

2050 REGIONAL PARKS AND TRAILS POLICY PLAN

A CHAPTER OF THE REGIONAL DEVELOPMENT GUIDE, IMAGINE 2050



IMAGINE²⁰⁵⁰
parks policy plan

Regional vision

A prosperous, equitable, and resilient region
with abundant opportunities for all to
live, work, play, and thrive.

Regional Core Values

Equity | Leadership | Accountability | Stewardship

Regional Goals

Our region is equitable and inclusive

Racial inequities and injustices experienced by historically marginalized communities have been eliminated, and all people feel welcome, included, and empowered.

Our communities are healthy and safe

All our region's residents live healthy and rewarding lives with a sense of dignity and well-being.

Our region is dynamic and resilient

Our region meets the opportunities and challenges faced by our communities and economy including issues of choice, access, and affordability.

We lead on addressing climate change

We have mitigated greenhouse gas emissions and have adapted to ensure our communities and systems are resilient to climate impacts.

We protect and restore natural systems

We protect, integrate, and restore natural systems to protect habitat and ensure a high quality of life for the people of our region.



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Section One: Overview of the Regional Parks and Trails System and Regional Parks and Trails Policy Plan

The benefits of parks and trails have been extensively documented, positively contributing to human health and well-being.¹ Benefits to physical well-being include increased physical activity, reduced risk of various chronic illnesses, and obesity. Benefits to psychological well-being include stress reduction, attention restoration, and improved cognitive functioning. Social well-being benefits include increased social capital, family bonding, and social integration. Parks and open space also contribute many environmental benefits, including storing water, reducing the effects of urban heat islands, conserving the diversity of flora and fauna in the region, and filtering the air we breathe.²

The Regional Parks and Trails System helps to keep the region at the top of national livability rankings. The Twin Cities area's 66 regional parks, park reserves, and special features, plus more than 487 miles of trails open to the public, showcase the unique landscapes of the region and provide year-round recreation. Residents have consistently singled out the region's parks, trails, and natural environment as the most attractive feature of the region. Drawing more than 69 million visits in 2023, the Regional Parks and Trails System provides access to natural space that contributes to physical and emotional well-being.

The Regional Parks and Trails System plays an important role in addressing climate change in the region. Conserving, maintaining, and enhancing the system through proactive planning and asset management can increase the resilience of the region and reduce the impacts associated with climate change. Working with partners, the Metropolitan Council is committed to growing these ecological benefits and developing policies that build resilience within the system and across the region.

The Regional Parks and Trails System resides within the larger context of Minnesota's extensive outdoor recreation system. For a more detailed description of Minnesota's system, please visit the Regional Parks and Trails Planning Handbook, Section Two.

What is the Regional Parks and Trails System?

The Regional Parks and Trails System, supported by the Met Council in partnership with cities, counties, and special park districts, was established in 1974. At that time, the Legislature found that:

"The pressure of urbanization and development threatens the most valuable remaining large recreational open spaces in the metropolitan area at the same time as the need for such areas is increased. Immediate action is therefore necessary to provide funds to acquire, preserve, protect and develop regional recreational open space for public use." (Minn. Stat. 473.302)

¹ M.P. White et al. (2020). Blue space, health and well-being: A narrative overview and synthesis of potential benefits. *Environmental Research*, 191, 1-14.

<https://www.sciencedirect.com/science/article/pii/S0013935120310665>

² Burrowes, K., Cohen, M., Gwan, P. (2022). *The health benefits of parks and their economic impacts*. Urban Institute, 1-25. <https://www.urban.org/research/publication/health-benefits-parks-and-their-economic-impacts>

In response to state legislation, about 31,000 acres of existing parks were designated as “regional recreation open space.” The newly designated regional parks had about five million visits in 1975. Over the last 50 years, the Met Council has invested state and regional funds to help park agencies develop those first designated regional parks, as well as to acquire and develop new parks and trails for the growing metropolitan population. The Regional Parks and Trails System strives to build upon the world class system of interconnected parks and natural areas first established in Minneapolis by such visionaries as Horace Cleveland and Theodore Wirth and to extend that model throughout the region.

The Regional Parks and Trails System includes:

- 65,339 acres protected
- 46 regional parks
- 12 park reserves
- Eight special features, such as the zoo and conservatory at Como Regional Park
- 56 regional trails, with 487 miles currently open to the public
- More than 69 million visits in 2023

Regional parks and trails contain significant regional natural resources such as lakeshore, wetlands, hardwood forests, native prairies, and groundwater recharging areas. If you were to visit one regional park, park reserve, or special feature each weekend – not even counting the trails – it would take you more than a year to get to them all. It is an amazing system, one that has few rivals anywhere in the world. It demonstrates the importance of natural spaces and outdoor recreation to Minnesotans, including those living in the Twin Cities metropolitan area, and the value of a collaborative and coordinated approach to planning for and developing the system across the region. The Regional Parks and Trails System is made up of four main components: regional parks, park reserves, regional trails, and special features.

Regional Parks contain a diversity of natural features, either naturally occurring or restored, and are typically 200-500 acres in size. Regional parks accommodate a variety of outdoor recreation activities. In 2024, a total of 46 regional parks are open to the public.

Park Reserves, like regional parks, provide for a diversity of outdoor recreation activities. One major feature that distinguishes the park reserve from a regional park is its size. The minimum size for a park reserve is 1,000 acres. Additionally, regional park implementing agencies are required to manage at least 80% of the park reserve as natural lands that protect the ecological functions of the native landscape. As of 2024, a total of 12 park reserves were open to the public.

Regional Trails are categorized as one of two types by the Met Council: destination or greenway trails and linking trails. Destination or greenway trails typically follow along corridors with high-quality natural features that make the trail itself a destination. Linking trails are predominately intended to provide connections between various Regional Parks and Trails System units. As of 2024, 56 regional trails totaling approximately 487 miles were open for public use.

Special Features provide opportunities not generally found in the regional parks, park reserves, or regional trail corridors. Special features often require a unique managing or programming effort. As of 2024, there are eight special features open to the public.

Additional information on Regional Parks and Trails System facilities is provided in Section Two.

Regional Parks and Trails System management structure

The organizational structure of the Regional Parks and Trails System is built on a strong partnership between the Met Council and 10 governmental agencies that include cities, counties, and special park districts. While each agency has a role in the Regional Parks and Trails System, collaboration is its cornerstone and strength.

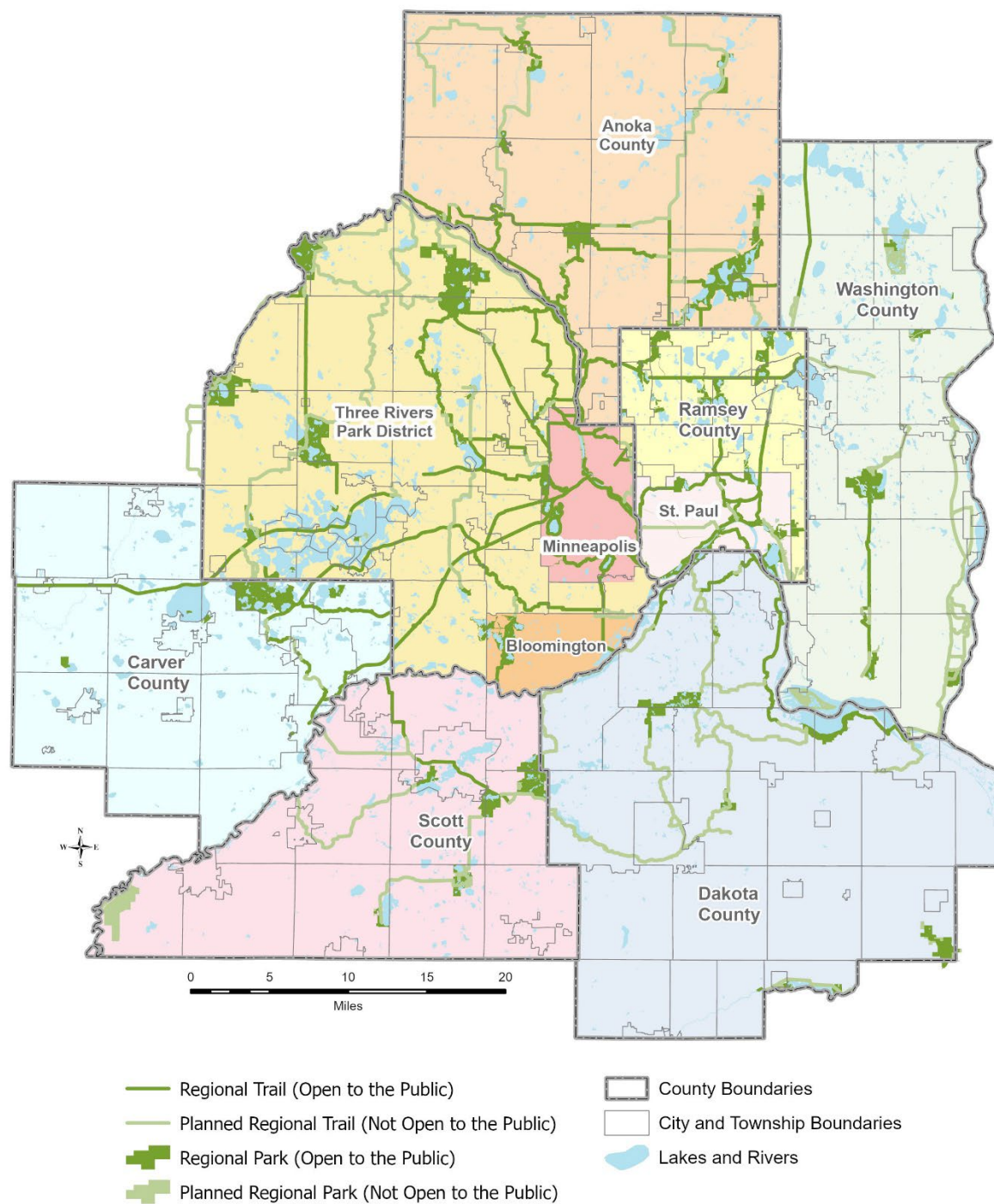
The role of regional park implementing agencies

Cities, counties, and special park districts own and operate regional parks and trails (Minn. Stat. 473.351, subd. 1(a)). Once a park or trail becomes part of the Regional Parks and Trails System, the Met Council supports it with coordinated regional planning, funding, system protection, research, information, marketing, and advocacy. The agency partners that own and operate the Regional Parks and Trails System are called regional park implementing agencies. Figure 1-1 shows a map of the regional park implementing agency jurisdictions.

The regional park implementing agencies are:

- Anoka County
- City of Bloomington
- Carver County
- Dakota County
- Minneapolis Park and Recreation Board
- Ramsey County
- City of Saint Paul
- Scott County
- Three Rivers Park District
- Washington County

Figure 1-1. Regional park implementing agencies



Role of the Metropolitan Council

Legislation directs the Met Council to take the lead role in providing for a Regional Parks and Trails System that will complement the recreational open space opportunities provided across the region by the federal, state, and local units of government. State law directs the Met Council to determine which parks and trails in the seven-county area are included in the Regional Parks and Trails System and to generally identify areas that should be acquired for the Regional Parks and Trails System. The Met Council is charged with determining whether these lands are regionally significant and would collectively provide a balanced system of outdoor recreation for the region. See Appendix 1 for an overview of key Minnesota legislation.

As described in the next section, the Met Council also contributes and administers funding to the regional park implementing agencies to acquire, develop, and operate the Regional Parks and Trails System.

The Met Council evaluates additions to the Regional Parks and Trails System through a system additions process. After Met Council’s evaluation is complete, the park or trail is considered a regional search area or corridor. Implementing agencies then conduct a long-range planning process to develop a vision and plan for the regional parks and trails with participation from the public. The Met Council ensures the long-range plan is consistent with the Imagine 2050 regional development guide, which includes the 2050 Regional Parks and Trails Policy Plan and other Met Council policies and systems. Once approved by the Met Council, the planned regional park or trail is eligible for regional funding for development, acquisition, and operations and maintenance (Figure 1-2).

Regional park implementing agencies are the owners and operators of the regional units. When an implementing agency proposes significant changes or advancements to the long-range plan, the implementing agency works with the Met Council to amend the regional unit’s long-range plan. Please refer to Section 3, Natural Systems, for information on system additions; Section 5, Planning for long-range planning requirements; and Section 8, Finance for Met Council funding contributions and administration (Figure 1-3).

