

DRAFT REGIONAL PARKS AND TRAILS PLANNING HANDBOOK

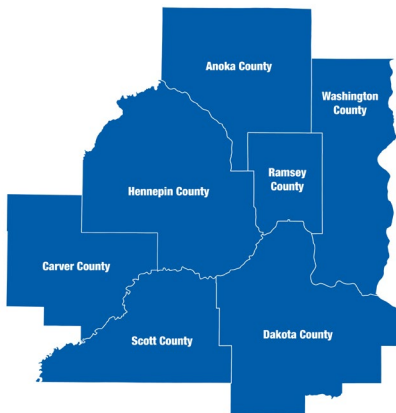


OCTOBER 2024

The Met Council's mission is to foster efficient and economic growth for a prosperous metropolitan region

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The Met Council is the regional planning organization for the seven-county Twin Cities area. The Met 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 Met Council board is appointed by and serves at the pleasure of the governor.

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Section One: Introduction and Engagement Summary

The Met Council develops, implements, and updates the Regional Parks and Trails Policy Chapter (policy chapter), as part of the Imagine 2050 regional development guide. The policy chapter implements Imagine 2050's vision, goals, and values. The policy chapter includes the Regional Parks and Trails System's vision, mission, and values, as well as its objectives, policies, and actions that describe how the Regional Parks and Trails System will act on its visionary and aspirational direction in partnership with the 10 regional parks and trails implementing agencies.

Resources for the Regional Parks and Trails Policy Chapter

This Regional Parks and Trails Planning Handbook and the [Grants Administration Guide](#) are resources that support the policy chapter.

The planning handbook contains more detailed procedural guidance on how the policy chapter's policies and actions are implemented. It is a resource guide developed primarily for implementing agency and Met Council staff. It contains policy content requirements, agency-Met Council processes, and planning resources. It provides guidance on the requirements and processes related to agency long-range planning and system protection requests, as well as to serve as a resource for more information, examples, and best management practices. It will continue to evolve and develop as agency and Council staff work together to enhance, grow, and promote the Regional Parks and Trails System.

The Met Council administers a wide range of funding sources and grant programs for the 10 regional park implementing agencies as directed by the Minnesota Legislature. The Grants Administration Guide provides an administrative overview for managing these state and regional funds. Since legal requirements for these programs vary, the Met Council helps to ensure compliance with all relevant requirements.

Figure 1-1. Met Council Planning Document Relationships



Section One: Introduction and Engagement Summary

1 **Organization**

2 The planning handbook follows the organization of the 2050 Regional Parks and Trails Policy Chapter:

- 3 • Section One: Introduction and Engagement Summary
- 4 • Section Two System Plan
- 5 • Section Three: Natural Systems
- 6 • Section Four: Climate Resilience
- 7 • Section Five: Planning
- 8 • Section Six: System Protection
- 9 • Section Seven: Recreation, Facilities, and Activities

10 All finance procedures are contained in the Regional Parks and Trails Grant Administration Guide.

11 **Amending the Handbook**

12 The planning handbook is a reference document meant to primarily serve implementing agency and
13 Met Council staff. It will be updated as needs arise, and resources become available.

14 The policy chapter is updated on a four-year cycle. Since the planning handbook is a complementary
15 document to the policy chapter, this update process offers an ideal opportunity to update the planning
16 handbook as well. Met Council Parks and Trails staff will partner with implementing agencies, the
17 Metropolitan Parks and Open Space Commission, the Community Development Committee, and the
18 Metropolitan Council on these updates.

19 **Met Council Regional Parks and Trails System research and engagement summary**

20 The existing conditions assessment, recent research, and engagement efforts provided a foundation for
21 the development of the Regional Parks and Trails System's vision, mission, values, objectives, policies,
22 and actions. This section summarizes three sets of research and engagement findings, including:

- 23 • Adventure Close to Home: Connecting Youth to the Regional Park System (2021)
- 24 • Regional Parks and Trails Visitor Study (2021)
- 25 • Community and targeted engagement about Regional Parks and Trails (2020-2024)

26 This content is meant to complement research and engagement information summarized for the region
27 and other Met Council systems at the beginning of Imagine 2050. Connections to research and
28 engagement are called out in different sections of the policy chapter.

29 **Connecting youth to the Regional Parks and Trails System**

30 The Regional Parks and Trails System protects valuable natural systems, preserves wildlife habitat,
31 and offers opportunities to enjoy nature close to home. Connecting teens with these outdoor
32 opportunities contributes to a healthy, equitable region and offers an opportunity to strengthen support
33 for the Regional Parks and Trails System into the future.

Section One: Introduction and Engagement Summary

1 By 2040, young people of color will account for more than half of all people under 18 years old.¹
2 Connecting these youth to the outdoors deserves high priority – for future support of the Regional Parks
3 and Trails System and for providing equitable access to outdoor experiences.

4 The Met Council examined the needs and preferences of multicultural and multiracial youth and
5 identified potential opportunities for regional park implementing agencies. The Met Council served as
6 lead partner of the research team, which included members of youth-serving community organizations,
7 and professional staff from park implementing agencies.

8 The project included an engagement process that connected youth organizations and members of
9 affected communities to the park implementing agencies. Project researchers used qualitative methods
10 – including multifaceted field experience, interview data, analysis of photos taken by youth, focus
11 groups, and youth-led discussion groups – to compile details and validate data.

12 The findings and recommendations cover a broad range of issues for youth and other community
13 members, including outdoor skills, in-park racism, cultural climate, preferred park activities, time
14 constraints, and transportation obstacles in accessing the parks.

15 The recommendations focus on time and resources for three sectors of the regional park and trail
16 system: (1) regional park implementing agency funding, policies, and planning; (2) programming and
17 outreach staff; and (3) long-range plan approval and research from the Met Council. The
18 recommendations are intended to help us reach desired outcomes, including:

- 19 • Develop partnerships with affinity groups and constituent-led organizations
- 20 • Develop, adapt, and implement models that overcome obstacles in connecting youth to parks
- 21 • Invest in inclusivity through staffing, programming, research, capacity-building, and dialogue
- 22 • Develop, adapt, and implement programming and outreach models that value youth's prior
23 experiences.
- 24 • Connecting youth to parks is essential for strengthening equitable usage, conserving high-
25 quality natural systems, and providing a comprehensive Regional Parks and Trails System.

26 **Regional Parks and Trails Visitor Study**

27 The 2021 Met Council Park and Trail Visitor Study² shares survey findings from people visiting parks
28 and trails in the seven-county Twin Cities region. The survey was developed to:

- 29 • Help inform planning, policy, and management.

¹ Metropolitan Met Council (2021) Adventure Close to Home: Connecting Youth to the Regional Park System (1):1.

² Metropolitan Met Council (2021) 2021 Parks and Trails Visitor Study.

Section One: Introduction and Engagement Summary

- 1 • Evaluate and strengthen equitable usage of regional parks and trails in accordance with the
2 2040 Regional Parks Policy Plan.
- 3 • Update data in funding formulas to help determine where funding goes for parks and trails.

4 The survey gathered information from visitors about their reasons for visiting, activities they participated
5 in at the site, how they planned their visit, transportation to the park, group size, seasonal visitation,
6 demographic information, and more.

7 [Are visitors satisfied with their experiences? What improvements do they suggest?](#)

8 89% of visitors reported that the facilities on the day of their visit were “excellent” or “very good.” Visitor
9 satisfaction was similar across the system. Satisfaction was slightly lower in mature systems with older
10 facilities (Minneapolis and Saint Paul).

11 Visitors were asked to name one thing that would improve their visit. For parks, the top suggestions
12 were related to “general maintenance” (20%), followed by “nothing at all” (16%). The most popular
13 suggestions were basic improvements like bathrooms and drinking water access, trail conditions, and
14 improved signage/information. Park agencies discussed the need for adequate funding to provide the
15 basic amenities the public needs and how bathroom and water access are key to making new and
16 underserved visitors comfortable in the regional park system.

17 [Who visits regional parks and trails?](#)

18 Systemwide, 38% of visitors are from outside the geographic area of a given park agency (“nonlocal”)
19 and 62% are visiting from within the park agency’s boundaries.

20 New and infrequent visitors represented 18% of parks visitors and 6% of trail visitors. Their answers to
21 the survey questions can help us understand how to attract new visitors.

22 Adults aged 45 to 64 represent the largest share of visitors. Teens, young adults, and adults older than
23 75 are underrepresented at our parks and trails. Adults aged 25-44 are also underrepresented on our
24 trails. Ramsey, Dakota, and Scott counties have the greatest disparities in young people’s visitation,
25 with Bloomington, Three Rivers Park District, and Anoka County having the smallest disparities.

