amendment.

The Council will consider the long-range plan amendment and the restrictive covenant amendment concurrently and either approve or disapprove them, based on whether the tower will negatively affect the Regional Parks System unit. If a regional park implementing agency believes that a tower should not be placed on Regional Parks System land because the tower could not meet the conditions of this policy, the regional park implementing agency has the authority to deny the application.

Tower placement on Regional Parks System land shall be considered a temporary non-recreation use. As stated previously, any lease revenues for the tower easement must be used by the regional park implementing agency to further the acquisition, redevelopment, development, or operation and maintenance of that regional park implementing agency's portion of the Regional Parks System. The regional park implementing agency must report the annual lease revenues to the Council and how the revenues were spent if they exceed \$2,500 per year. Regional park implementing agencies are encouraged to charge "at cost" fees for public safety radio equipment on towers located on Regional Parks System land.

Placement of Other Utilities: Easement Process

Regional Wastewater Infrastructure

Regional wastewater conveyance facilities are located on Regional Parks and Trails System to serve the regional park and trail and other areas. The Metropolitan Council's Environmental Services Division works cooperatively with regional park implementing agencies to locate facilities when needed. Collaborative opportunities between the Council and Regional Park Implementing Agencies to educate visitors about the importance and benefits of the Regional Wastewater System are encouraged.

Other Utilities

To distribute electricity, natural gas, oil, drinking water, and other utilities, it may be necessary to place underground conduits/pipes or above ground transmission poles/towers on Regional Parks System lands. Such utilities may be needed to serve visitors at that Regional Parks System unit, and to serve other land.

Regional park implementing agencies may either sell or grant a utility conveyance (an easement or a license) to the utility provider. The utility provider may have to pay for the easement or permit based on the benefit the utility provides to the Regional Parks and Trails System unit.

Agencies must follow the System Protection Process for Land Conversions described earlier in this Chapter of the Handbook for Council consideration of utility easement conveyances. Utility conveyances should specify the following information.

- The location of the utility, access to it, and time limit of the conveyance.
- How the project area will be improved to a similar or better state.
How the long-range plan will continue to be implemented.

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The Regional Parks and Trails System consists of nearly 60,000 acres of unique natural spaces that provide a wide variety of benefits to visitors and natural systems.

Since 1974, activities and facilities in the Regional Parks and Trails System were guided by a static list of eligible recreational activities. Today, Regional Park Implementing Agencies, in partnership with the Metropolitan Council, seek to build upon its nature-based recreation foundation and expand into activities and facilities that better meet the evolving needs of a more diverse audience, including youth, Black, Indigenous, and people of color, those over 65 years of age, to name a few.

As the region's population diversifies, there is a growing need to move toward a more flexible system of recreational activities and facilities that increases equitable access to a more diverse audience. It is important to note that the activities and facilities included in the original eligibility list remain an important part of the Regional Parks and Trails System.

Additionally, there is a desire to provide a range of recreational opportunities that include park and trail facilities designed with nature-based, context sensitive approaches that fit the regional setting while improving and enhancing natural systems. Examples include skate parks with built-in infiltration basins, green roofs, and permeable surfaces.

Recreational Activities Evaluation Process

Regional Park Implementing Agencies are responsible for conducting long-range planning to guide the acquisition and development of the Regional Parks and Trails System. Part of this process includes performing an initial evaluation to determine what activities and facilities should be supported by the unit, including new types of activities and facilities. When considering whether to accommodate a new use, the Implementing Agency must first assess and connect how well the proposed activity/facility meets the engagement findings.

The following criteria should guide decisions on proposed activities and facilities:

- Be consistent with the community engagement findings of Agency-led long-range planning, including the equity analysis.
- Serve a regional audience.
- Not duplicate local, neighborhood parks and trails systems.
- Connect with and support the system's nature-based foundation.
- Be compatible with other uses and activities, minimize user conflicts, and preserve a wide range of user experiences.

Proposed activities and facilities for regional parks and trails should also be consistent with the Regional Parks and Trails Vision, Mission, and Values

- **Vision:** Together, growing community connections and inspiring health and healing through exceptional outdoor experiences and high-quality natural areas.
- **Mission:** A partnership committed to an interconnected, nature-based parks and trails system, where everyone belongs.
- **Values:**

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- **Collaboration:** Recognizing that we are one part of a broader community working together to create regional parks and trails for all. Building strong partnerships is vital to sustaining and living out our values.
- **Belonging:** Committed to offering processes, spaces and programming that are inclusive, welcoming, safe, and accessible to all individuals seeking experiences in the outdoors.
- **Stewardship:** Caring for the natural environment today and for future generations.
- **Well-being:** Knowing that the outdoors is vital for personal and community health.
- **Adaptability:** Challenging ourselves to grow, by creating a culture of innovation.
- **Education:** Inspiring learning about culture, history, and natural systems.