Figure 2-2. Planning for the regional system: System addition process

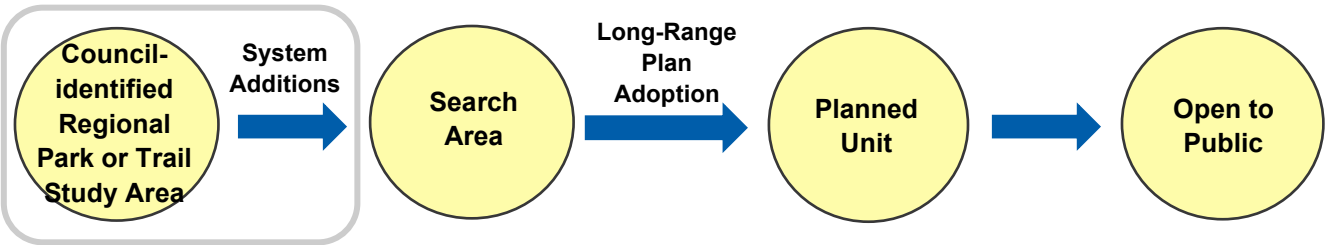


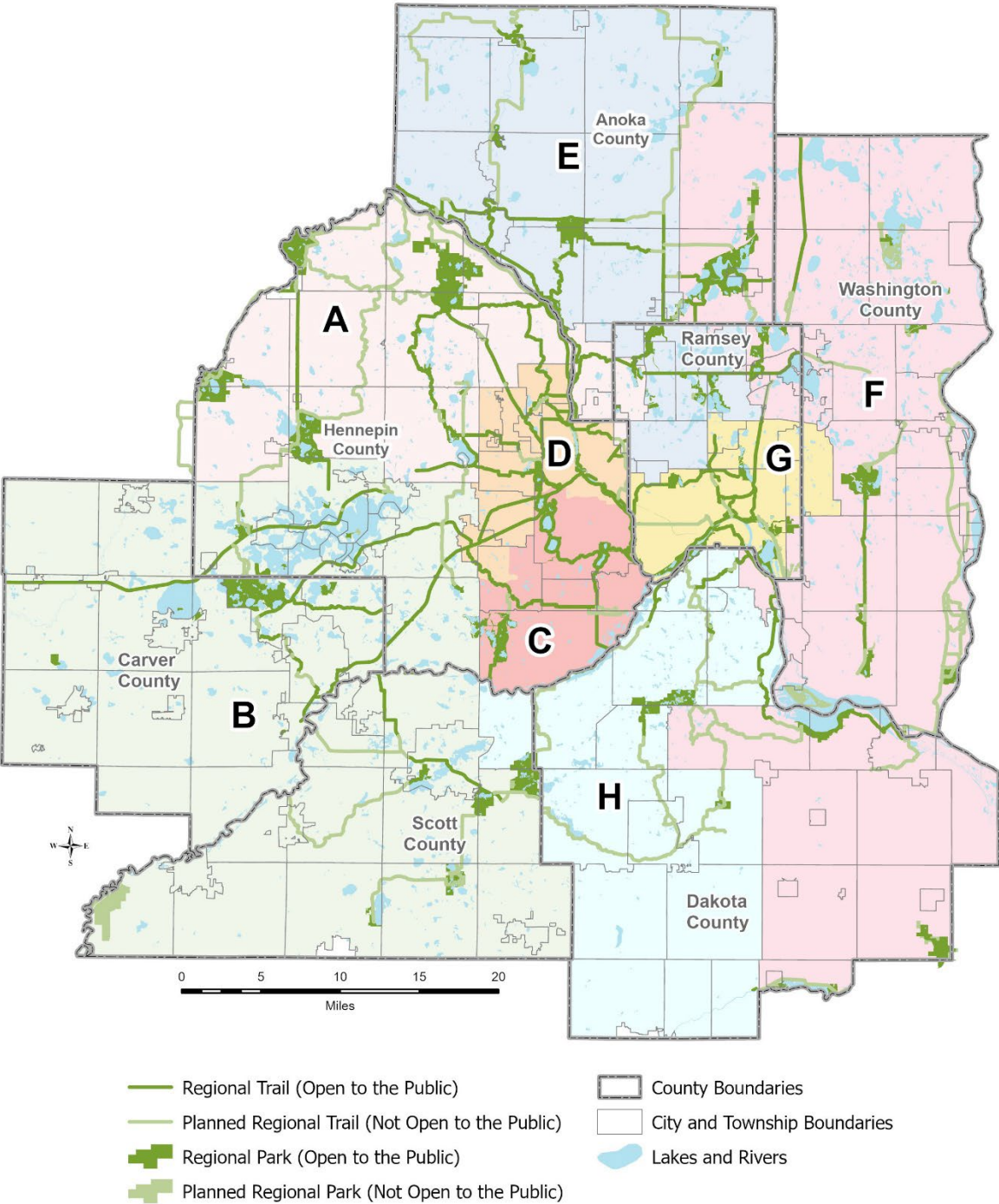
Figure 3-3. Met Council's long-range plan review program



Role of Metropolitan Parks and Open Space Commission

The Metropolitan Parks and Open Space Commission, appointed by the Met Council, uses its expertise to advise on the review of regional park and trail long-range plans, and grants for land acquisition, capital improvements, and the advancement of equity. It also provides recommendations on updates and amendments to the Regional Parks and Trails Policy Plan. The commission comprises eight volunteer members, who represent specific districts throughout the region and a chair who is appointed at large. A map of the districts is shown in Figure 1-4.

Figure 1-4. Metropolitan Parks and Open Space Commission districts



Role of the Regional Parks and Trails Policy Plan

Managing a Regional Parks and Trails System that involves a variety of different local entities, in addition to the Met Council, requires coordinated policies and strategies. The 2050 Regional Parks and Trails Policy Plan lays out objectives and policies for the Regional Parks and Trails System and the actions designed to meet these objectives and policies.

Over the last 50 years, the Regional Parks and Trails System partnership has made significant strides toward achieving the Imagine 2050 values of equity, leadership, accountability, and stewardship. By protecting high quality natural systems and providing a world-class system of recreational opportunities, the Regional Parks and Trails System has contributed significantly to the high quality of life in the region. The policies laid out in the 2050 Regional Parks and Trails Policy Plan reflect the Met Council's ongoing commitment to support and protect the Regional Parks and Trails System.

Equity remains an important priority for the Met Council and region. The regional park implementing agencies have various programs and practices to help reach and serve their diverse base of users. The 2050 Regional Parks and Trails Policy Plan strives to build upon the good work that the regional park implementing agencies have been doing to advance equity.

Accountability is a regional core value in Imagine 2050, including a commitment to monitor and evaluate the effectiveness of the policies and procedures governing the Regional Parks and Trails System. The Met Council will work with the Metropolitan Parks and Open Space Commission, regional parks implementing agencies, and other parks stakeholders to develop a set of Regional Parks and Trails Policy Plan performance measures that quantitatively assess progress on the policies in this plan. This has been added to the four-year workplan that resides in Section Nine.

Planning for 2050

The metropolitan area has historically made a substantial investment in conserving green spaces by establishing regional parks, park reserves, special features, and regional trails. Federal, state, and local governments have invested in parks, trails, natural areas, and wildlife refuges that provide additional recreational activities and habitat. Local communities have invested millions of dollars in community and neighborhood parks and recreation areas.

Protecting natural systems in the metropolitan area builds on past investments and offers an excellent opportunity for further investment in the Regional Parks and Trails System as the region grows by 657,000 people from 2020 to 2050.³ The long-range vision, beyond 2050, for the Regional Parks and Trails System includes expanding the system from over 60,000 acres today to nearly 70,000 acres, and nearly tripling the trail system from 487 miles today to over 1,300 miles.

³ Metropolitan Council (2023). *The regional forecast: population and employment in the Twin Cities region in 2050*, p.1. <https://metro council.org/Data-and-Maps/Publications-And-Resources/MetroStats/Land-Use-and-Development/The-Regional-Forecast-Update-2023.aspx>

The work of planning, acquiring, protecting, and developing these new parks and trails continues. New regional trails and greenway corridors will link regional parks, park reserves, and special features with one another as well as connect with population centers.

Preserving natural areas with an eye toward the future is critical to the region's livability, sustainability, stewardship, and prosperity. The Regional Parks and Trails System represents a major, well-established conservation effort for land and water resources. The area's growing population will need additional large-scale parks and open space lands with interconnected trails in the future. The region will continue to identify natural systems as well as land with restoration potential, to be added to the system and make plans for their acquisition before the opportunity is lost.

System plan

The Met Council has the responsibility of preparing a system plan for the Regional Parks and Trails System. The system planning process begins with the Met Council identifying "generally the areas which should be acquired," as required by the 1974 Metropolitan Parks Act. The Regional Parks and Trails Policy Plan includes the system plan, which identifies the regional parks and trails that are included in the system.

The Met Council reviews the system plan portion of the Regional Parks and Trails Policy Plan every four years as part of the policy plan revision process and may add, modify, or delete planned elements to the system. Additions, including major boundary adjustments, or deletions to the system proposed outside the regular plan review process are substantial revisions to the policy plan, and as such require an amendment to the policy plan. Identification of specific boundaries and detailed planning for individual units of the system are addressed in long-range plans for each unit. The long-range plans are prepared by the regional park implementing agencies.

Amending the policy plan

The Met Council will amend the *2050 Regional Parks and Trails Policy Plan* only for a substantial revision. A substantial revision is defined by the Met Council as (1) a proposed revision that is intended to or could have the effect of changing the direction or intent of adopted Met Council policy, (2) addition or deletion of a policy, or (3) addition or deletion of a system element, or a major boundary adjustment as defined in the Section Five, Action 1, Boundary Adjustment section, with further detail provided in the Regional Parks and Trails Planning Handbook.

An amendment request initiated by the Metropolitan Parks and Open Space Commission should include documentation to substantiate that it constitutes a substantial revision to the policy plan. A Met Council decision to amend the plan on its own initiative or that of the Commission will be preceded by a finding that a substantial revision is proposed. When amending the policy plan, the Met Council will conduct a public hearing in accordance with Minnesota Statutes, section 473.147 and adopted Met Council policy.

Updating the policy plan

Minnesota law requires the Met Council to conduct a comprehensive review of the Regional Parks and Trails Policy Plan at least every four years (Minn. Stat. 473.147). However, over a four-year period,

changes occur in population, acquisition, development, and system use. Updating the data and factual information to keep the policy current with new trends and conditions is not a substantial revision to the policy plan and will be accomplished through the ordinary process of consideration and approval by the Metropolitan Parks and Open Space Commission, the Community Development Committee, and the governing body of the Met Council. The regional park implementing agencies will receive formal notice of any proposed update prior to consideration by the Metropolitan Parks and Open Space Commission.

Regional Parks and Trails Planning Handbook

The Regional Parks and Trails Planning Handbook is a resource that complements this policy plan. The planning handbook contains more detailed procedural guidance on how the policy plan's policies and actions are implemented. It is a resource guide developed primarily for regional park 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 implementing agency long-range planning and system protection requests, as well as to serve as a resource for more information, examples, and best management practices.

Requirements and processes detailed in the planning handbook carry the same authority as those outlined or previewed within the policy plan. For example, the policy plan outlines the required components of long-range plans developed by regional park implementing agencies for each unit of the Regional Parks and Trails System, while the planning handbook details the specific content that must be included within each of these components. The planning handbook will continue to evolve and develop as agency and Met Council staff work together to enhance, grow, and promote the Regional Parks and Trails System. For example, regional park implementing agencies occasionally seek guidance from Met Council staff on how to fulfill specific long-range plan requirements. Excerpts of long-range plans or additional guidance on how to meet requirements may be included in future versions of the planning handbook.

Regional Parks and Trails System funding

The Met Council contributes and administers funding to the regional park implementing agencies. Funding for the Regional Parks and Trails System currently consists of four main grant programs. Each grant program is intended for different purposes and includes various funding sources. Only regional park implementing agencies qualify for the grant programs. Each grant program is highlighted briefly below.

Additional information is available in the Regional Parks and Trails *Grant Administration Guide*, and in program specific guidance: <https://metro council.org/Parks/Grants-Funding/Grant-Administration-Guide/Grant-Administration-Guide.aspx>

Equity Grant program

In 2019, the Met Council created a grant program using Met Council (regional) bonds to promote equitable use of regional parks and trails. Bond-funded grants provided funding for acquisition, development, or redevelopment projects in the Regional Parks and Trails System. In 2021, the Met Council dedicated the use of parks interest earnings to provide additional funding for the Equity Grant

Program. Interest earnings may be used for noncapital as well as capital projects. The 2024 Equity Grant Program continued this combination of Met Council bonds and parks interest earnings to fund both capital and programming projects.

Regional Parks Bonding program

The Regional Parks Bonding Program is intended for Regional Parks and Trails System acquisition, development, and redevelopment projects. Park and trail development should be based on the principle of providing and maintaining quality public park areas and facilities, primarily for residents of the metropolitan area. The amount of funds each regional park implementing agency receives is based on a formula specified in Section Eight: Finance.