26 Asian American, Black, and Latino visitors are underrepresented relative to the regional population of
27 each group. Visitors aged 18-24 were more racially/ethnically diverse than older visitor groups. Carver,
28 Anoka, and Washington counties have the smallest racial/ethnic disparities relative to population, while
29 Dakota County, Minneapolis, Three Rivers, and Bloomington have the greatest. Trail disparities are
30 even higher than for parks.

31 [How do visitors travel to regional parks and trails?](#)

32 Visitors traveled to parks mostly in cars (59%), but they traveled to trails via mostly people-powered
33 methods (81% by bike or foot). Urban core regional parks and trails have higher rates of people-
34 powered transportation compared with other parts of the region.

35 [What do people do in parks and trails?](#)

36 Primary activities are those reported by visitors as the main reason they visited on that day. The top five
37 primary activities of summer day visitors to the regional parks are walking/hiking (33%), dog
38 walking/dog park (13%), biking (10%), swimming (6%), and jogging/running (5%).

39 The top five primary activities of summer day visitors to the regional trails are biking (48%),
40 walking/hiking (25%), jogging/running (9%), dog walking/dog park (6%), and commuting (4%).

Section One: Introduction and Engagement Summary

1 The five most popular activities (when visitors could report all the activities they were doing) in the
2 regional park system are hiking/walking (55%), relaxing/doing nothing (27%), observing nature (27%),
3 biking (22%), and meeting up with family or friends (18%).

4 The five most popular activities on regional trails are biking (54%), hiking/walking (41%), dog
5 walking/dog park (16%), jogging/running (16%), and observing nature (15%).

6 All visitors, regardless of social characteristics, enjoyed a diverse range of activities. Analyzing activity
7 patterns among underserved users, however, may help identify how to better serve these communities
8 at parks and trails.

9 **Community and targeted engagement**

10 Since 2020, Met Council staff have attended and hosted many community engagement events as a
11 commitment to fostering relationships with the many stakeholders of the Regional Parks and Trails
12 System, such as regional park implementing agencies, local organizations, other partners, and
13 residents. As park and trail use inequities persist, a focus on underserved communities is essential –
14 and consistent with the Met Council’s community-centered engagement framework. Engagement
15 events include participation at fairs and festivals, hosting focus groups, and supporting research
16 studies.

17 Like existing conditions and research, engagement informs the vision, mission, values, objectives,
18 policies, and actions. Community and targeted engagement summarized in this space include:

- 19 • Future Forest: Love Letters to Regional Parks
- 20 • Monarch Festival
- 21 • LGBTQ+ Perspectives in Parks
- 22 • Young Leaders Collaboration

23 **Future Forest: Love Letters to Regional Parks**

24 At the 2020 Art Shanty event on Lake Harriet in Minneapolis, Met Council staff invited people to write a
25 love letter to a regional park and chat with naturalists about tree canopy and climate change. One tree
26 was planted for every five letters. Visitors wrote over 4,000 letters expressing their love for their favorite
27 regional parks.

28 Key themes included:

- 29 • Human connection
- 30 • Connection to place
- 31 • Natural resources
- 32 • Mental health/feelings and emotions
- 33 • Physical health
- 34 • Recreation

35 **Monarch Festival**

36 Met Council has staffed a table at the Monarch Festival at Lake Nokomis annually since 2020 to
37 engage visitors by asking an applicable question in exchange for a reward. The festival embraces Latin
38 culture and celebrates the migration of monarch butterflies from Minnesota to Mexico.

Section One: Introduction and Engagement Summary

1 In 2020 and 2021, Met Council staff invited people to find their “naturehood” on regional parks maps,
2 raising awareness of where regional parks are located and potential activities at regional parks. In
3 2021, Met Council staff asked, “What do you love about parks?”

4 In 2022, Met Council staff asked visitors, “What do you like to do in nature?” and “I feel at home or
5 comfortable in nature when___”. Themes from 2022 included:

- 6 • Felt at home while doing an activity
- 7 • Cleanliness is important
- 8 • Knowing the area is important (importance of signage/wayfinding)
- 9 • People feel at home when they are connected to certain aspects of nature (trees, space,
10 flowers, lakes)

11 In 2023, Met Council staff asked visitors, “What can a butterfly teach us about the land we all share?” to
12 inspire ideas about the connections between butterflies, humans, and land. Themes from 2023
13 included:

- 14 • Borders of land are a human construct
- 15 • Interconnectedness between humans and the environment
- 16 • It is our duty as humans to nurture our natural systems
- 17 • Large appreciation and connection to the wrapped “We Are on Dakota Land” bus

18 [LGBTQ+ perspectives in parks](#)

19 At the urging of regional park implementing agencies, the Met Council hosted three focus groups to
20 better understand perspectives within the Lesbian, Gay, Bisexual, Transgender, Queer, Plus (LGBTQ+)
21 communities on representation, possible barriers, and visions for the future of parks. The participating
22 organizations were Urban Bird Collective, Solcana Fitness, and Macalester College Outing Club. Each
23 group is run by LGBTQ+ leaders with members from across the region.

24 Recommendations include:

- 25 • Create more affinity group programs that support learning and feelings of safety
- 26 • Provide resources to build confidence and a desire to return
- 27 • Have naturalists and outreach staff that reflect the community
- 28 • Listen to and support LGBTQ+ staff’s experience
- 29 • Use more inclusive language and comprehensive information.

30 A highly visual, graphic-rich story map discussing takeaways from these focus groups is available here:
31 <https://arcgis.metc.state.mn.us/portal/apps/storymaps/stories/b0421951338244429d643021412934f0>

32 [Young leaders’ collaboration](#)

33 Young leaders from the Environmental Stewardship Institute and other regional organizations
34 participated in a Met Council-sponsored workshop series where they conducted research of diverse
35 youth in the region to create parks policy recommendations. Interviews of young people combined with
36 discussion and analysis resulted in the creation of recommendations. Below are the “Directives for the
37 2050 Regional Parks Policy Plan”:

- 38 • Parks are safe for everyone regardless of gender, race, or ability.
- 39 • Our parks are accessible and safe for the youth of the region.

Section One: Introduction and Engagement Summary

- 1 • Our parks are biodiverse, clean, and well-kept; our parks and trails receive adequate funding to
- 2 maintain them free of litter or pollution.
- 3 • Our parks facilitate the need for relaxation for the busy youth of this region.
- 4

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1 **Section Two: System Plan**

2 The Regional Parks and Trails System Plan (system plan) in the policy chapter includes policies and
3 actions that address research, mapping needs, and management for the parks and trails system. The
4 system plan lists each regional park or trail that is in the system, including current regional parks and
5 trails that are open-to-the-public, planned, and search areas/corridors.

6 The planning handbook's system plan section contains a description of the recreational system within
7 which the Metropolitan Regional Parks and Trails System exists. This section also includes maps of the
8 regional parks and trails for each implementing agency.

9 **Minnesota Outdoor Recreation System**

10 State and Federal recreational parks and open space are often large-scale natural settings that draw
11 visitors from across the state and beyond. They serve similar recreational needs as the Regional Parks
12 and Trails System. Local recreational open space facilities provide active recreation, such as athletic
13 fields, courts, and aquatic centers. Private operations also make substantial contributions to the
14 provision of recreational facilities and services, including golf courses, riding facilities, marinas, day
15 camps, downhill ski areas, and privately owned public spaces (Figure 2-1).

16 **National Parks and Federal Lands**

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

19 *Minnesota Valley National Wildlife Refuge*

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

26 *Mississippi National River and Recreation Area*

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

35 *St. Croix National Scenic Riverway*

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

42 **State Parks, Lands, and Trails**

43 The Minnesota Department of Natural Resources (DNR) manages state parks, lands and trails in the
44 region, including Afton, Fort Snelling, and William O'Brien state parks; the Minnesota Valley State

Section Two: System Plan

1 Recreation Area; and the Brown's Creek, Gateway, Luce Line, and Minnesota Valley state trails. The
2 DNR also provides wildlife management areas for hunting, trapping, fishing, wildlife viewing and other
3 compatible recreational uses. Scientific and natural areas are open to the public for nature observation
4 and education but are not meant for intensive recreational activities.

