

REGIONAL PARKS SYSTEM EQUITY TOOLKIT

PURPOSE

Many levels of government provide parks and recreational space for the residents of our region. The Metropolitan Council plans the Regional Park System in partnership with other agencies to augment spaces managed and maintained by cities, counties, the state, and federal government. The regional plan, Thrive MSP 2040, and its companion, the 2040 Regional Parks Policy Plan, provide the long-term vision for the development of the Regional Park System and establish key outcomes to achieve regionally by 2040.

Thrive MSP 2040 establishes a new direction for the region related to equity – and the 2040 Regional Parks Policy Plan emphasizes the need to strengthen equitable use of the Regional Parks System. The plan builds upon the good work that local government agencies, which implement the Regional Parks System, have been doing to advance equity, by providing a specific equity lens to evaluate operations, planning and investments.

The Regional Parks System is extensive: it includes 54 regional parks and park reserves, 40 regional trails and eight special recreation features, such as the zoo and conservatory at Como Regional Park in St. Paul. With more than 47 million visits each year, and an investment of more than \$658 million in state and regional funds (augmented by \$163 million in state funds to support operations and maintenance) since the system's inception, it's important to assure those investments are inclusive of and beneficial to all the region's residents.

An equity lens, also called an analysis toolkit or impact assessment, is a tool government agencies use to collect information and analyze major activities. Many government agencies in the United States are using an equity lens to create, monitor, and fully integrate equity principles. This Regional Parks System “equity toolkit” is intended for use in decision-making related to system funding and investment.



DEVELOPMENT OF THE EQUITY TOOLKIT

In the 2040 Regional Parks Policy Plan, the Metropolitan Council explicitly committed to collaborate with regional park implementing agencies, partners, community-based organizations, advocacy groups, and other stakeholders to develop a Regional Parks System equity toolkit. With the assistance of CultureBrokers® LLC, this collaboration consisted of three strategic conversations:

1. Building Understanding
2. Shaping Choices
3. Making Decisions



SESSION 1: BUILDING UNDERSTANDING

This first strategic session with participants was convened to develop a shared understanding. This meeting provided background information on the Regional Parks System, reviewed the Metropolitan Council's equity responsibilities in Thrive MSP 2040 and the 2040 Regional Parks Policy Plan, and outlined the process for developing the equity toolkit.

SESSION 2: SHAPING CHOICES

The second strategic session with participants focused on identifying critical equity performance standards. Session participants developed questions to evaluate a park or trail project by effectively gauging the project's impact on equitable use. More than 300 questions were developed in this session. The questions were later compiled and sorted based on content theme for later review by session participants.

SESSION 3: MAKING DECISIONS

The final strategic conversation involved recommending high-impact questions for the equity toolkit, from the list of 300 questions generated during the prior session. Participants rated, ranked and reduced the questions collaboratively.

OUTCOMES

Through these three strategic conversations, stakeholders recommended questions for regional parks implementing agencies to use in putting together their grant applications for Capital Improvement Program and Parks and Trails Legacy Funds.

1. What is the population breakdown for your jurisdiction by race, ethnicity, age, national origin, ability status and income?
2. Which population segments above are currently underserved by the Regional Parks System?
3. Which of the underserved populations (identified in Question 2) will this project better serve?
4. What specific aspects of this project will help to better serve the targeted populations (identified in Question 3)?
5. Exactly how will you verify the target populations (identified in Question 3) are better served?

Based on this stakeholder process, the Metropolitan Parks and Open Space Commission (June 7, 2016), Metropolitan Council Community Development Committee (June 20, 2016) and full Metropolitan Council (July 14, 2016) considered and unanimously recommended the following for the equity toolkit:

1. The toolkit consists of:
 - Set of "equity lens" questions answered by regional park implementing agencies
 - Report of the responses to equity lens questions
 - Set of "equity analysis" questions to guide conversation about the responses
 - Set of "user sessions" to help agencies, Met Council staff and MPOSC understand, use and progress
2. There is a blueprint for continuous improvement and development of the toolkit.
3. Plan to address the stakeholders' additional recommendations and share that with the equity toolkit participants.

NEXT STEPS

The Council will use the Regional Parks System equity toolkit in the 2018-19 biennium (beginning July 1, 2017) for Parks and Trails Legacy Fund dollars and 2019 fiscal year (beginning on July 1, 2018) for Capital Improvement Program dollars.

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