Parks and Trails Legacy Fund program

The Parks and Trails Legacy Fund program was created after the statewide passage of Minnesota's Clean Water, Land, and Legacy Amendment in 2008. Along with state and Greater Minnesota regional parks and trails, the Met Council receives a portion of the Parks and Trails Legacy appropriations for the Regional Parks and Trails System.

The Met Council administers the Parks and Trails Legacy funds to regional park implementing agencies. The 25-year Parks and Trails Legacy Plan provides high-level guidance for use of the funds.

Each regional park implementing agency's share of the funds is based on a formula specified in state statute (Minnesota Statutes, section 85.53, subd 3). This statute requires that 10% of the total Parks and Trails Legacy appropriations be set aside for land acquisition.

Park Acquisition Opportunity Fund program

The Park Acquisition Opportunity Fund program is organized into two separate accounts, corresponding to different funding sources. The two funding sources are the Parks and Trails Legacy Fund and the Environment and Natural Resources Trust Fund. As noted above, 10% of the Parks and Trails Legacy Fund appropriations are set aside for land acquisition through the Park Acquisition Opportunity Fund program. Direct appropriations for land acquisition from the Environment and Natural Resources Trust Fund, recommended by the Legislative-Citizen Commission on Minnesota Resources, are also allocated to the Park Acquisition Opportunity Fund program.

The Met Council matches every \$3 in state funding from the Parks and Trails Legacy Fund with \$2 from Met Council bonds for the Park Acquisition Opportunity Fund program, as required by Minnesota Statutes, section 85.53, subd. 3. The Met Council has chosen to make the same match for Environment and Natural Resources Trust Fund funding for park acquisition. The Met Council's Park Acquisition Opportunity Fund program is noncompetitive and awarded based on funding availability.

Operation and maintenance funds

The Met Council administers state funds to regional park implementing agencies to pay for a portion of their operation and maintenance costs. The share each regional park implementing agency receives is based on a formula specified in state statute (Minnesota Statutes, section 473.351).

Direct pass-through appropriations

In addition to the five grant programs highlighted above, the Met Council also administers pass-through appropriations from the state to regional park implementing agencies and local governments. These dollars are legislatively earmarked for a particular regional park implementing agency or park and trail unit.

Total system investment

The total investment the state and Met Council have made toward the Regional Parks and Trails System between state fiscal years 1974 and 2024 totaled \$1.25 billion (Table 1-1).

Table 1-1 Regional Parks and Trails System state and regional funding investments, 1974-2024

| Program | Funding source(s) | Investment totals, 1974-2024 (millions) |
|-----------------------------------|--|---|
| Regional Parks Bonding | State and Met Council bonds, Environment and Natural Resources Trust Fund, interest (through 1984) | \$475.2 |
| Operation and Maintenance | State General Fund and Lottery-in-Lieu of Sales Tax, as per Minnesota Statutes, section 297A.65 | \$252.6 |
| Parks and Trails Legacy Fund | 0.038% general state sales and use tax, as per Minnesota Constitution, Article XI, Section 15 | \$234.2 |
| Pass-Through Appropriations | Various state funds | \$178.7 |
| Park Acquisition Opportunity Fund | Met Council bonds | \$36.9 |
| | Parks and Trails Legacy Fund | \$26.0 |
| | Environment and Natural Resources Trust Fund | \$13.2 |
| Other Investments | State and Met Council funds | \$31.8 |
| Equity Grant Program | Met Council bonds and parks interest earnings | \$4.4 |
| | Total | \$1.25 billion |

The investments and funding sources described above are not the only funding sources for the Regional Parks and Trails System. Each regional park implementing agency provides its own mix of funding for their respective regional parks and trails. Other funding sources also exist, including federal grants, public-private partnerships, and private donations.

The State of the Regional Parks and Trails System

Demographic and economic trends, social issues, relationships, investments, and infrastructure shape the Regional Parks and Trails System today, as well as its future. To prepare for 2050, the policy plan identifies these existing conditions as a foundation for future priorities and direction.

Through research, agency collaboration, stakeholder engagement, and observation of large-scale trends, Imagine 2050 identifies four key existing conditions in addition to the broader landscape of the region, with specifics detailed in other policy chapters of Imagine 2050 and provided under Section One of the Regional Parks and Trails Planning Handbook. Understanding these conditions informed the System vision, mission, values, objectives, policies, and actions.

Vital to people and communities

Regional parks and trails are important to people for multiple reasons including public health, social connections, and recreation opportunities. With changing demographics, the Regional Parks and Trails System will need to assess ways to continue being a relevant service for current and future visitors.

The Regional Parks and Trails System is a highly valued amenity to the Twin Cities metro area with over 69 million visitors in 2023⁴ (see Figure 1-5 below). Park and trail users generally have a positive experience, with 88% of visitors in 2021 ranking the facilities as “Excellent” or “Very Good.”⁵ The system provides many benefits to its visitors, ranging from simple time in nature to recreational opportunities to increased happiness to social connectivity.

⁴ Metropolitan Council (2024) *Visits to the regional park system in 2023*, p.1.

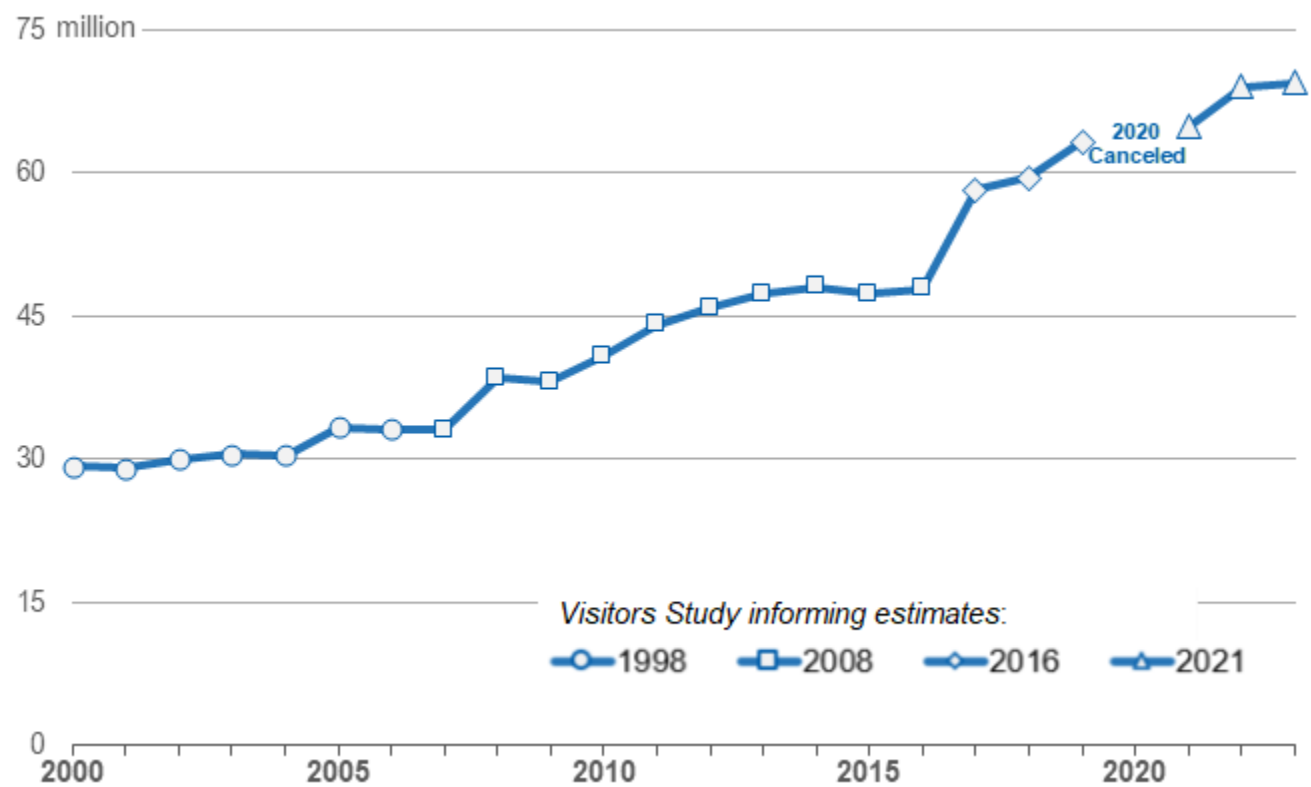
<https://metro council.org/Parks/Publications-And-Resources/PARK-USE-REPORTS/Annual-Use-Estimates/2023-Visits-to-the-Regional-Parks-and-Trails-Syste.aspx>

⁵ Metropolitan Council (2021) *2021 parks and trails visitor study*, p. 3.

<https://metro council.org/Parks/Research/Visitor-Study.aspx#Report>

Figure 1-5: Visits to the Regional Parks and Trails System have more than doubled since 2000

Estimated visits to regional parks and trails



Source: Metropolitan Council's annual population estimates and annual parks and trails use estimates (July 2024). Park use estimates are calculated using a multiplier factor that is collected during the Metropolitan Council's Visitors Study (typically completed once every five years). We recommend caution comparing use estimates informed by different visitors studies.

Access to parks and trails reduces medical costs, increases community trust, and provides mental health benefits. It increases positive emotions like calmness, joy, and creativity. Connection to nature is a low-cost public health measure compared to conventional medical interventions.⁶ Thousands of articles and four decades of peer-reviewed research publications lead to one general conclusion: Time outdoors will improve anyone's physical and mental health. When people get outdoors – into the parks and on the trails – health care is moved “upstream,” from curing sickness in the medical system to preventing it.

“Community gatherings are in parks, and this is a way to get to know neighbors. ... People meet friends in parks.”

Youth leader, Roseville

⁶ Metropolitan Council (2021) *Adventure close to home: Connecting youth to the regional park system* (1):3. <https://metro council.org/Parks/Research/Youth-Parks/Report.aspx>

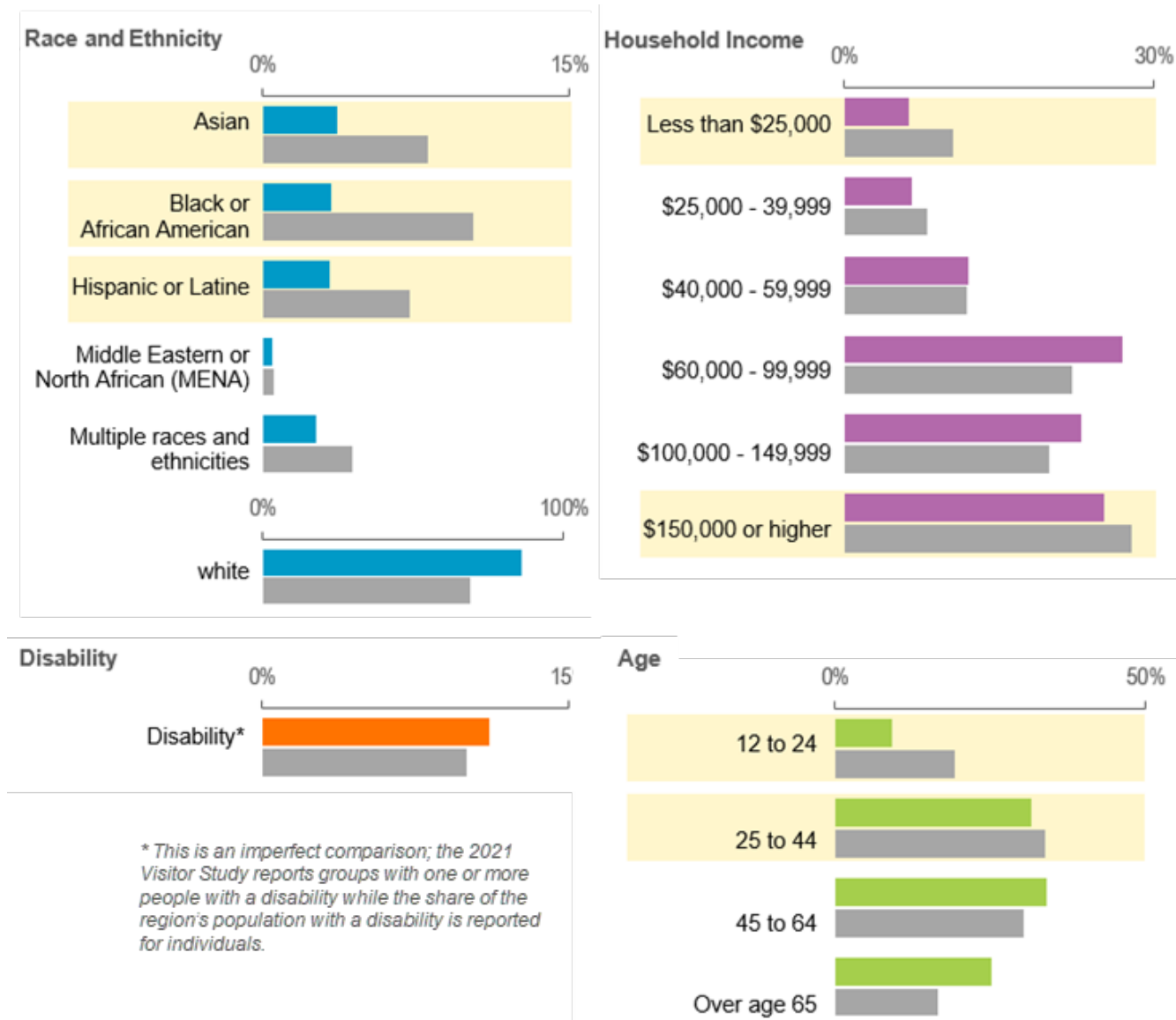
As the system continues to grow and change, regional parks and trails must continually adapt to new challenges. For example, parks may be a potential solution to public health emergencies. With the onset of the COVID-19 pandemic in 2020, people gathered in parks as a form of recreation and sanctuary when many other options were unavailable. In a 2023 post-pandemic survey from the National Recreation and Parks Association, 80% of park and recreation professionals across the country reported that current visitation levels were higher than pre-pandemic levels.