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

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

13 **Regional Parks and Trails System**

14 The Regional Parks and Trails System is an interconnected network of large, nature-based,
15 recreational open space parks and trails in the seven-county metropolitan area. The regional system
16 primarily consists of lands located in natural settings that provide close-to-home recreation and protect
17 continuous habitat, plant and animal communities, as well as clean water, air, and soil. Typically, these
18 areas are contiguous to lakes, rivers, or other water bodies. Regional parks and park reserves include
19 large areas of land or water that often intersect multiple political jurisdictions. Regional trails may
20 traverse several communities and provide connections between regional parks, park reserves,
21 population centers, and the greater trail network in the region. For more information about the Regional
22 Parks and Trails System please visit Section One of the Policy Plan.

23 **Local Parks**

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

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

35 **Private Recreation**

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

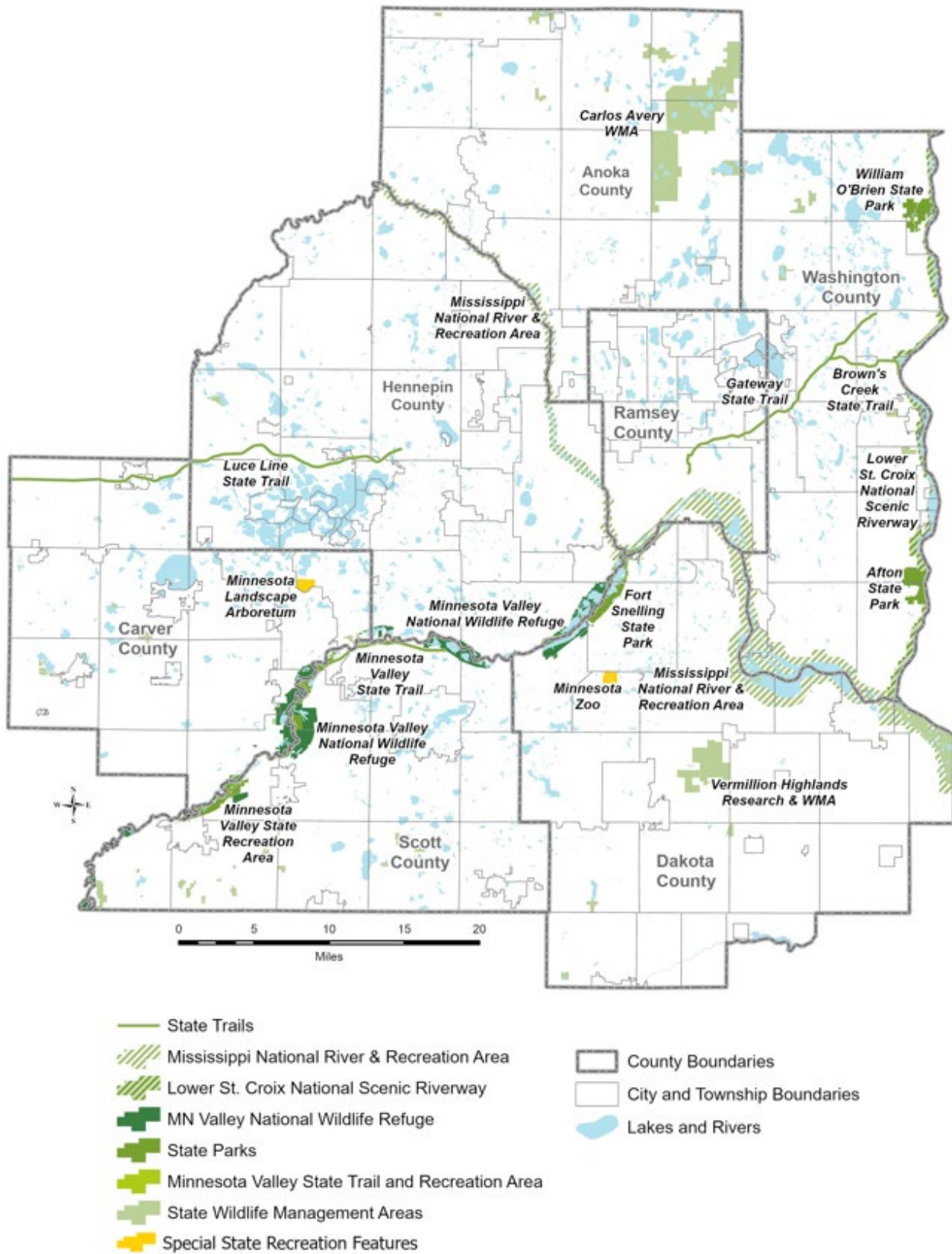
1 **Nonprofit Partners**

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

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Section Two: System Plan

1 Figure 2-1. National, Federal, and State Recreation Lands in the Region



2

1 **Regional Parks and Trails Mapping by Implementing Agency**

2 The following maps show the regional parks and trails for each implementing agency:

- 3 • Anoka County
- 4 • City of Bloomington
- 5 • Carver County
- 6 • Dakota County
- 7 • Minneapolis Park and Recreation Board
- 8 • Ramsey County
- 9 • City of Saint Paul
- 10 • Scott County
- 11 • Three Rivers Park District
- 12 • Washington County

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Section Three: Natural Systems

The Regional Parks and Trails System serves as a nature-based recreation system that protects high-quality natural areas. With a focus on the protection, restoration, and enhancement of natural systems, the Met Council is committed to working collaboratively with the ten regional park implementing agencies to strategically locate and acquire lands for the Regional Parks and Trails System to ensure high-quality opportunities and access for all visitors.

Locating and Acquisition

The legislative charge to the Met 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](#)).

The Met Council uses a system addition process to identify and include regionally significant areas for the Regional Parks and Trails, and to provide a balanced network of outdoor recreation opportunities across the region.

Process and Criteria Overview for System Additions

The Met Council will work with the ten regional park implementing agencies to host a system additions process, which includes evaluating proposed additions to the Regional Parks and Trails System. This process is organized to assess and determine whether the proposed additions are of regional significance and will help provide a balanced system of public outdoor recreation for the metro region. The process of adding a new park or trail or expanding an existing one is illustrated on the following page (Figure 2). Major considerations in determining what lands should be brought into the Regional Parks and Trails System are organized around three primary factors:

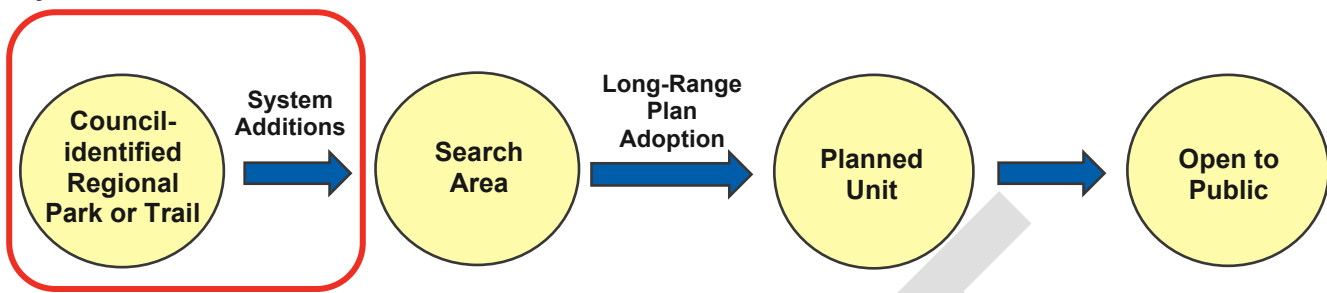
- **Natural systems foundation:** Acquiring lands that protect or restore natural features, help protect or improve water quality, provide wildlife habitat, and/or offer opportunities for outdoor recreation.
- **Geographic distribution:** Ensuring regional park and trail facilities are evenly distributed around the region or distributed in proportion to the existing and forecasted population.
- **Equity:** The ability to strengthen equitable use of regional parks and trails by all our region's residents regardless of 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 and Trails Policy Plan update requires the Met Council to conduct a formal policy plan amendment process that includes a public hearing conducted under the requirements of Minnesota Statutes, section 473.147. For more information about adding to and expanding the Regional Parks and Trails System, see Section Five, Planning later in this handbook, under the Boundary Adjustments sub-header.

The Met Council convenes 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 Policy Chapter.

Figure 2: System Additions Process

System Additions Overview:



Regional Park and Trail Study Areas

Typically, new regional parks and trails are proposed as search areas or search corridors based on high-quality natural features or desired connections between units of the Regional Parks and Trails System and other destinations. However, there are instances when a regional park implementing agency will propose that an existing park or trail become part of the Regional Parks and Trails System. Such proposals may meet approval if the existing park or trail is able to fill a gap in the Regional Parks and Trails System in relation to the three primary factors listed above (natural systems, geographic distribution, and equity). For example, a park located in the urban core may not have high-quality natural features but may provide opportunities for historically underserved communities through proximity, recreation, community affinity, or programming opportunities.

