

Information Item

Metropolitan Parks and Open Space Commission



Meeting Date: July 11, 2024

Community Development Committee: July 15, 2024

Topic

Parks Research Update: Regional Parks System 2023 Annual Use Estimate & 2025 Visitor Study

District(s), Member(s):	All
Policy/Legal Reference:	Minn. Stat. §§ 85.53, subd. 3 and 473.351, subd. 3; <i>2040 Regional Parks Policy Plan</i>
Staff Prepared/Presented:	Darcie Vandegrift, Principal Researcher (651-602-1669); Ismael Ramirez, Principal Researcher (651-602-1831)
Division/Department:	Community Development / Regional Planning

Proposed Action

Information item; no action is proposed at this time.

Background

The Metropolitan Council has prepared annual use estimates for the Regional Park System since 1995 in partnership with the ten regional park implementing agencies.

The Council bases its estimates of parks and trails visits on counts of visitors entering regional parks and trails from Memorial Day to Labor Day. The count is a collaboration between all ten regional parks implementing agencies, whose staff conduct the summer counts, and Council staff who complete the analysis.

An estimated 69.4 million visits were made to the Regional Parks system in 2023 representing a 0.6% increase from 2022. The increase was smaller than in previous years, partly due to typical variations in research methodology and inclement smoky and hot weather in 2023. 71% of the visits were to regional parks, park reserves, and special recreation features. The rest were to regional trails. The most visited regional park was Minneapolis Chain of Lakes, with 7.5 million visits. Other top-visited parks include Mississippi Gorge Regional Park with 3.8 million visits and both Central Mississippi Riverfront Regional Park and Como Regional Park, Zoo & Conservatory hosting 3.5 million visits. The most visited trail was the Minnehaha Parkway Regional Trail with about 2.9 million visits, followed by Lake Links Regional Trail with 1.1 million visits and Cedar Lake Regional Trail hosting 947,000 visits.

The Council uses a four-year rolling average of counts to ensure a representative sample of each park and each trail. Off-season visits (winter, spring, and fall) are based on a survey asking visitors how often they visit during off-season months. The most recent survey was completed in 2021.

The next Visitor Study will be completed in 2025. The 2025 Parks and Trails Visitor Study aims to collect data from visitors to all Regional Parks and Trails System units during the summer of 2025 to inform planning policy, assess equitable usage, and update state funding formulas. As of the beginning of July, a scope of work will be submitted to recruit a consultant who will provide the data for the study. We expect that the consultant will be hired by January 2025, a pilot survey will

be completed by April 30, 2025, and the final survey will be administered between May 26 and September 1, 2025, with a final report due by October 8, 2025.

At the Metropolitan Parks and Open Space Commission meeting, staff will provide a more detailed explanation of the methodology and findings for the 2023 use estimate, staffing changes in parks research, and an update on the 2025 Visitor Study.

Rationale

Minnesota Statutes (85.53, subdivision 3 and 473.351, subdivision 3) and the *2040 Regional Parks Policy Plan* specify visits to the Regional Parks System as a component in determining each regional park implementing agency's share of the Regional Parks System grant program dollars.

Thrive Lens Analysis

As a key factor in determining grant program dollars for the Regional Parks System, the annual use estimate impacts the *Thrive MSP 2040* outcome of Stewardship. The estimate is used to ensure allocation of grant dollars are spent in a manner proportional with regional park and trail visits. The annual use estimate also provides an indication of the popularity of the Regional Parks System, which can serve as a proxy to the Thrive outcome of Livability.

Funding

The use estimate is conducted annually with staff time from Community Development Division's budget. The visitor survey is funded through funds from the Community Development Division's budget.