The system can also help address loneliness and social isolation. Social isolation and loneliness affect millions of Americans and come with harmful health impacts. In a recent U.S. Surgeon General's advisory, loneliness and social isolation can increase the risk of premature death by 26% and 29% respectively. Regional parks and trails can help reverse this trend by providing social spaces for the region and building greater social connections.

While regional parks and trails are a highly valued amenity for our region, they are out of reach for some communities for a variety of reasons. In the 2021 Parks and Trails Visitor Study, Black people, Indigenous people, people of color, and young people were underrepresented as a proportion of visitors to the system (see Figure 1-6). Among communities of color, the most common barriers to access are lack of awareness, time constraints, safety concerns, and transportation barriers. In the 2021 Youth and Parks report, the top barriers identified for young people were safety concerns, a lack of opportunity to learn necessary skills, and racism and exclusion.

Figure 1-6. People of color, youth, and low- and very high-income residents are underrepresented in Regional Park and Trail System visits

Comparing the share of visitors by demographic topic (in color) with regional demographics (in grey)



Source: Metropolitan Council's 2021 Regional Parks and Trails Visitor Study; U.S. Census Bureau, decennial census, 2020 (race and ethnicity, age); U.S. Census Bureau, American Community Survey one-year estimates, 2021 (household income, disability). Disparities between visitors and the region's population greater than 2% are highlighted in yellow.

It is crucial that the Regional Parks and Trails System works to identify, address, and reduce these barriers to these underserved communities, especially because the region will only become more diverse in the future. It is expected that in 2050, 45% of the region will be Black people, Indigenous people, and people of color, and 22% of the population will be 65 years or older. With a significant change in population, regional parks and trails must continually change and improve to best meet the needs of the Twin Cities region.

History of inequitable development

Through partnership and coordination, the Regional Parks and Trails System developed into the expansive system we recognize today. However, systemic racism has played a role in shaping the use and development of these recreational spaces.

The land that the Regional Parks and Trails System sits on is the ancestral land of the Dakota and the Ojibwe, which was stolen from them through a series of ill-intentioned treaties that were often enacted under pressure from the U.S. government. With continued growth of the Twin Cities and harsh punishments resulting from the U.S. – Dakota War of 1862, the Dakota were ultimately pushed out of their homelands and forced to reside on small reservations throughout Minnesota and elsewhere. The resulting displacement also separated the Dakota from the Bdote, the confluence of the Mississippi and Minnesota Rivers. These places are sacred and provide deep connection to the Dakota people as the place of their origin stories. Nearby places hold significant cultural and spiritual meaning. The Owámniyomni Okhódayapi organization writes of efforts to reconnect American Indian communities to the Bdote and other cultural treasures: “Native communities are still fighting to resurrect and protect their culture, language and history. We can help restore this story disrupted.”⁷ With regional parks and trails sited on American Indian lands, the system must address a way forward to respect the land and the people who have deep ties to these spaces.

Regional parks and trails are also influenced by racist policies in housing development. Redlining and racial covenants created in the early 20th century restricted neighborhoods to only certain white communities. Combined with housing developers’ efforts to ensure parks were built near their investments, these Progressive Era policies had the impact of racially segregating those who visited lakeside parks in Minneapolis and Saint Paul. Today, there is strong evidence of a connection between these earlier redlining practices and areas with increased temperature, decreased tree canopy, and more impervious surfaces.⁸

Today, the legacy of inequity continues to persist in overburdened communities as seen with the large gaps in visitation demographics, especially among Black residents. White residents comprise 68% of the region’s population but account for 84% of regional park visits. Meanwhile, Black residents comprise 10% of the region’s population, but account for only 4% of regional park visits.⁹ Some common barriers to access include a lack of awareness, time constraints, and safety concerns. The creation of the Regional Parks and Trails System started with a desire to collaborate and protect the natural beauty of the Twin Cities, but it also comes from a government that was associated with

⁷ Owamniyomni Okhodayapi, www.owamniyomni.org, About section, 2024.

⁸ Hoffman JS, Shandas V, Pendleton N. (2020) *The effects of historical housing policies on resident exposure to intra-urban heat: a study of 108 US urban areas*. *Climate* 8(1):12.
https://www.researchgate.net/publication/338556690_The_Effects_of_Historical_Housing_Policies_on_Resident_Exposure_to_Intra-Urban_Heat_A_Study_of_108_US_Urban_Areas

⁹ Metropolitan Council (2021) *2021 parks and trails visitor study*, pp.13-14.
<https://metro council.org/Parks/Research/Visitor-Study.aspx>

systemic racism. To move forward by 2050, it will be critical to address the legacy of racial inequity and work toward creating a more desirable future.

The climate is changing

Climate change has already begun to impact life in the Twin Cities region with intensifying weather events, warming winters, and hotter summers. The Regional Parks and Trails System is a key tool for applying mitigation and adaptation strategies (See Figure 1-7 below).

To adequately prepare for 2050, the Regional Parks and Trails System plans to mitigate climate change while adapting to the on-the-ground impacts to the region. With average annual temperatures in the Twin Cities region warming by nearly three degrees Fahrenheit since 1895,¹⁰ the impacts of climate change to recreation and natural systems are already being felt. Regional parks and trails are greatly impacted by these changes, resulting in new realities such as habitat loss for native species, shorter winters, earlier ice outs, and increased frequency of extreme heat and poor air quality. It is also important to note that low-income and communities of color are more vulnerable to the effects of climate change. For example, areas in Minneapolis that had racial covenants (properties that could only be sold to whites) have temperatures that are on average 3.71 degrees Fahrenheit cooler than the rest of the city.¹¹ Racial covenants were outlawed by the Fair Housing Act of 1968 and are no longer enforceable, but the effects of these covenants can still be seen and felt today.

Another aspect of climate change is the impact it has on water quality. Throughout the central and metropolitan areas of Minnesota, only 54% of lakes meet water quality standards for recreation.¹² Due to algal blooms, littering, and pollution, the recreational opportunities for park visitors have diminished slightly.

While climate change is already being felt around the region, parks and trails can provide many environmental benefits as they break up and ameliorate the effects of urban heat islands, improve air quality, sequester carbon, and provide flood-storage benefits. Parks and trails also protect natural habitats, providing increased biodiversity while maintaining healthy ecosystems.

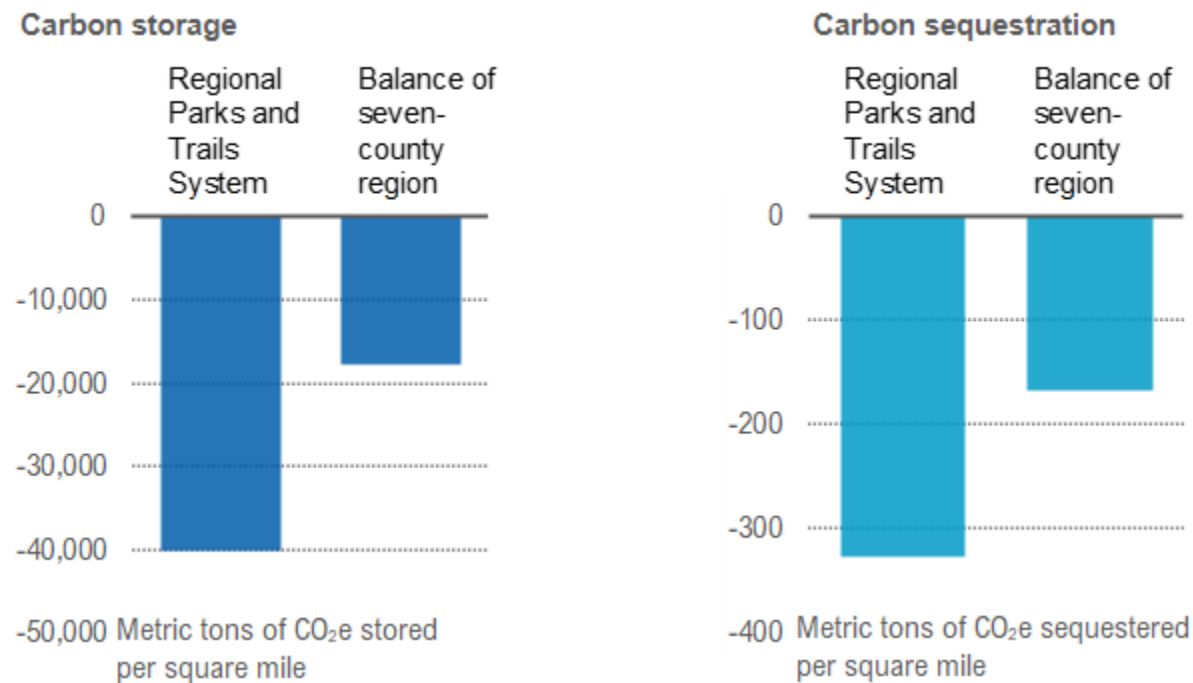
¹⁰ Minnesota Department of Natural Resources. Climate trends. *Climate change and Minnesota*.

https://www.dnr.state.mn.us/climate/climate_change_info/climate-trends.html

¹¹ Walker, R.H., Keeler, B.L., Derickson, K.D. (2024) The impacts of racially discriminatory housing policies on the distribution of intra-urban heat and tree canopy: A comparison of racial covenants and redlining in Minneapolis, MN, *Landscape and Urban Planning*, 245. <https://experts.umn.edu/en/publications/the-impacts-of-racially-discriminatory-housing-policies-on-the-di>

¹² Minnesota Pollution Control Agency. *Lake water quality. Water quality*. <https://www.pca.state.mn.us/air-water-land-climate/lake-water-quality>

Figure 1-7. The Regional Parks and Trails System mitigates greenhouse gases by storing and sequestering carbon at rates twice that of other areas



Source: Metropolitan Council analysis of the USGS National Land Cover Database and primary literature sequestration rates within census municipality boundaries and regional park boundaries.

Throughout the Regional Parks and Trails System, work is underway to increase the environmental benefits that were previously mentioned. A 2021 work group made up of implementing agency and Met Council staff identified the following efforts:

- Restoring lands to native plant communities or species resilient to new climates
- Protecting large areas of land to provide habitat for native species like bison and the rusty patched bumblebee
- Adapting recreational opportunities like adjusting open hours to allow for more recreation in cooler evening hours

As implementing agencies continue efforts to build a more resilient future, it is important that the Met Council continues to support this work, while also striving to think of new ways to address these challenges.

Growing pains

The Regional Parks and Trails System has experienced rapid growth over the past few years, especially regional trails. This expansion must be balanced with the need to secure adequate funding for regular maintenance.