Sometimes prior to the system additions process, a candidate park or trail is identified as a “Study Area” because Council staff need time to assess whether the proposed addition is of regional significance. The proposed area for consideration is called a “regional park or trail study area.” This designation does not guarantee that a park will become part of the Regional Parks and Trails System. It simply means that the Met Council, in coordination with the regional park implementing agency who has proposed the addition, will conduct a study 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 Metropolitan Council for evaluation.

The Met Council regularly conducts visitor use studies to understand visitor use patterns, among other things. A key metric measured is local and non-local visitation. A local visit means the visit is by someone living within the regional park implementing agency’s jurisdiction. Non-local visits are by people who live outside the park’s implementing agency jurisdiction. Non-local visitation is one important variable in several of the regional parks funding program formulas.

The 2021 visitor study showed that the average percentage of non-local visits across the Regional Parks and Trails System was about 38%. As our region continues to grow, and as residents become more aware of the impacts of climate change and a desire to reduce their carbon footprint, staff project that non-local visits will continue to decline as visitors chose parks and trails closer to their home. Met Council staff will continue to observe and evaluate non-local visitation to ensure this criterion is relevant and appropriate for future Regional Parks and Trails System additions.

Met Council staff, in collaboration with the ten regional park implementing agencies, are preparing the 2025 Visitor Study. This study will again measure local and non-local visits and compare the findings to those from the 2021 study. Staff will continue monitoring and reporting on these evolving trends and share insights with the Met Council and park agencies for future decision-making.

Section Three: Natural Systems

1 *Process for Moving from “Search Area” to “Planned” to “Open to the Public”*

2 Regional parks and trails with a search area or search corridor designation are considered a part of the
3 Regional Parks and Trails System, but they are ineligible for regional funding until the implementing
4 agency completes a long-range plan for the unit and the Met Council approves it. These areas and
5 corridors are defined in intentionally vague terms as they rely on the long-range planning process to
6 identify the future boundaries.

7 After the adoption of the long-range plan, the implementing agency may begin to assemble the land
8 needed for the unit. This process may take one significant acquisition, or it may take a number of years.
9 Once the unit reaches a point of critical mass, the Met Council, in consultation with the regional park
10 implementing agency, will determine it “open to the public”. Once it reaches this point, it’s added to the
11 annual use estimate for the system (it should be noted that the “open to public” status will not be
12 reflected in the policy plan until the next update).

13 More information about the long-range planning process can be found in Section Five of this handbook.

DRAFT

1 **Section Four: Climate Resilience**

2

3 This section was added as a placeholder for future parks and trails climate resilience procedures. Since
4 the climate resilience policy and its associated actions are new with Imagine 2050, it will take time to
5 develop and operationalize the procedures necessary to implement them.

DRAFT

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 systems are preserved and enhanced for current and future generations. Collaborative efforts and long-range planning are essential for addressing the evolving needs of our diverse communities, caring for our natural systems, and enhancing the quality of life for all residents and visitors in the region.

Long-Range Plan Requirements

Each long-range plan for regional parks, park reserves, special features, and regional trails must include specific information or requirements. Please note when requirements differ from one classification to another. For example, regional parks, park reserves, and special features may have different requirements than regional trails.

Requirements that are unique to regional parks, park reserves, and special features are accompanied by a tree symbol:



Requirements that are unique 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:

- Engagement
 - Demand forecast
 - Public awareness
 - Public and partner engagement and equity analysis
- Development Concept
 - Boundaries
 - Acquisition costs
 - Development concept
 - Accessibility
 - Operations
 - Public services
- Natural Systems
 - Natural systems
 - Mississippi Corridor Critical Area

Engagement

Demand Forecast

The demand forecast estimates the future demand to be met by the unit as identified by the Met 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.
- A statement that the regional park or trail serves that need, or that the proposed expansion responds to the forecasted need.

For the projection of population, Met Council population data and local forecasts must be used to estimate this demand. Met Council publishes county-level, city and town-level, and sub-city zone-level forecasts at www.metroMet Council.org/forecasts/ Agencies can request local population estimates and forecasts for a more detailed or customized service-shed.

Section Five: Planning

1 *Public Awareness*

2 This requirement describes the regional park implementing agency's plans for making the public aware
3 of the services available when the regional park, park reserve, special feature, or regional trail is open,
4 including how to access the location by transit, if applicable.

5 *Public and Partner Engagement and Equity Analysis*

6 For the public and partner engagement requirement, the regional park implementing agency describes
7 the process they conduct for involving the public, local units of government, and other affected agencies
8 including state and/or federal recreation providers in the development of the long-range plan or plan
9 amendment. This process should:

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

17 An equity analysis shall be conducted and should include the following elements:

- 18 • Project area description:
 - 19 ○ Define the boundaries and demographics of the engagement area, including
20 neighborhoods adjacent to the park or trail, travel sheds, and other relevant information.
 - 21 ○ Provide context on underserved populations and the historical factors leading to present-
22 day inequities. Met Council staff encourage using the Regional Parks and Trails Equity
23 Tool: <https://metrotransitm.n.shinyapps.io/regional-parks-equity-tool/>
- 24 • Engagement with underserved populations:
 - 25 ○ Identify stakeholders, including youth, Black, Indigenous, and people of color communities,
26 people with disabilities, low-income populations, people 60 years of age and older, and
27 other relevant community groups.
 - 28 ○ Detail engagement strategies used for each stakeholder group. Please consider culturally
29 competent and community representative staffing, training, engagement locations and
30 times, and communication methods in planning and implementing engagement
31 opportunities. Met Council staff encourage using the International Association for Public
32 Participation's Public Participation Spectrum as a resource:
33 https://cdn.ymaws.com/www.iap2.org/resource/resmgr/pillars/Spectrum_8.5x11_Print.pdf
- 34 • Summary and accountability:
 - 35 ○ Include a summary of comments received, issues raised, and how engagement influenced
36 the plan's content, especially the plan's development concept. Summarize what
37 strategies worked well and what strategies were less effective.
 - 38 ○ Outline accountability measures for creating better outcomes, including regional and local
39 access, quality of experience, facility rules/policies, and reporting back to stakeholders.

40 **Development Concept**

41 *Boundaries*



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

Section Five: Planning



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

4 *Acquisition Costs*



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



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

15 *Development Concept*



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

- 17 • Description and a map showing the location of planned development and natural resources
18 management projects
- 19 • Approximate capacity of each facility
- 20 • Map of existing and planned local and regional trail connections to the site and information on
21 how they relate to development within the park
- 22 • Wayfinding signage plan, indicating the types of signs and general locations within the park
- 23 • Information on the source and location of drinking water that meets the recreational uses and
24 needs of the park
- 25 • Schedule and cost estimates for each project
- 26 • Conflicts between recreational and natural-resource management needs in developing the park
27 should be addressed and resolved.



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

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

35 *Accessibility*



36 A plan that addresses accessibility, affordability, and other measures designed to ensure that the
37 facility can be used by people with limited mobility. All new and updated long-range plans for the

Section Five: Planning

1 Regional Parks and Trails System must address compliance with the Americans with Disabilities Act
2 (ADA). Met Council staff encourage regional park implementing agencies to use U.S. Access Board
3 guidelines for Outdoor Developed Areas as a minimum standard of accessibility on all new or
4 substantially altered capital projects within the Regional Parks and Trails System: [https://www.access-](https://www.access-board.gov/aba/guides/chapter-10-outdoor/)
5 [board.gov/aba/guides/chapter-10-outdoor/](https://www.access-board.gov/aba/guides/chapter-10-outdoor/)



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

8 *Operations*



9 Rules, regulations or ordinances affecting the site, including estimated operation and maintenance
10 costs and sources of revenue to operate and maintain recreation facilities and to manage natural
11 resources in the park/trail unit. The operations plan should indicate how energy to operate and maintain
12 the park unit is being managed and conserved. The plan should also state how solid waste from park
13 users is recycled and disposed of consistent with applicable laws.



14 Rules, regulations or ordinances affecting the trail, including estimated operation and maintenance
15 costs and sources of revenue to operate and maintain the trail.