Process for Including New Activities

If an Implementing Agency is interested in proposing a new activity or facility that is not included in the current regional park or trail long-range plan, or the activity or facility requires physical changes or construction beyond adjustments to park management rules or policies, the Implementing Agency shall pursue one of two paths:

- For a new activity or facility proposal not in the current long-range plan, amend the plan.
- For proposals made in park or trail unit with a long-range plan updated within the last five years, the Implementing Agency may seek MPOSC and Metropolitan Council approval of the proposed activity and design through a formal request that includes:
 - Description of the request
 - How the request fits within the regional park or trail unit and overall Regional Parks and Trails System
 - How the request meets the above criteria
 - Detailed development concept and schematic design
 - Identification of conflicts and steps necessary for their resolution
 - Known opposition

MPOSC and the Council may approve the proposal, require improvements, or reject the proposal based on their assessment of the above criteria. If both MPOSC and the Council find the proposal to be compatible with the criteria, then the Council will approve the long-range plan/request without conditions. If either MPOSC or the Council finds the activity or facility incompatible, the Council may ask the Implementing Agency to go back to modify or improve the approach or design. If both MPOSC and the Council deem the proposal incompatible, then the Council reserves the right to exclude the activity or facility from regional funding, including calculations of the annual parks use estimates and the agency's acreage total, similar to the treatment of incompatible facilities that pre-dated the Regional Parks and Trails System.

Ineligible Recreational Activities

Sport Complexes

Organized amateur athletic facilities or sports complexes are not eligible to be included in the Regional Parks and Trails System. Traditionally, municipal recreation departments and/or school districts provide

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for these needs. The Minnesota Amateur Sports Commission is responsible for elevating the social and economic benefits of sports to enrich the lives of all Minnesotans. Grants for such facilities go through the sports commission, not the Council.

Informal, flexible ball fields that can be used for a variety of pickup games are encouraged in the Regional Parks and Trails System. These less formal fields meet a variety of recreational needs, and are not intended for programmed or league sports. These services are offered in other recreational settings.

Off-Road Vehicles

Off-road vehicles are defined as all-terrain vehicles (ATVs), off-road motorcycles and four-wheel-drive vehicles. Snowmobiles are not off-road vehicles. Snowmobiles have been permitted on some regional trails and parks when local ordinances and the Implementing Agency have authorized such use. Local units of government in the rural areas of the region also work with the Minnesota Department of Natural Resources (DNR) and snowmobile clubs to provide rights-of-way for snowmobile trails that link to other trails outside the region.

The DNR has statutory authority under Minnesota Statutes, section 84.03 to provide for regulated use of off-road vehicles through its management of several legislatively dedicated accounts that are supported by license receipts and a portion of Minnesota gas tax revenues. Locating and managing an off-road vehicle use area in the region that doesn't adversely affect nearby land uses and natural features will require cooperation between the affected local unit of government and the DNR. Implementing Agencies may participate in locating an off-road vehicle use area, but the lead responsibility for locating and funding the area will be provided by the DNR under the authority it is granted in statute.

Enterprise Facilities

Concessioners may operate within the Regional Parks and Trails System if they have met the appropriate approvals from the relevant Implementing Agencies. Concessioners must provide park or trail-related amenities and services to visitors without negatively impacting the natural features of the regional park or trail. Implementing Agencies must contact the Council to determine whether a long-range plan amendment is required to accommodate the concessioners.

Regional parks, trails, park reserves, and special recreation features may contain enterprise-fund recreation facilities that are compatible with the natural features of the unit and do not conflict with the primary uses of the unit. Enterprise-fund recreation facilities include any facility that is expected to generate sufficient revenues to pay its own costs, such as golf courses, downhill ski areas, and water parks. Enterprise facilities that generate a profit are not eligible for regional park or trail funds from the Council in the same way as their private sector counterparts.

Other Ineligible Activities

Other ineligible activities for specific funding programs can be found within the Regional Parks Grant Administration Guide.

Section Eight: Finance

For Finance procedures, please visit the [Regional Parks and Trails Grant Administration Guide](#)

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