Since the creation of the Regional Parks and Trails System in 1974, the system has grown substantially, totaling more than 60,000 acres of park land protected and almost 490 miles of regional trails. This has been achieved due to the investment of over \$1 billion in state and regional dollars and

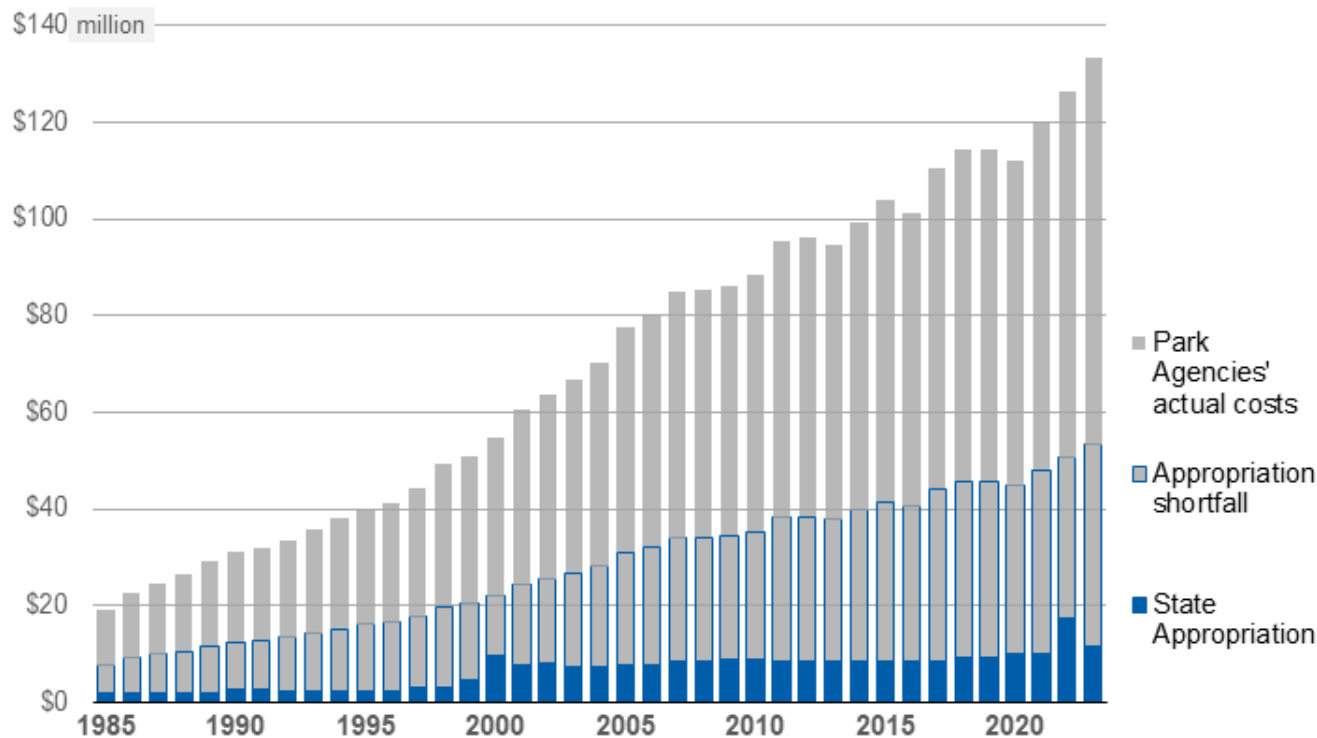
an additional \$244 million of state funds for operations and maintenance funding (2024 figures) in addition to hundreds of millions of dollars invested in operations, programming, and capital improvements by the implementing agencies themselves.

The overall success of a large parks and trails system in the Twin Cities region has led to an expectation of high-quality amenities. In the 2021 Regional Parks Visitor Study, respondents were asked to suggest recommendations that would improve their experience visiting regional parks and trails. The most common recommendations for improvement were maintenance for regional parks (20%) and better surface conditions for regional trails (23%). Despite the high demand for improved and well-maintained amenities, the regional park implementing agencies are facing a gap in funding for operations and maintenance. When it comes to financing the system’s operations and maintenance costs, the state has historically invested significantly less than its statutorily required 40% of total operational costs, instead appropriating, on average, 9% of these costs (see Figure 1-8).

In addition to the regular demands of maintaining and upgrading infrastructure, there is also a desire to continue expanding the system, to improve access to underserved communities, protect natural areas, and plan for developing areas and the growing population.

Figure 1-8. State funding fall short of appropriation commitment as costs increase for agencies

Appropriated funding from the State of Minnesota and operations and maintenance costs incurred by regional park implementing agencies



Source: Metropolitan Council analysis of Operations and Maintenance appropriations and park agency annual expenditures.

Regional Parks and Trails System Vision, Mission, Values, and Objectives

The Regional Parks and Trails System vision, mission, values, and objectives are intended to nest within and complement the regional vision, values, and goals articulated in Imagine 2050, the regional development guide. The system is grounded in a unique partnership between the 10 regional park implementing agencies and the Met Council.

Vision for the Regional Parks and Trails System

Together, growing community connections and inspiring health and healing through exceptional outdoor experiences and high-quality natural areas.

Mission

A partnership committing 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, recreation, and natural systems.

Objectives

The 2050 Regional Parks and Trails Policy Plan advances the Imagine 2050 regional goals and the regional core values of equity, leadership, accountability, and stewardship by striving to:

- **Foster equity and belonging:** Connect people with nature, community, and cultural landscapes to better support their physical, mental, and emotional well-being.
- **Take care of what we have:** Reinvest in existing regional parks and trails to maintain and enhance visitor experiences.
- **Protect and restore:** Protect and restore natural systems to safeguard the well-being of all living things.
- **Adapt and mitigate:** Increase the region's resilience to climate change through land stewardship practices that mitigate greenhouse gases and adapt to future climates.
- **Meet future needs:** Meet the growing demand for regional parks and trails through strategic and timely land acquisition and development.

An additional description of the five objectives is below:

Objective 1- Foster equity and belonging: Connect people with nature, community, and cultural landscapes to better support their physical, mental, and emotional well-being.

The seven-county Twin Cities region has a world-renowned system of regional parks and trails that span seven-counties. The history of our region is complex and marred by systemic racism that at one time overtly limited certain people's ability to choose where they live, work, and even recreate. The legacy of this history has had a profound impact on the people of our region and the implications of this racist past persist today. This reality has greatly informed who uses our Regional Parks and Trails System today and whether impacted communities feel welcomed.

The partnership that makes up our Regional Parks and Trails System acknowledges this troubled history and is committed to reparative solutions through advancing equity and belonging in our work. We are committed to addressing and undoing structural and programmatic inequities across the metropolitan region. We believe in working with impacted communities to co-create solutions and shape a future where all people have a seat at the table to shape our collective future. We recognize that there is a lot of work to do, and we are committed to building a Regional Parks and Trails System where everyone feels a sense of belonging.

Objective 2 - Take care of what we have: Reinvest in existing regional parks and trails to maintain and enhance visitor experiences.

The Regional Parks and Trails System, made up of the 10 regional park implementing agencies and supported by the Met Council, has a large and mature system of parks and trails. Once an agency establishes a regional park or trail, they also establish a regular reinvestment plan to ensure that the unit is maintained for high-quality visitor experiences.

In 2022, the most recent year for operational expenditure data, the ten regional park implementing agencies' operational expenditures exceeded \$130 million. While the state contributes to this critical function, historically its investment has been about 9% of the total annual operating costs. This means most costs are borne by the regional park implementing agencies. If funding does not keep up with growing user demand and infrastructure maintenance, the system will experience degradation and decline.

To protect our current and future investments in the Regional Parks and Trails System, the State of Minnesota, and Met Council must prioritize and accelerate reinvestment in the existing system from all available funding sources, in partnership with the 10 regional park implementing agencies. A synopsis of key Minnesota legislation for the Regional Parks and Trails System, including Minnesota Statute 473.351 – which indicates regional park implementing agencies should receive at least 40% of their actual operations and maintenance costs from state funding to operate and maintain the Regional Parks System – and applicable funding formulas can be found in Appendix 1.

Objective 3 - Protect and restore: Protect and restore natural systems to safeguard the well-being of all living things.

Our metro region's natural systems – our lakes, rivers, streams, wetlands, and uplands - serve as the foundation on which our Regional Parks and Trails System was created.

Our regional parks and trails are the crown jewels of our region's natural systems, providing access to the outdoors for everyone, ensuring healthy habitats and landscapes, and increasing ecological resilience. In partnership with regional park implementing agencies, the Met Council aims to preserve these high-quality natural systems for today's residents and for future ones. In the parts of our regional system that are degraded, the Met Council aims to invest in restoration.

The health of our natural systems is intertwined with the health of our region. The Met Council encourages work across sectors to protect, restore, and connect natural systems with one another. Providing access and opportunities for people to be outdoors as a way to promote happiness, health, and well-being is critical.

Objective 4 - Adapt and mitigate: Increase the region's resilience to climate change through land stewardship practices that mitigate greenhouse gases and adapt to future climates.

The Regional Parks and Trails System provides our region with important ecosystem services to combat climate change. The most critical role natural systems play in climate change mitigation is sequestering carbon in soils and organisms. Additional services will help the region adapt to future climates, including shade and cooling benefits, water storage, and protecting critical habitat that provides refuge for all living things.

Our regional trail network serves as the arterial backbone of our region's active transportation system, in coordination with the Regional Bicycle Transportation Network, local trail networks, and other important trail connections. Additionally, regional parks and trails provide wildlife pathways and migratory routes. Agencies are working to reduce or eliminate barriers to wildlife movement by improving connectivity and ensuring all living things can find food, water, and suitable habitat.

By working together, the Met Council and implementing agencies can anticipate and address climate change impacts and utilize climate tolerant species that adapt to our wetter and warmer region. By making proactive park and trail modernization investments and anticipating future weather conditions that put in place more durable infrastructure and climate-adapted species, our system will be able to survive more frequent storms, freeze-thaw cycles, floods, wildfires, and other natural disasters.

The Met Council and regional park implementing agencies are committed to reducing greenhouse gas emissions and energy use and providing for carbon capture. Whether through increased use of renewable energy, electrification of fleets, or investing in smart infrastructure, we share a common commitment to shrink our carbon footprint. The Met Council is committed to providing regionwide climate data and other requested information and technical assistance.

Objective 5 - Meet future needs: Meet the growing demand for regional parks and trails through strategic and timely land acquisition and development.

As our region's population continues to grow toward the 2050 projection of nearly four million residents, the use of our Regional Parks and Trails System will grow, too. In 2023, the system had more than 69 million visits. While this level of use reflects the high value residents place on the system, it also illustrates the tremendous daily pressure on the system that agencies must support to meet visitor needs.

To prepare for the projected growth and use, the Met Council will work closely with our 10 regional park implementing agencies to acquire existing park and trail in-holdings, and we will identify new opportunities for future expansion. As our population becomes more diverse and the proportionate share of the population over 65 years nearly doubles, we must adapt our facilities and park offerings to remain relevant to changing expectations and needs. Bridging facilities, a relatively new idea to the regional system, are intended to attract and introduce new visitors to our regional parks and trails. This type of facility may become more prevalent as we continue to innovate to meet new needs.

In areas with limited land availability, protecting and preserving natural systems will become more challenging and will require more creativity. Some of the best conservation opportunities may include protecting regional "greenway" corridors that provide natural systems benefits for people and wildlife. Finding corridors that connect larger landscapes will increase their natural systems value, but with limited opportunities, our approaches will need to adapt and will require more partnerships across public and private sectors and new sources of funding. Parks and trails professionals will need to reach beyond their current relationships and knowledge base to innovate and grow as we collectively strive to meet our region's challenging and exciting future.

Section Two: System Plan Policy and Actions

System Plan policy

Maintain a robust and current set of data, maps, plans, processes, and applications to support regional parks and trails planning.

System Plan policy performance measure(s): To be developed.

The Met Council is responsible for preparing a system plan for the Regional Parks and Trails System. The system is made up of the current regional parks and trails that are open to the public, planned components of the system, and search areas and search corridors for new components to the system. For a regional unit to be deemed “open to the public” it must be substantially open for use. Planned units have Met Council-approved long-range plans and are eligible to enter into the acquisition and development stage. Search units are proposals for regional parks and trails that will be developed through the long-range planning process.

The Regional Parks and Trails System is an interconnected network of large nature-based, recreational open space parks and trails in the metropolitan area. The system primarily consists of lands located in high-quality natural settings that provide close-to-home recreation and protect continuous habitat, plant and animal communities, as well as clean water, air, and soil. Typically, these areas are contiguous to lakes, rivers, or other water bodies. Restoration and protection of natural areas is a key objective in the Regional Parks and Trails System. Regional parks and park reserves include large areas of land or water that often intersect multiple political jurisdictions. Regional trails may traverse several communities and provide connections between regional parks, park reserves, population centers, and the greater trail network in the region. Regional parks and trails draw visitors from across the region and beyond.

The Regional Parks and Trails System is part of the overarching outdoor recreation system in the region consisting of lands owned or managed by federal, state, and local governments, as well as lands privately owned by nonprofit conservancies or for-profit organizations. All play an important role in supporting and protecting the outdoor recreation system. The system is designed to meet the recreational needs and natural resources protection goals of the region. The outdoor recreation system consists of a wide range of facilities, from state parks to regional trails to neighborhood playgrounds to private nature centers. The Regional Parks and Trails System is a critical part of this well-rounded system of outdoor recreation.