16 *Public Services*



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



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

24 **Natural Systems and Mississippi River Corridor Critical Area**

25 *Natural Systems*

26 A plan or program for managing and restoring natural resource features of the regional park, park
27 reserve, special feature, or regional destination trail. *Note: A Natural Systems component is not required*
28 *for regional linking trail long-range plans.*

29 This plan or program should include the following components:

30 **Natural Resources Inventory**

31 A natural resources inventory should include a land cover inventory that is consistent with the Minnesota
32 Land Cover Classification System by the Minnesota Department of Natural Resources and MetroGIS.
33 The natural resources inventory should also include native plant communities mapped in the Minnesota
34 County Biological Survey.

35 This section should also include listed species. Please visit the Minnesota Department of Natural
36 Resources' Natural Heritage Information system to identify and help protect rare, endangered, and
37 threatened species.

Section Five: Planning

1 **Landscape Management, Restoration, and Maintenance**

2 The natural resources inventory should be a basis for projects and proposals to maintain high-quality
3 natural resource features and restore degraded resources, including the estimated capital costs for
4 natural resource restoration projects.

5 Regional park implementing agencies should consult with natural resource professionals in designing
6 and constructing park facilities, especially trails that are adjacent to or traverse natural resource areas.
7 The final design and construction should allow the public to view and enjoy these natural habitats with
8 minimal adverse impact.

9 The Natural Systems component should also include information on how vegetation will be managed.
10 The Met Council encourages regional park implementing agencies to select and manage vegetation to
11 enhance resilience to climate changes, including using native species that are more tolerant of climate
12 variability.

13 **Water Resource Protection**

14 The plan should include information on how surface water and groundwater resources in the unit,
15 including wetlands, will be protected. The Met Council encourages regional park implementing agencies
16 to use Minnesota Pollution Control Agency's Minnesota Stormwater Manual:
17 https://stormwater.pca.state.mn.us/index.php?title=Main_Page

18 The long-range plan should include provisions to, first, avoid wetland impacts; second, minimize impacts;
19 and finally, mitigate impacts when no other options are available.

20 The Met Council also encourages implementing agencies to integrate water management practices that
21 enhance the area's resilience to extreme weather events and climate variability.

22 *Mississippi River Corridor Critical Area*

23 This requirement only applies to regional parks, park reserves, special features, and regional trails
24 located in part or wholly within the Mississippi River Corridor Critical Area.

25 Long-range plans must address the following:

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

36

37 **Acquisition Long-Range Plan Criteria and Process**

38 Once the Met Council designates a unit to be a part of the Regional Parks and Trails System, the
39 regional park implementing agency conducts a long-range planning process. There are times when the
40 agency has an opportunity to acquire – or protect under an option to purchase – land that does not yet
41 have a development concept, which is one of the requirements for long-range planning. In these
42 situations, the regional park implementing agency may choose to develop an acquisition long-range plan,
43 to establish the long-range plan boundary or to adjust an existing Met Council-approved long-range plan

Section Five: Planning

1 boundary. The acquisition long-range plan or amendment may focus solely on the land under option to
2 purchase. The Met Council must approve the acquisition long-range plan prior to acquisition. Acquisition
3 long-range plans should include:

- 4 • A demonstration of the proposed unit's consistency with Section Three: Natural Systems
5 including size/service area requirements in Section Two: System Plan.
- 6 • Boundaries: A map showing the proposed unit's boundaries or for existing units, the parcels to be
7 added to the long-range plan boundary in relation to the existing administrative and management
8 boundaries of the park or trail. Additionally, a description of the future ownership and/or
9 management arrangement.
- 10 • Acquisition costs: A list of parcels to be acquired and the estimated total cost and schedule for
11 their acquisition, and information on natural resources, site suitability, special assessments,
12 potential contamination based on data from the Minnesota Pollution Control Agency and other
13 conditions that affect acquisition of the site or location of the boundaries.
- 14 • A demonstration of implementing agency board approval and other support from partner
15 agencies.

16 Once the regional park implementing agency completes a full long-range plan, they may move forward
17 with the unit's development concept and access financial assistance from the Met Council's grant
18 programs.

19 **Plan Amendment Boundary Adjustment Criteria and Process**

20 Boundary adjustments are additions or removals of land from an existing Met Council-approved long-
21 range plan's management boundary. The Met Council will consider boundary adjustment proposals
22 through the following amendment processes and criteria outlined in Figure 5-1 below. All other proposals
23 will be considered by the Met Council through the policy plan amendment process. When boundary
24 adjustments arise, Agency and Met Council staff will work together through a consultation process to
25 determine the most appropriate path forward.

26 Concurrent with an amendment process and criteria, boundary adjustment proposals must also include
27 the following:

- 28 • A description of the purpose for the change and the extenuating circumstances.
- 29 • A map identifying the current boundary and the proposed boundary.
- 30 • A demonstration of the proposal's consistency with:
 - 31 ○ Park and trail classifications (Policy Plan, Section 2 System Plan, Action 1 Classifications)
 - 32 ○ Locating and acquisition criteria (Planning Handbook, Section 4: Natural Systems, Action
33 1 Locate and Acquire Land).

34 If the Met Council approves the boundary adjustment request, then the new parcel will be eligible for
35 applicable regional funding sources.

36

1 Figure 5-1: Boundary Adjustment Threshold Summary

Plan Amendments: Boundary Adjustment Criteria and Process – Eligibility Threshold Summary		
Unit Type	Regional parks Park reserves Special features Regional trail corridor land	Regional trails alignments
Administrative Approval of Long-Range Plan Amendment	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Minor correction to a mapping or design error affecting less than 1% of unit’s total management boundary acreage. • Proposes a park or trail boundary adjustment, public-to-public land exchange, or an acquisition long-range plan amendment that changes the management boundary by less than 5 acres; and the land addition/removal is valued up to \$750,000 total. 	Trail realignment alters up to 1-mile of trail and is within 1-mile of the original alignment but does not alter the start and end points of the trail.
Focused Long Range Plan Amendment, Acquisition Long-Range Plan or Land Conversion	<p>A limited in scope plan amendment that meets one of the following two criteria, whichever is greater:</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Affects less than 100 acres of the total management boundary acreage • Affects less than 20% of the total management boundary acreage. 	<p>A limited in scope plan amendment that meets one of the following two criteria:</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Trail realignment is up to 1.5 miles from the original alignment. • Proposed trail extension is up to one mile, and it enables connection to existing or future trailhead, park, local trail, or other destination.
Regular Long-Range Plan Amendment	A full scope plan amendment that significantly changes the earlier proposal for acquisition and/or development and exceeds the thresholds for a focused long-range plan amendment (above).	A full scope plan amendment that significantly alters the earlier trail alignment and exceeds the thresholds for a focused long-range plan amendment (above).
Policy Plan Amendment	<p>Meets one of the following two criteria:</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Exceeds plan amendment criteria • Proposes new regional park study area or search area 	<p>Meets one of the following two criteria:</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Exceeds plan amendment criteria • Proposes new trail

2 **Please note, Met Council staff will consider the requirements of any Met Council or State funding*
 3 *restrictions.*

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

Section Five: Planning

1 **Design Considerations for Long-Range Plans**

2 The planning handbook incorporates policy direction from Imagine 2050 to:

- 3 • Promote expanded multimodal access to regional parks, regional trails, and the transit network.
- 4 • Acknowledge the range of recreation opportunities throughout the region by encouraging context-sensitive and nature-based approaches to designing facilities.
- 5
- 6 • Develop opportunities, programs, and spaces that strive to uplift community connections to the
- 7 outdoors while counteracting barriers and harm placed on underrepresented communities found
- 8 in the most recent visitor study.

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

11 Promote expanded multimodal access:

- 12 • Met Council and implementing agencies are encouraged to provide connections to transit stops
13 or park-and-rides when designating the alignment of a regional trail. Implementing agencies are
14 encouraged to collaborate with Metropolitan Transportation Services and Met Council Parks and
15 Trails staff early in the regional trail planning process.
- 16 • Provide bike racks located near activity areas in regional parks and trails so visitors can safely
17 park their bikes as they recreate.
- 18 • Design multiple entrance points to a regional park to make it easier for bicyclists and pedestrians
19 to access the park.

20 Acknowledge the range of recreation opportunities:

- 21 • Regional park and trail facilities designed with a nature-based, context sensitive approach fit its
22 setting while using innovative approaches to improve or enhance natural systems. Examples
23 include infiltration basins, green roofs, and permeable surfaces.
- 24 • Offer recreation activities that play to the strengths of the regional park or trail's location instead
25 of trying to offer all things to all people. An example is the incorporation of watercraft and
26 swimming in a regional park located on a lake.
- 27 • Relative to areas outside of the Metropolitan Urban Service Area, encourage more development
28 in regional parks and trails within the metropolitan urban service area to provide diverse
29 recreation opportunities and settings, helping to ensure everyone's needs are met across the
30 Regional Parks and Trails System.