As a part of Minnesota's outdoor recreation system, the Twin Cities Regional Parks and Trails System fills a special niche that distinguishes it from local and state recreation opportunities. Criteria outlined in the 25-Year Parks and Trails Legacy Plan help determine what makes a unit “regionally significant.”¹³

¹³ Minnesota Department of Natural Resources. (2011). *Parks and trails legacy plan, parks and trails of state and regional significance, A 25-year long-range plan for Minnesota*. www.legacy.mn.gov/minnesota-state-and-regional-parks-and-trails-legacy-plan

The following criteria provide the key considerations for regional significance for the Regional Parks and Trails System:

- Comprises a nature-based setting and substantial acreage (100-acre minimum, but usually significantly larger)
- Offers a range of high-quality activities and experiences
- Serves multiple communities
- Is consistent with the Regional Parks and Trails Policy Plan, a chapter of Imagine 2050
- Provides recreational opportunities in areas that currently lack these amenities

Publicly owned lands and open space areas administered by the federal and state government play an important and complementary role to the Regional Parks and Trails System. In general, local recreational open space facilities provide active recreation, such as athletic fields, courts, and aquatic centers. Private operations also make substantial contributions to the development of facilities and the provision of services and include golf courses, riding facilities, marinas, day camps, and downhill ski areas, as well as privately owned public spaces.

The desired outcomes for maintaining the system plan are to:

- Meet the recreational needs and the natural systems protection goals of the region.
- Support and protect the regional outdoor recreation system in coordination with federal, state, and local governments, as well as with lands privately owned by nonprofit or for-profit agencies *Refer to the Regional Parks and Trails Planning Handbook for more information about Minnesota's outdoor recreation system.*
- Provide timely and accurate decision making related to comprehensive planning, regional park and trail long-range plans and amendments, and other system protection activities.
- Determine eligibility for regional funding through the Met Council for planned and existing regional parks and trails.

Maintaining the system plan is critical to a number of Met Council responsibilities, including system protection, planning for the future, and funding eligibility.

System Plan - Action 1: Review and update system plan, classifications

The Met Council reviews and updates the system plan and evaluates the regional park and trail classifications every four years, in partnership with the regional park implementing agencies, to determine what is relevant and necessary.

The Met Council reviews the system plan portion of the Regional Parks and Trails Policy Chapter in partnership with the regional park implementing agencies every four years as part of the policy plan revision process and may add, modify, or delete planned elements to the system. Additions, including major boundary adjustments, or deletions to the system proposed outside the regular plan review process are substantial revisions to the policy plan, and as such require an amendment to the policy plan. Identification of specific boundaries and detailed planning for individual units of the system are addressed in long-range plans for each unit. The long-range plans are prepared and implemented by the regional parks implementing agencies. As circumstances or public expectations change,

implementing agencies may need to update their plans through a long-range plan amendment. Refer to the Regional Parks and Trails Planning Handbook Section Five Planning, to learn more about the amendment process.

Regional parks and trails classifications

Elements of the Regional Parks and Trails System are categorized into four major types: regional parks, park reserves, regional trails, and special features. As part of the *Imagine 2050* process, three additional subclassifications are being considered for the special features classification:

- Cultural Landscape subclassification
- Historical Landscape subclassification
- Open Space/Natural Systems subclassification

The Historical Landscape and Open Space/Natural Systems subclassifications need further discussion before moving them into active use and implementation. See Section Nine, Workplan. Only the Cultural Landscape subclassification is currently proposed for inclusion in the system plan.

Regional parks

Regional parks, typically 200-500+ acres in size, are areas of natural or decorative (for example, perennial and annual plants) quality for nature-based outdoor recreation such as picnicking, boating, fishing, swimming, camping, and trail use. Access to water bodies suitable for recreation – such as swimming, boating, and fishing – is particularly important. Most regional parks are adjacent to lakes, rivers, or streams.

Regional Parks at a glance

Existing: 46 regional parks

Planned: 1 regional park; 1 regional park boundary adjustment

Search: 6 regional park search areas

Regional Park attributes

Use: Regional parks accommodate a variety of outdoor recreation activities. The recreational quality of a regional park is measured by the presence or absence of outstanding natural areas and the ability to provide for a wide range of natural area-related recreational opportunities. Regional parks and park reserves offer important amenities and services to regional trails, including providing places for trailheads, picnicking, parking, restrooms, and drinking water.

Service area: 3 - 5 communities

Site attributes: Regional parks are located in natural settings contiguous to water bodies or watercourses whenever possible. They contain significant regional natural habitats including lakeshore, rivers, streams, wetlands, uplands, forests, prairies, and groundwater recharging areas, as well as lands which could be restored to provide critical habitat and access to nature.

Size: Regional parks can range from 100-1000 acres of land area; a typical regional park in a rural/suburban area is between 200-500 acres, while a regional park in an urban area is typically closer

to 100 acres. A regional park should be large enough to accommodate a variety of activities, preserve a pleasant natural experience, and buffer activity areas from each other and from surrounding areas.

Site location: Regional parks are located where high-quality natural systems occur or have potential to occur. Examples include land with restoration potential, areas where there is a demonstrated regional recreation need, particularly next to lakes and rivers, and/or where growth is expected to occur.

Regional trails

Regional trail corridors provide recreational opportunities along linear pathways or potentially via waterways throughout the metropolitan area. Generally, regional trails connect units of the Regional Parks System and draw visitors from across the seven-county area and beyond. Regional trails play a prominent role alongside the Regional Bicycle Transportation Network (RBTN), providing recreation and transportation services.

Regional Trails at a glance

Existing: 56 trails, with over 487 miles open to the public

Planned: 16 trails

Search: 48 trail search corridors

The Met Council has defined two types of regional trails: destination (or greenway) trails and linking trails.

Destination trails typically follow routes with high-quality natural systems that make the trail itself a destination. These routes may also include important cultural resources. Additionally, destination trails are often closely aligned with the RBTN. They provide a scenic setting, a compelling sense of place, and they often support bicycle commuting options. Usually, they follow natural or linear features that traverse areas of scenic appeal and/or historical, architectural, and developmental points of interest. They typically include wider corridors that improve wildlife habitat, protect natural features, and provide recreational opportunities beyond the trail itself.

Linking trails provide vital connections between Regional Parks and Trails System units, the RBTN, state and federal lands, significant natural areas, schools, shopping, and other regional destinations. Regional parks and park reserves along the trail route offer important services to trail visitors, including places for picnicking and other desirable activities, parking, restrooms, and drinking water.

Regional trail attributes

The use, service area, and site attributes for both destination and linking trails are the same. Size and site location have minor differences.

Use: Trails may be developed for one or more modes of nonmotorized recreational travel including hiking, biking, horseback riding, cross-country skiing, and paddling. In general, e-bikes are allowed on regional trails. Trail use must be consistent with individual implementing agency rules and ordinances.

With respect to bicycling, regional trails serve:

- Pre-teen bicyclists who are often accompanied by a parent and need access to local schools, libraries, recreation facilities, shopping, and neighborhoods. These bicyclists have a strong preference for separation from motor vehicles on protected bikeways and trails.
- Adult and teenage bicyclists who may ride regularly for transportation but prefer comfortable access by a direct route on lower-speed or low-traffic streets. These bicyclists are more comfortable on designated bikeways such as roadway-adjacent or independent trails.
- Adult and teenage bicyclists who are willing to travel along most roadways but prefer the more natural surroundings that regional trails can offer. They value direct access to destinations and can ride at higher speeds than average cyclists. This group will often rely on roads for transportation but will use trails when they are direct and enjoyable.
- Experienced bicyclists who want direct access to destinations with minimum delays. These bicyclists primarily rely on the road system for routes and value using roads for commuting, but occasionally enjoy independent trails if they are relatively direct and continuous and/or create a time advantage over parallel on-road routes by avoiding traffic lights.

Service area: 3-5 communities for both destination and linking trails.

Site attributes: When feasible, off-road trails should utilize natural linear and/or human-made corridors such as stream or river valleys, along the edges of forests or prairies, utility corridors, railroad corridors, and highway rights-of-way. On-road bikeways should only be allowed for short segments where no other off-road solutions are reasonable/viable. Trails may still be within the roadway right-of-way, but they need to be physically separated from vehicle traffic by raised curbs, large planters, or other permanent vertical barriers.

Regional trail types primarily include:

- Roadway-separated, independent trails, including trails that run along abandoned railroad corridors, or along utility or private easements, and exist in their own independent rights-of-way. These trails are categorized as destination trails.
- Roadway-adjacent, multiple-use trails that run adjacent to public roadways, but not on the roadway itself. In urban areas, these would be at street curb level. These trails are categorized as linking trails.
- Occasional on-road protected bikeways designed exclusively for bicycles at street grade that are separated by a physical barrier from vehicle traffic. These trails are categorized as linking trails.

When an implementing agency receives state or federal transportation funding to develop a regional trail, Minnesota Rules Chapter 8820 applies. This rule requires that specific design standards be used, including variables such as design speed and expected users. When regional trails pass through a regional park, recreational standards should be given higher priority due to the natural and recreational context. Implementing agencies should examine each situation carefully, identify potential conflicts between recreational and transportation needs, and engage interested stakeholders, including transportation planners and the larger community, to come to a common solution.

Size: Regional trails should provide sufficient corridor width to protect and/or connect with natural and/or cultural resources and safely accommodate trail use. A regional trail should also be of sufficient length to be a destination itself or it may link regional park system units and/or link where people live to regional parks or trails.

Site location: The trail treadway should be placed where it minimizes impacts to natural systems. For destination trails, the site location is preferably adjacent to high quality natural areas or areas of public interest. Linking trails should connect where people live with the units of the regional parks system. Linking trails should be at least 1.5 miles apart and not overlap the localized service area or other regional trails, unless significant barriers exist, such as highways, rivers, or other natural or human-made features that restrict access. Linking trails often connect people to population centers, schools, shopping areas, or other parks and trails along the route.

Additional site qualities for linking and destination trails include:

- Serves as a backbone to the local trail network
- Fills a gap in the regional recreation system
- Passes through local parks and trails, utilizing service amenities along the route
- Does not duplicate an existing trail

Park reserves

Park reserves, like regional parks, include large areas of land or water and provide for a diversity of outdoor recreation activities such as viewing and studying nature, conservation, swimming, picnicking, hiking, boating, camping and trail uses. What distinguishes park reserves from regional parks is the larger size, and the emphasis on preservation and ecological integrity.

Park reserves are substantially larger than regional parks because they require adequate space to protect and manage diverse natural systems and provide for compatible outdoor activities. The minimum size for a park reserve is 1,000 acres, but larger park reserves are desirable. To establish and maintain an uncompromised sense of nature and protect high-quality natural resources, at least 80% of each park reserve should be managed as wild lands that protect the ecological functions of the native landscape. Up to 20% of a park reserve may be developed for compatible recreational activities.

Park Reserves at a glance

Existing: 12 park reserves open to the public

Planned: 1 park reserve

Search: 0 park reserve search areas

Park reserve attributes

Use: Park reserves are typically used for a variety of nature-based outdoor recreation activities. They provide, protect, and manage the many natural landscapes and systems of the region. Park reserves often provide important services for trail use and access including trailheads, parking, restrooms, drinking water, and space for picnicking, along with other activities.

Service area: The entire metropolitan region.

Site attributes: Park reserves are large areas of land or water that extend into multiple jurisdictions and offer a diversity of unique resources, such as topography, lakes, streams, marshes, and flora or fauna.

Size: At least 1,000 acres or a sufficient area to encompass the resource envisioned for preservation. While park reserves have a minimum required size of 1,000 acres, larger reserves are preferred.

Site location: Park reserves are located where high-quality natural areas occur. Due to their large acreage requirement, these are usually in places outside of the Metropolitan Urban Service Area. Park reserves aim to protect significant portions of one or more of eight regional landscape types including:

- **Anoka Sand Plains:** Located in the northern metro area and along the Mississippi River, this area consists of flat, sandy lake plains, defined by small dunes, sandy soils, kettle lakes, and tunnel valleys. Pre-settlement vegetation was mostly oak barrens, floodplain forests, and brushland. Significant portions of Rice Creek Chain of Lakes Park Reserve are representative of the Anoka Sand Plain.
- **St. Croix Ground Moraine:** These landscapes have a rolling countryside and are located on sandy, well-drained soils. Other features of the St. Croix Ground Moraine include deciduous forests, marshes, and conifer bogs. The Big Marine Park Reserve in Washington County includes St. Croix Ground Moraine.
- **Des Moines Ground Moraine:** Defined by gently rolling countryside on stony or clay soils, small shallow lakes, potholes, and lowlands with hummocks and knobs. Prominent vegetation includes big woods forests, wetlands, marshes, and shrubby swamps. Significant portions of Carver and Hyland-Bush-Anderson park reserves are representative of the Des Moines Ground Moraine.
- **Terminal Moraine:** The terminal moraine contains some of the roughest topography in the metropolitan area, with rocky glacial deposits forming steep cone-shaped hills and deep lakes. Common vegetation in this landscape is oak savannas, aspen-oak lands, marshes, and shrubby swamps. Significant portions of Murphy-Hanrehan and Big Marine Park Reserves are representative of Terminal Moraine.
- **Lightly Glaciated Areas:** Mainly flat uplands with deep soils formed by decomposed bedrock and ancient glacial deposits; deeply dissected stream and river valleys and a few lakes or wetlands. Predominantly vegetated by tall grass prairies, oak-savannas, deciduous forests, cedar glades and floodplain forest clumps. Parks with these features include Lake Byllesby Regional Park and Miesville Ravine Park Reserve.
- **Mississippi River Valley:** The Mississippi River Valley has multiple distinct areas with differing landscapes:
 - **Upstream of St. Anthony Falls:** Upstream of St. Anthony Falls, the surrounding area has narrow floodplains, low banks, and a flat valley top. Common vegetation includes floodplain forests, marshes and shrubby swamps, prairies, oak savannas, and aspen-oak.
 - **St. Anthony Falls to the mouth of the Minnesota River:** Defined by deep gorges and steep-sided bluffs, vegetation is similar to the upstream segments of the river.
 - **Below the mouth of the Minnesota River:** This area is defined with wide floodplain wetlands with lakes and marshes, floodplain terraces, and steep slopes. Vegetation is primarily floodplain forests, shrubby swamps, big woods forests, cedar glades, and oak savannas. Spring Lake Park Reserve is a good example of this landscape type.

- Minnesota River Valley: Known for steep-sided bluffs and a wide meandering river, other features of this landscape include floodplains with extensive lakes, wetlands, and some dry lands. Floodplain forests, fens, bogs, and prairies are common in this area. Significant portions of Blakeley Bluffs Park Reserve are representative of the Minnesota River Valley landscape type.
- St. Croix River Valley: The St. Croix River Valley features a deep valley with steep bluff walls, sandy shorelines, and small floodplains with islands. Predominant vegetation includes floodplain forests, shrubby swamps, prairies, big woods forests, and deciduous forests.

Special features

Special features are named in state legislation (Minnesota Statutes, 473.121, subd. 14) and provide specialized or single-purpose recreational activities generally not found in regional parks, park reserves, or trail corridors. Some special features require unique management approaches and include specific programming efforts. Special features may include zoos, conservatories, arboretums, unique ecological areas, display gardens, bridging facilities, or cultural landscapes.

Special Features at a glance

Existing: 8 Special Features

Search: 1 Bridging Facility

Use: Special features provide a unique high-quality outdoor recreation and/or nature-based experience and may require special programming or management. Special features complement the Regional Parks and Trails System and do not duplicate or compete with recreational facilities adequately provided by the public or private sector.

Service area: The entire metropolitan region.

Site attributes: Special features provide unique natural and/or cultural services within a natural area-based scenic setting that offers a compelling sense of place.

Size: The size of a special feature or bridging facility is dependent on the feature itself.

Site location: Special features are located where unique natural and/or cultural conditions exist offering a compelling sense of place.

Funding: Special features require a long-range plan that is approved by the Met Council to qualify for regional funding.

Bridging facilities subclassification

Bridging facilities are a subclassification within the special feature category. They may be nested within a regional park, park reserve, or trail. They seek to attract and introduce new outdoor recreation users to the Regional Parks and Trails System. Their purpose is to help address inequities that contribute to lower participation rates among prioritized communities.

Bridging facilities have a clear and unique purpose. Bridging facilities are not designed as a one-size-fits-all approach. They introduce new visitors to the parks and trails system across race, ethnicity,

national origin, income, ability, and age; as well as encourage greater participation by the future stewards of our region's natural and recreation resources – young adults, teenagers, and children.

Use: Bridging facilities are designed to prototype new ideas that advance equitable usage, focusing on underserved groups in the Regional Parks and Trails System. These facilities engage people with the wide array of opportunities that exist across the system through interests, innovative strategies, and collaboration. Bridging facilities seek to build on community strengths, establishing partnerships with the communities they intend to better serve.

Service Area: Bridging facilities serve a specific community or communities. For example, a city or a specific group. When planning for bridging facilities, implementing agencies will identify the population(s) to be better served and the inequities that will be addressed, working directly with the community to create, design, and develop them.

Site Attributes: Bridging facilities may:

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

Size: The size of a bridging facility is dependent on the feature itself.

Site location: Bridging facilities are located close to their target audience, which includes historically underserved communities.

Funding: Bridging facilities must have a long-range plan that is approved by the Met Council to request funding. Implementing agencies proposing a bridging facility will:

- Provide a clear statement of purpose for what it is intended to accomplish, consistent with the above defined purpose, recognizing that these facilities will differ within and across agencies, and must evolve and change over time, in order to stay relevant and effective
- Include a plan for an awareness-building, programming, or marketing component, to promote regional parks and trails to users facing obstacles to access the Regional Parks and Trails System

- Provide a programming plan through park agency staff or through a partnership arrangement.
- Only bridging facilities that are designated as a unit of the regional system or are nested within an existing unit of the Regional Parks and Trails System will be included in the annual use estimate.

Cultural Landscape subclassification

Cultural landscapes recognize lands with significant cultural value to American Indian Tribes and other cultural communities. Cultural landscapes of significance:

- Recognize and protect culturally significant landscapes including American Indian burial grounds.
- Help interpret and educate visitors on the significance of the cultural landscape.
- Do not require that recreation be part of the unit.
- May be designed to protect areas of significant cultural or sacred meaning to groups. This includes protecting these spaces and designing them in a way that limits public access and foot traffic.

Regional Parks and Trails System Plan

There are four implementation status categories described in the system plan. Together, these categories make up the 2050 Regional Parks and Trails System:

- Open to the Public Regional Parks and Trails System units
- Planned Regional Parks and Trails System units that are not yet open to the public
- Regional Parks and Trails System boundary adjustments
- Regional Park search areas and Regional Trail search corridors

Open to the Public Regional Parks and Trails System facilities

As described in the previous section, the Regional Parks and Trails System, as of 2025, includes 46 regional parks, 12 park reserves, 56 regional trails, and 8 special features that are open for public use. The system includes 65,339 acres of land in a protected status.

Open to the Public Regional Parks, Park Reserves, and Special Features

As of 2025, there are 66 regional parks, park reserves, and special features developed and open to the public. These units are listed in Tables 2-1, 2-2, and 2-3 and shown in Figures 2-1 and 2-3.

Table 2-1. Regional parks open to the public

| Regional Park Implementing Agency | Regional Park | Map # |
|-------------------------------------|--|-------|
| Anoka County | Riverfront Regional Park | P1 |
| Anoka County | Bunker Hills Regional Park | P2 |
| Anoka County | Coon Rapids Dam Regional Park | P3 |
| Anoka County | Lake George Regional Park | P4 |
| Anoka County | Martin-Island-Linwood Lakes Regional Park | P5 |
| Anoka County | Mississippi West Regional Park | P6 |
| Anoka County | Rum River Central Regional Park | P7 |
| Anoka County | Coon Lake Regional Park | P8 |
| Carver County | Baylor Regional Park | P9 |
| Carver County | Lake Minnewashta Regional Park | P10 |
| Carver County | Lake Waconia Regional Park | P11 |
| Dakota County | Lake Byllesby Regional Park | P12 |
| Dakota County | Lebanon Hills Regional Park | P13 |
| Dakota County | Whitetail Woods Regional Park | P14 |
| Minneapolis Park & Recreation Board | Above the Falls Regional Park | P15 |
| Minneapolis Park & Recreation Board | Central Mississippi Riverfront Regional Park | P16 |

| Regional Park Implementing Agency | Regional Park | Map # |
|--|--|-------|
| Minneapolis Park & Recreation Board | Minneapolis Chain-of-Lakes Regional Park | P17 |
| Minneapolis Park & Recreation Board | Minnehaha Regional Park | P18 |
| Minneapolis Park and Recreation Board/Saint Paul | Mississippi Gorge Regional Park | P19 |
| Minneapolis Park & Recreation Board | Nokomis-Hiawatha Regional Park | P20 |
| Minneapolis Park & Recreation Board/Three Rivers Park District | North Mississippi Regional Park | P21 |
| Minneapolis Park & Recreation Board | Theodore Wirth Regional Park | P22 |
| Ramsey County | Bald Eagle-Otter Lake Regional Park | P23 |
| Ramsey County/Saint Paul | Battle Creek & Indian Mounds Regional Park | P24 |
| Ramsey County | Long Lake Regional Park | P25 |
| Ramsey County/Saint Paul | Phalen-Keller Regional Park | P26 |
| Ramsey County | Tony Schmidt Regional Park | P27 |
| Ramsey County | Vadnais-Snail Lake Regional Park | P28 |
| Saint Paul/Ramsey County | Battle Creek & Indian Mounds Regional Park | P24 |
| Saint Paul | Como Regional Park | P29 |
| Saint Paul | Hidden Falls-Crosby Farm Regional Park | P30 |
| Saint Paul | Lilydale-Harriet Island & Cherokee Heights Regional Park | P31 |
| Saint Paul/Minneapolis Park & Recreation Board | Mississippi Gorge Regional Park | P19 |
| Saint Paul/Ramsey County | Phalen-Keller Regional Park | P26 |
| Scott County | Cedar Lake Farm Regional Park | P32 |
| Scott County/Three Rivers Park District | Cleary Lake Regional Park | P33 |
| Scott County | Doyle-Kennefick Regional Park | P34 |
| Scott County | Spring Lake Regional Park | P35 |
| Three Rivers Park District | Bryant Lake Regional Park | P36 |
| Three Rivers Park District/Scott County | Cleary Lake Regional Park | P33 |
| Three Rivers Park District | Clifton E. French Regional Park | P37 |
| Three Rivers Park District | Eagle Lake Regional Park | P38 |
| Three Rivers Park District | Fish Lake Regional Park | P39 |
| Three Rivers Park District | Lake Minnetonka Islands Regional Park | P40 |
| Three Rivers Park District | Lake Minnetonka Regional Park | P41 |
| Three Rivers Park District | Lake Sarah Regional Park | P42 |

| Regional Park Implementing Agency | Regional Park | Map # |
|--|---|-------|
| Three Rivers Park District | Coon Rapids Dam Regional Park/Mississippi Gateway Regional Park | P43 |
| Three Rivers Park District/Minneapolis Park & Recreation Board | North Mississippi Regional Park | P21 |
| Washington County | Cottage Grove Ravine Regional Park | P44 |
| Washington County | Pine Point Regional Park | P45 |
| Washington County | St. Croix Bluffs Regional Park | P46 |