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

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

38 **Long-Range Plan Amendments Criteria and Process**

39 Minnesota Statutes, section 473.313 requires long-range plans be developed by the park implementing
40 agencies consistent with the Regional Parks and Trails Policy Plan; however, it does not specify when
41 revisions are necessary. As referenced in the policy plan, the regional park implementing agency will

Section Five: Planning

1 submit a long-range plan amendment to the Met Council to change its original proposal for acquisition
2 and/or development, or when the agency has developed significant additional details that needs to be
3 reflected in the long-range plan. The Met Council may approve or reject the long-range plan amendment
4 for cause and return the plan to the regional park implementing agency for revisions to address the Met
5 Council's concerns.

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

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

- 17 • Improvements that substantially differ in type, size, scale, or cost from those in the Met Council-
18 approved long-range plan and the adopted capital improvement program to meet expanded local
19 recreational demands or satisfy above-average quality standards
- 20 • Changes to a park or trail boundary
- 21 • Proposals for placement of telecommunications towers on Regional Parks and Trails System land
22 (see Section Six: System Protection - Telecommunications towers evaluation process in this
23 handbook).

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

27 **Focused Long-Range Plan Amendments**

28 Occasionally, regional park implementing agencies seek to make minor changes to a long-range plan
29 that may only impact a subset of long-range plan requirement areas. The regional park implementing
30 agency should discuss the scope of the desired plan amendment with the Met Council Parks and Trails
31 staff prior to commencing the amendment process to determine the required subset of long-range plan
32 requirements.

33 Examples of focused long-range plan amendments include Battle Creek Regional Park – Pigs Eye Lake
34 ([2021-68](#)) and Minnesota River Greenway Regional Trail – Fort Snelling State Park segment ([2021-342](#)).
35 The Battle Creek Regional Park – Pigs Eye Lake amendment followed a feasibility study on the
36 implementation of islands within Pigs Eye Lake, which are intended to improve aquatic habitat, improve
37 the quantity and quality of habitat for migratory bird species, and enhance the quantity of shoreline
38 habitat. The amendment focused primarily on natural resources and public safety improvements, and did
39 not address park acquisition, boundary adjustments, recreation infrastructure, or access.

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

Section Five: Planning

1 Prior to the submittal of each of these long-range plan amendments to the Met Council, regional park
2 implementing agency staff worked closely with Met Council staff to identify the requirements of the
3 focused amendment.

4 Focused long-range plan amendments are considered through the Met Council committee process that
5 typically has a 60-day duration.

6 **Administrative Process for Minor Long-Range Plan Amendments**

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

- 11 1. **Consistent:** Is consistent with Minn. Stat. § 473.313 requirements and be determined to be
12 complete for review by the Met Council.
- 13 • Conform to the regional systems plans.
 - 14 • Consistent with Met Council policies, including Imagine 2050 and parks policies.
- 15 2. **Minor in scope:** Does not change the acquisition and/or development concept.
- 16 3. **Subject of the amendment:**
- 17 a. **Corrections:** Proposes corrections to a minor mapping or design error affecting less
18 than 1% of the unit's total acres of the management boundary.
 - 19 b. **Minor regional trail realignments:** Proposes regional trail implementation
20 realignments that alter up to 1 mile of trail and are within 1 mile of the original alignment
21 but do not alter the start and end points of the trail.
 - 22 c. **Boundary changes:** Proposes a regional park or trail boundary adjustment, public-to-
23 public land exchange, or an acquisition long-range plan amendment that changes the
24 management boundary by less than 5 acres; and the land addition/removal is valued up
25 to \$750,000 total.
 - 26 d. **Natural area/utility Met Council consents:** Proposes land and/or easement
27 conveyances for:
 - 28 • Natural area monitoring.
 - 29 • Conveys an easement for a natural area restoration, or enhancement project that
30 affects the management boundary by less than 5 acres.
 - 31 • Underground utility that has no material long-range impacts to the park or trail and
32 affects the management boundary by less than 1 acre.
- 33 4. **No impacts:** Does not have the potential for a cumulative or material impact to the regional
34 park or trail's recreational opportunities, natural areas, or cultural resources.

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

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

39 There may be instances when Met Council staff direct minor amendment proposals to the regular Met
40 Council Committees, due to political sensitivity or other contextual factors. Administrative review is
41 proposed to be completed within 45 business days once the long-range plan amendment has been
42 deemed complete.

43 Met Council review of this administrative review program is proposed to take place after two years of its
44 approval; then transition to the four-year Policy Plan update cycle. The Community Development

Section Five: Planning

1 Committee will receive annual administrative approvals updates. The Metropolitan Parks and Open
2 Space Commission will receive updates more frequently.

3 **Joint powers agreements**

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

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

- 9 • Address who owns, controls, and manages the land under the Regional Parks and Trails System
10 unit improvement
- 11 • Ensure that the unit improvement will be open to all people (not restricted by residence)

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

15 The duration of the joint powers agreements should last the expected life of the unit improvement. They
16 should be included in a unit's long-range plan as an assurance that any funds provided by the Met
17 Council for improvements would be spent consistently with the approved long-range plan.

18 Regional trails usually extend through several communities, so they require coordination for segment
19 implementation. Regional parks, park reserves, and special features may coordinate with one or two
20 local governments on specific facility improvements to enhance a Met Council-approved long-range plan.
21 If an improvement to a Regional Parks and Trails System unit occurs on land owned by a local
22 government instead of the regional park implementing agency, the agency may lease the park unit land
23 and manage it through a joint powers agreement with the local jurisdiction.

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

Section Six: System Protection

The Met Council protects public investment in acquisition and development by assuring 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 and Trails System and its individual parts, including regional park and trail long-range plans, restrictive covenants that place restrictions on park and trail land, the Metropolitan Land Planning Act, and metropolitan significance.

Met Council Review Processes

There are four review processes to support implementation of the system protection policy, including:

- Local comprehensive planning: The Local Planning Assistance review of local comprehensive plans ensures that public investment in acquisition and development are consistent with Met Council systems and policies, as well as other agency system plans.
- Land conversion process: The land conversion process considers the conversion of Regional Parks and Trails Systems lands to other uses.
- Telecommunication tower evaluation process: This process helps ensure that telecommunication towers are placed in ways that minimize impacts to the park or trail unit.
- Placement of utilities process. The placement of utilities process helps ensure that utilities are placed in ways that minimizes impacts to the regional park or trail unit.

For more information about the policies and actions related to these topics, please visit Section Six of the policy chapter.

Local Comprehensive Planning

The policy direction from Imagine 2050 and the Met Council's systems and policy plans – including this planning handbook – provides guidance to local governments in planning for local growth and development. 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 Met Council's metropolitan system plans ([Minnesota Statutes 473.864](#)).

Following the decennial adoption of the Regional Parks and Trails Policy Plan, the Met Council will issue system statements inclusive of changes in the system plan as required under the [Metropolitan Land Planning Act](#). Local communities will have three years to update their local comprehensive plans with the changes that are reflective of their system statement. If the Met Council issues system statements based on a future amendment to the Regional Parks and Trails Policy Plan, local communities have nine months to amend their comprehensive plans (Minnesota Statutes, section 473.856).

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

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

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

Section Six: System Protection

1 *Conformance*

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

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

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

13 *Consistency*

14 Consistency is generally achieved if the local plan addresses the community role for the land use
15 policies in Imagine 2050, including:

- 16 • Land Use Policy Plan, Objective 2: Maximize opportunities for growth in places well-served by
17 transit, bicycle, and pedestrian infrastructure. Local communities are encouraged to plan and
18 develop local trail connections to regional trails as identified in the 2050 Regional Parks and
19 Trails Policy Plan and to plan for and connect to the Regional Bicycle Transportation Network as
20 identified in the 2050 Transportation Policy Plan.
 - 21 ○ Policy 4: Plan for and build an interconnected system of local streets, pedestrian, and
 - 22 bicycle facilities that prioritize the individual experience in planning for transit, bicycling,
 - 23 walking, and rolling.
 - 24 ○ Policy 6 Prioritize the preservation, restoration, and enhancement of environmental and
 - 25 natural systems near transportation features and areas where transit is available.
- 26 • Land Use Policy Plan, Objective 4: Prioritize land use and development activities that protect,
27 restore, and enhance natural systems at all scales.
 - 28 ○ Policy 2: Establish and connect natural systems corridors through land use, water
 - 29 resources, and conservation planning.
- 30 • Address the link between local land uses to local parks and open space, as well as the Regional
31 Parks and Trails System.
- 32 • Includes an implementation plan describing public programs, fiscal devices, and other specific
33 actions (sequencing and staging activities) that implement the comprehensive plan and ensure
34 conformance with regional system plans.
- 35 • Address official controls and include a capital improvement program (sewers, parks,
36 transportation, water supply and open space) that supports planned growth and development.

37 *Compatibility*

38 Compatibility with adjacent and affected governmental units is generally achieved if the local plan
39 adequately documents that it has addressed the concern of all adjacent and affected jurisdictions,
40 based on comments or concerns from these entities. As local communities update their comprehensive
41 plans, the Met Council encourages them to identify locally important natural areas for protection
42 through acquisition, conservation easements, and conservation-sensitive development practices
43 especially in respect to protection and on-going resiliency of the Regional Parks and Trails System. In
44 addition to planning for the recreational needs of its residents, the Met Council encourages
45 communities to plan local trail connections to the Regional Parks and Trails System. Together, the

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1 region, the regional park implementing agencies, local communities, nonprofit organizations, and the
2 private sector can preserve natural areas and enhance multimodal access to regional parks and trails.

3 **Land Conversion Process**

4 Conversion of Regional Parks and Trails System lands to other uses is allowed only in limited
5 circumstances and with prior approval of the Metropolitan Council. Land conversion requests are
6 challenging for regional park implementing agencies because they are complex and often originate
7 from reasons outside of the agency's department and control. The Met Council's land conversion
8 approach aims to ensure that any system impacts are evaluated and mitigated fairly and transparently
9 as an equally valuable land exchange is determined. Met Council committees require defensible and
10 compelling stories that include summaries of these requests and desired actions. Met Council staff
11 work closely with regional park implementing agencies to establish workable solutions for each
12 conversion proposal. For more information about the land conversion policy, actions, and requirements,
13 please visit Section Six: System Protection in the Regional Parks and Trails Policy Plan.

14

15 Land conversions follow a five-part process that includes the regional park implementing agency and
16 the Met Council agreeing to an equally valuable exchange proposal. Once an agreement is reached,
17 the agency develops a memo summarizing the proposal and the Met Council reviews the proposal.
18 Conveyances are provided once approved by the Met Council (Figure 6-1).

19 **Figure 6-1 Land Conversion Process**

20

21

22

23

24



25 **Equally Valuable Exchange Proposal**

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

Encouraged approach:

Equally valuable exchanges that are quality **park or trail land** additions located within the same park unit where the land is being proposed for removal.

Equally Valuable Land is:

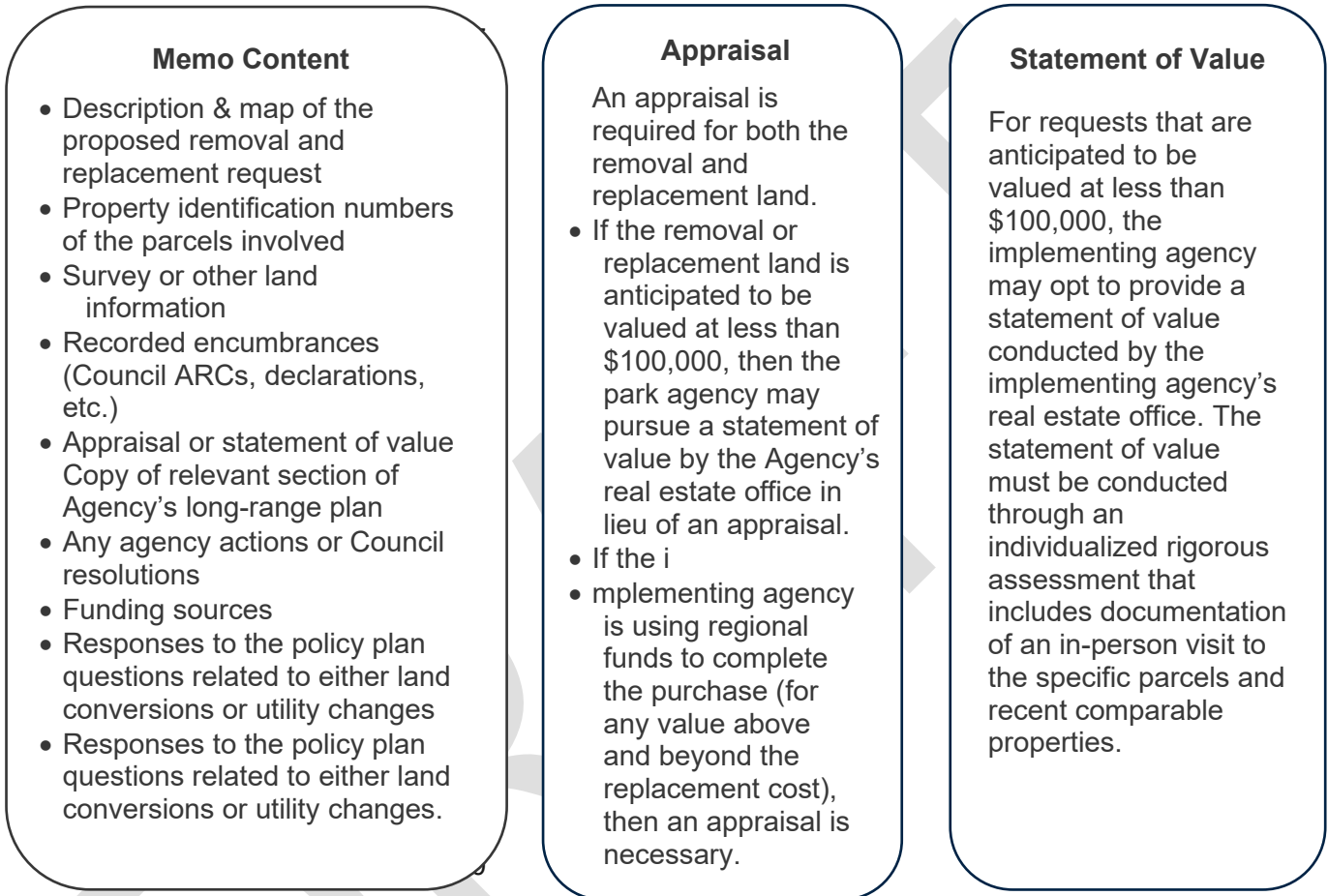
1. Contiguous to the Regional Parks and Trails System unit containing the land proposed to be exchanged (within the same park/trail unit)
2. Has comparable **or** better natural resource characteristics
3. Could provide comparable **or** better recreation opportunities than the land being removed from the park or trail.

28

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1 *Agency Memo*
2 Regional park implementing agencies should submit a memo with any land conversion
3 request. Similar to long-range plan reviews, land conversion requests include a Met Council
4 review. For requests to be considered complete, agreement on the equally valuable
5 exchange is needed in addition to the required materials.

6



The Met Council prioritizes land-for-land exchanges for all system protection requests. There may be exceptional circumstances for the park agency to pursue another approach when this priority cannot be met.

If the agency is not able to replace the land within the unit from where it is removed, there may be other options for exchanges, listed in priority order:

1. Land additions in another unit managed by the implementing agency
2. Facility additions or improvements within the unit under consideration.
3. Facility additions or improvements outside the unit under consideration.

The second and third priorities for land conversions should be avoided to the greatest extent possible.

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1 **Telecommunication Towers Evaluation Process**

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

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

- 7 • The communication system is not able to function without placement of the tower on Regional
8 Parks and Trails System land. Since each of these radio frequency communication systems
9 relies on grid placement of towers, all other alternatives must be considered for placement
10 within the grid in order to avoid placing a tower on Regional Parks and Trails System land. The
11 communication service provider must demonstrate that this criterion is satisfied when requesting
12 approval by the Met Council and regional park implementing agency to place a tower on
13 Regional Parks and Trails System land. The only exception to this condition is that a tower for
14 the Metropolitan Emergency Radio System may be placed on Regional Parks and Trails System
15 land even if it could be placed on private land instead.
- 16 • The tower's impact on the Regional Parks and Trails System land must be minimized.
- 17 • The tower must be screened from view of regional park or trail visitors as much as possible
18 through tower placement and design features agreed to by the regional park implementing
19 agency.
- 20 • The tower must be located on land that has already undergone regional park or trail
21 development and is accessible through the existing park road system. Land in park reserves or
22 regional parks conserved for habitat restoration and interpretation must be avoided.
- 23 • Co-locating multiple antennas on fewer towers is preferred. The Met Council acknowledges that
24 co-location is not always possible due to potential interference.
- 25 • Payments for placing telecommunication towers in regional parks or park reserves should be
26 dedicated to the regional park implementing agency that owns the land for acquisition,
27 redevelopment, development, or operation and maintenance of its Regional Parks and Trails
28 System units.

29 All telecommunication tower proposals for the regional parks and trails system require regional park
30 implementing agencies to submit a focused long-range plan amendment. The focused long-range plan
31 amendment should state how the conditions listed above have been met. The Met Council will then
32 review the focused long-range plan amendment for consistency with the conditions of this policy and
33 either approve, modify, or reject the long-range plan amendment.

34 If the land for the tower's location has a restrictive covenant on it (required for land acquired with
35 regional funds), the regional park implementing agency shall amend the covenant to recognize the
36 temporary use of the tower with any conditions required for the tower's lease and submit the amended
37 covenant to the Met Council as part of the long-range plan amendment.

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

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1 Tower placement on Regional Parks and Trails System land shall be considered a temporary non-
2 recreational use. As stated previously, any lease revenues for the tower easement must be used by the
3 regional park implementing agency to further the acquisition, redevelopment, development, or operation
4 and maintenance of that regional park implementing agency's portion of the Regional Parks and Trails
5 System. Implementing agencies are encouraged to charge "at cost" fees for public safety radio
6 equipment on towers located on Regional Parks and Trails System land.

7 **Placement of Utilities**

8 For information about the placement of utilities policies, actions, and procedures for both regional
9 wastewater infrastructure and other utilities; as well as utility easement criteria please refer to Section
10 Six, Action Four of the Regional Parks and Trails Policy Plan.

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Section Seven: Recreation, Facilities, and Programming

The Regional Parks and Trails System includes nearly 53,000 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 Met Council, seek to build upon its nature-based recreational foundation and expand into activities and facilities that better meet the evolving needs of a more diverse audience, including youth, Black, Indigenous, people of color, people over 65 years of age, and more.

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 or facility meets the engagement findings.

Proposed activities and facilities for regional parks and trails should also be consistent with the Regional Parks and Trails System's 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:**
 - **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.

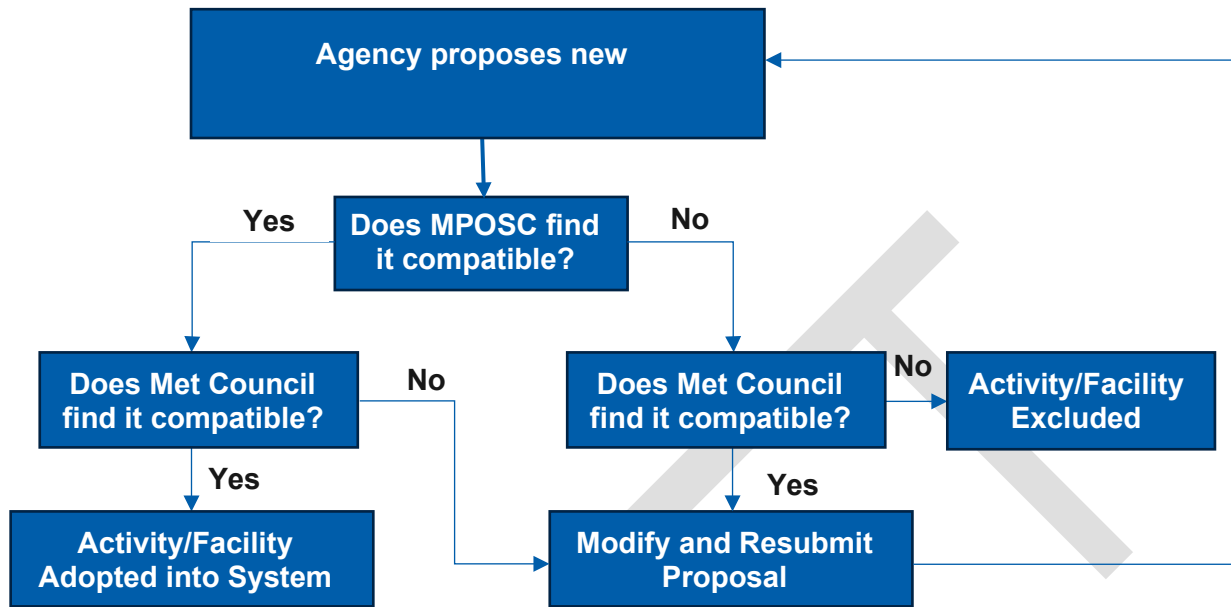
1 **Process for Including New Activities or Facilities**

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

- 6
- For a new activity or facility proposal not in the current long-range plan, amend the plan.
 - For proposals made in a park or trail unit with a long-range plan updated within the last five
7 years, the implementing agency may seek approval of the proposed activity and design through
8 a formal request that includes:
9
 - Description of the request
 - How the request fits within the regional park or trail unit and overall Regional Parks and
10 Trails System
 - How the request meets the Activities and Facilities criteria defined in Section 7 of the
11 Parks and Trails Policy Plan, Action 1, and included below:
12
 - All proposed activities and facilities for regional parks and trails should be
13 consistent with the community engagement findings of the Agency-led long-
14 range planning processes
 - Serve a regional audience
 - Should not duplicate neighborhood parks and trails systems
 - Should connect and support the system’s nature-based foundation
 - Be compatible with the other uses and activities, minimize user conflicts, and
15 preserve user experiences
 - Be consistent with the expectations of the Council’s review and approval process
 - Detailed development concept and schematic design
 - Identification of conflicts and steps necessary for their resolution
 - Known opposition

24 Depending on whether Metropolitan Parks and Open Space Commission and the Met Council find the
25 proposal to be compatible with the above criteria, they will determine if the proposal is approved, will
26 require improvements, or be rejected completely (Figure 7). If both organizations find the proposal to be
27 compatible, then the long-range plan/request will be approved without conditions. If one organization
28 deems an activity or facility as incompatible, the Met Council may ask the implementing agency to
29 modify or improve the approach or design. If both organizations deem the proposal incompatible, then
30 the Met Council reserves the right to exclude the activity or facility from regional funding, including
31 calculations of the annual parks use estimates and the agency’s acreage total, similar to the treatment
32 of incompatible facilities that pre-dated the Regional Parks and Trails System.
33
34
35
36

Figure 7: Recreational Activity or Facility Approval Flowchart



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 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 Met 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.

1 **Enterprise Facilities**

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

7 Regional parks, trails, park reserves, and special features may contain enterprise-fund recreation
8 facilities that are compatible with the natural features of the unit and do not conflict with the primary
9 uses of the unit. Some enterprise-fund recreation facilities are expected to generate sufficient revenues
10 to pay its own costs, such as golf courses, downhill ski areas, and water parks. Enterprise facilities that
11 generate a profit are not eligible for regional park or trail funds from the Met Council. Some enterprise
12 facilities are not designed to generate a profit and as such may be eligible for receiving regional
13 funding.

14 **Other Ineligible Activities**

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

17 **Better Coordinate the Regional Trail System with the Regional Bicycle Transportation
18 Network**

19 During the Imagine 2050 planning process, the Trail Coordination workgroup identified the following
20 efforts to frame future discussions with Met Council, implementing agencies, and others. These
21 conversations will occur during the 2025-2028 implementation timeframe.

- 22 • Establish and regularly convene an Agency-Met Council workgroup focusing on better
23 coordinating the Regional Bicycle Transportation Network (RBTN) and regional trails. Topics
24 include development of a shared vision that results in a more coordinated, integrated, and
25 interconnected regional system that that is easy to use for all residents of the region.
- 26 • Improve wayfinding, including establishing minimum requirements and other low-cost solutions
27 that promote a more coordinated and accessible system.
- 28 • Foster relationships between regional park implementing agencies and Met Council staff, to
29 improve communication and coordination during planning for the RBTN and regional trails.
- 30 • Build on the strengths of the existing RBTN and regional trail system, to better coordinate their
31 development and growth. In exurban and rural communities, find opportunities to better
32 coordinate and align the RBTN and regional trails.
- 33 • Coordinate with outreach and communications staff across the Met Council and within the
34 regional park implementing agencies, to increase awareness and accessibility of the regional
35 trail system.

1 **Section Eight: Finance**

2

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

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