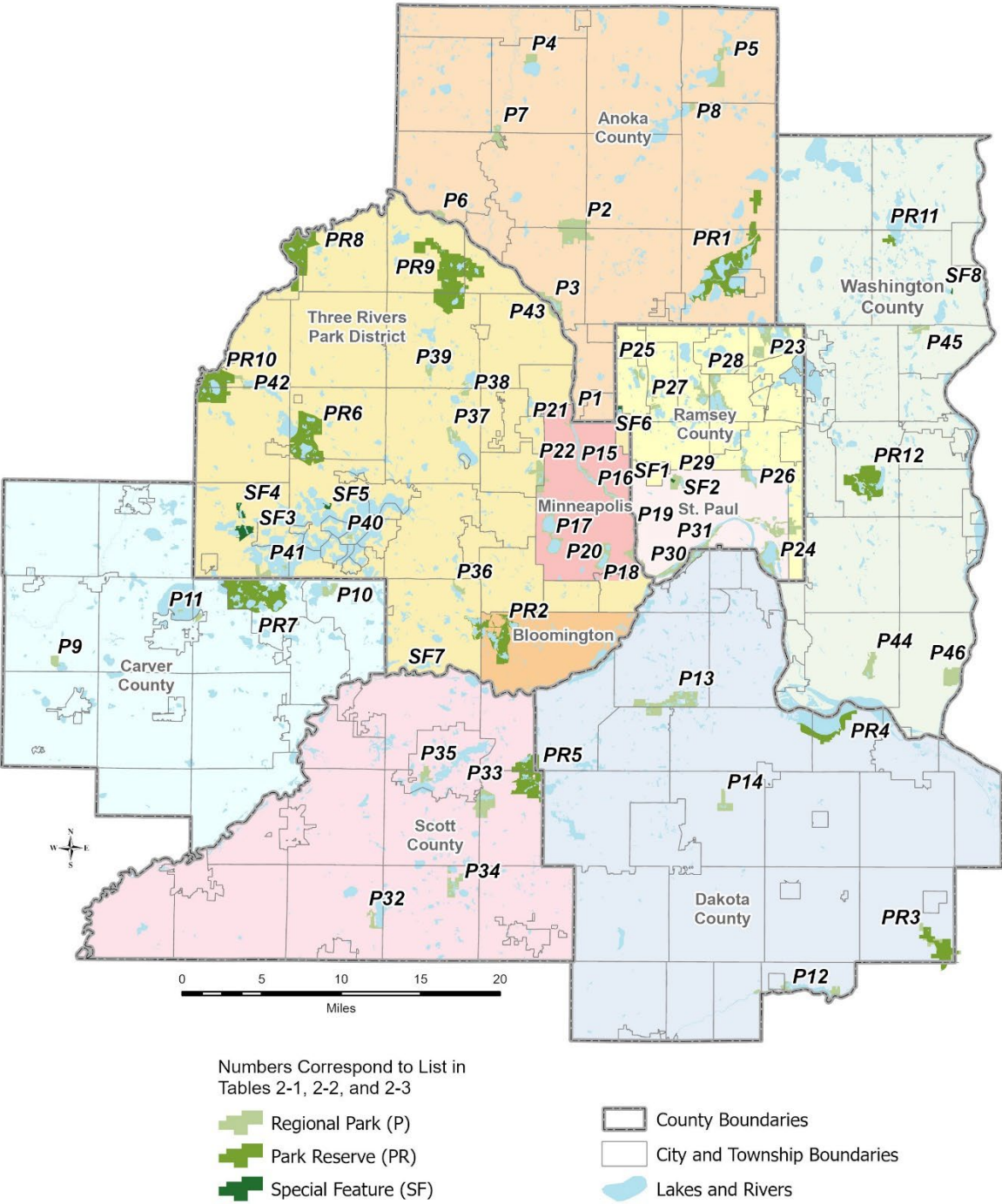
Table 2-2. Park reserves open to the public

| Regional Park Implementing Agency | Park Reserves | Map # |
|---|---|-------|
| Anoka County | Rice Creek Chain-of-Lakes Park Reserve | PR1 |
| Bloomington/Three Rivers Park District | Hyland-Bush-Anderson Lakes Park Reserve | PR2 |
| Dakota County | Miesville Ravine Park Reserve | PR3 |
| Dakota County | Spring Lake Park Reserve | PR4 |
| Scott County/Three Rivers Park District | Murphy-Hanrehan Park Reserve | PR5 |
| Three Rivers Park District | Baker Park Reserve | PR6 |
| Three Rivers Park District | Carver Park Reserve | PR7 |
| Three Rivers Park District | Crow-Hassan Park Reserve | PR8 |
| Three Rivers Park District | Elm Creek Park Reserve | PR9 |
| Three Rivers Park District/Bloomington | Hyland-Bush-Anderson Lakes Park Reserve | PR2 |
| Three Rivers Park District | Lake Rebecca Park Reserve | PR10 |
| Three Rivers Park District/Scott County | Murphy-Hanrehan Park Reserve | PR5 |
| Washington County | Big Marine Park Reserve | PR11 |
| Washington County | Lake Elmo Park Reserve | PR12 |

Table 2-3. Special features open to the public

| Regional Park Implementing Agency | Special Recreation Feature | Map # |
|-----------------------------------|-------------------------------|-------|
| Saint Paul | Como Park Zoo | SF1 |
| Saint Paul | Marjorie McNeely Conservatory | SF2 |
| Three Rivers Park District | Gale Woods Farm | SF3 |
| Three Rivers Park District | Kingswood | SF4 |
| Three Rivers Park District | Noerenberg Gardens | SF5 |
| Three Rivers Park District | Silverwood | SF6 |
| Three Rivers Park District | The Landing | SF7 |
| Washington County | Square Lake | SF8 |

Figure 2-1. Regional parks, park reserves, and special features open to the public



Open to the Public Regional Trails

As of 2025, there are 56 regional trail corridors with a total of 487 miles open to the public, listed in Table 2-4 and Figures 2-2 and 2-3. Many trails are constructed in phases, with some as part of roadway improvement projects or local developments. Therefore, although a trail is listed as being open, some portions of the trail corridor may be developed in the future and are not yet open to the public.

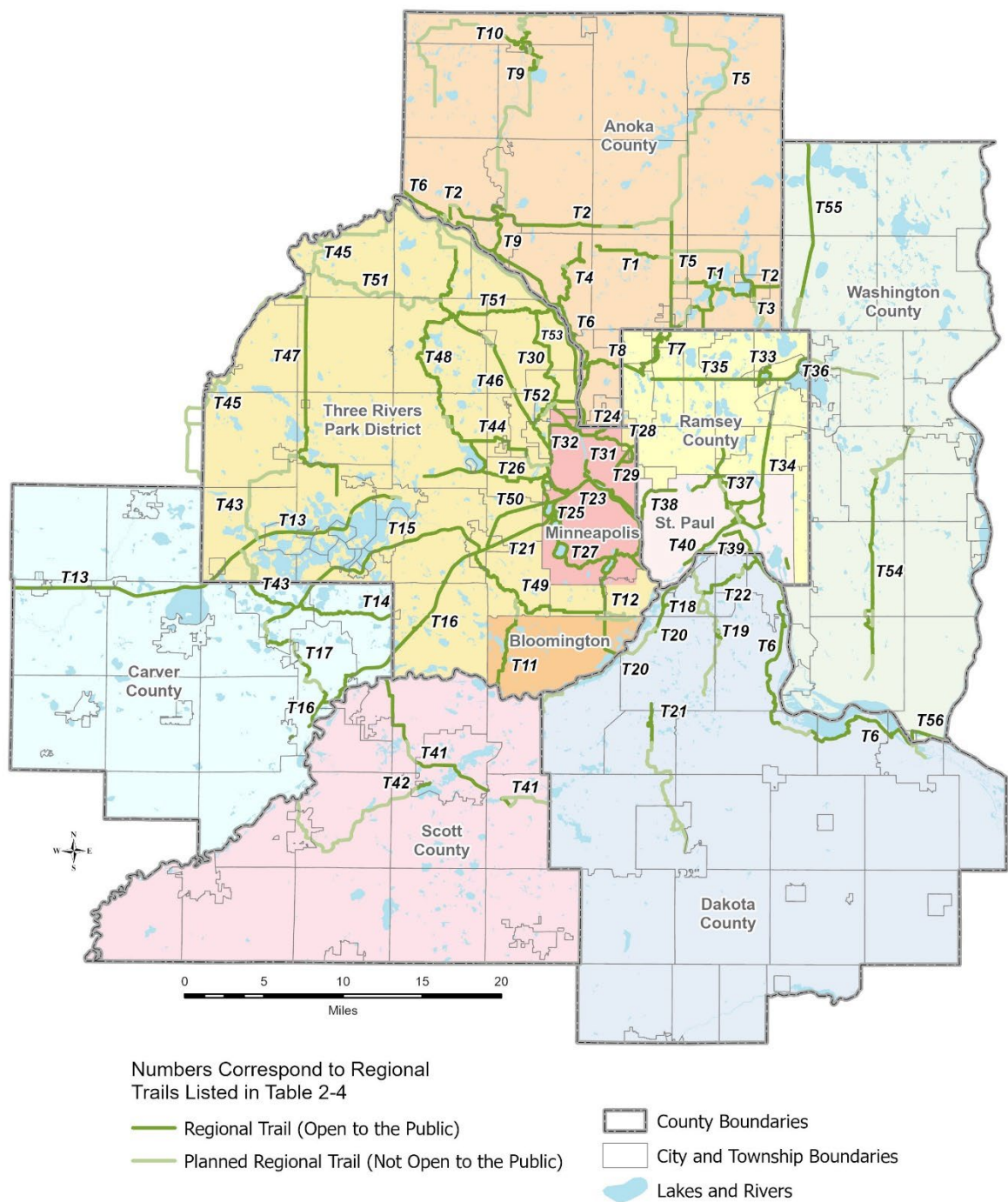
Table 2-4. Regional trails open to the public

| Regional Park Implementing Agency | Regional Trails | Map # |
|---|---|-------|
| Anoka County | Bunker Hills-Chain of Lakes Regional Trail | T1 |
| Anoka County | Central Anoka Regional Trail | T2 |
| Anoka County | Chain of Lakes-Otter Lake Regional Trail | T3 |
| Anoka County | Coon Creek Regional Trail | T4 |
| Anoka County | East Anoka County Regional Trail | T5 |
| Anoka County/Dakota County | Mississippi River Regional Trail/Mississippi River Greenway Regional Trail | T6 |
| Anoka County/Ramsey County | Rice Creek North Regional Trail | T7 |
| Anoka County/Ramsey County | Rice Creek West Regional Trail | T8 |
| Anoka County | Rum River Regional Trail | T9 |
| Anoka County | Sugar Hills Regional Trail | T10 |
| Bloomington/Three Rivers Park District | Canadian Pacific Rail Regional Trail – Segment A | T11 |
| Bloomington/Three Rivers Park District/Minneapolis Park & Rec Board | Nokomis-Minnesota River Regional Trail | T12 |
| Carver County/Three Rivers Park District | Dakota Rail Regional Trail | T13 |
| Carver County | Highway 5 Regional Trail | T14 |
| Carver County/Three Rivers Park District | Lake Minnetonka Regional Trail | T15 |
| Carver County/Three Rivers Park District | Minnesota River Bluffs Regional Trail | T16 |
| Carver County | Southwest Regional Trail | T17 |
| Dakota County | Big Rivers Regional Trail | T18 |
| Dakota County | Lebanon Hills Greenway Regional Trail | T19 |
| Dakota County | Minnesota River Greenway Regional Trail | T20 |
| Dakota County/Anoka County | Mississippi River Greenway Regional Trail/ Mississippi River Regional Trail | T6 |
| Dakota County | North Creek Greenway Regional Trail | T21 |
| Dakota County | River to River Greenway Regional Trail | T22 |

| Regional Park Implementing Agency | Regional Trails | Map # |
|---|---|-------|
| Minneapolis Park & Recreation Board/Three Rivers Park District | Cedar Lake Regional Trail | T23 |
| Minneapolis Park & Recreation Board | Columbia Parkway Regional Trail | T24 |
| Minneapolis Park & Recreation Board | Kenilworth Regional Trail | T25 |
| Minneapolis Park & Recreation Board/Three Rivers Park District | Luce Line Regional Trail | T26 |
| Minneapolis Park & Recreation Board | Minnehaha Parkway Regional Trail | T27 |
| Minneapolis Park & Rec Board/ Bloomington/Three Rivers Park District | Nokomis-Minnesota River Regional Trail | T12 |
| Minneapolis Park & Recreation Board/Three Rivers Park District | Northeast Diagonal Regional Trail | T28 |
| Minneapolis Park & Recreation Board | Ridgway Parkway Regional Trail | T29 |
| Minneapolis Park and Recreation Board/Three Rivers Park District | Shingle Creek Regional Trail | T30 |
| Minneapolis Park & Recreation Board | St. Anthony Parkway Regional Trail | T31 |
| Minneapolis Park & Recreation Board | Victory Memorial Parkway Regional Trail | T32 |
| Ramsey County | Birch Lake Regional Trail | T33 |
| Ramsey County/Saint Paul | Bruce Vento Regional Trail | T34 |
| Ramsey County | Highway 96 Regional Trail | T35 |
| Ramsey County/Washington County | Lake Links Regional Trail | T36 |
| Ramsey County/Anoka County | Rice Creek North Regional Trail | T7 |
| Ramsey County/Anoka County | Rice Creek West Regional Trail | T8 |
| Ramsey County/Saint Paul | Trout Brook Regional Trail | T37 |
| Saint Paul/Ramsey County | Bruce Vento Regional Trail | T34 |
| Saint Paul | Grand Round North Regional Trail | T38 |
| Saint Paul | Robert Pira Regional Trail | T39 |
| Saint Paul | Samuel Morgan Regional Trail | T40 |
| Saint Paul/Ramsey County | Trout Brook Regional Trail | T37 |
| Scott County | Big Woods Regional Trail (formerly Scott West Regional Trail) | T41 |
| Scott County | Spring Lake Regional Trail | T42 |
| Three Rivers Park District | Baker-Carver Regional Trail | T43 |
| Three Rivers Park District | Bassett Creek Regional Trail | T44 |
| Three Rivers Park District/Minneapolis Park and Recreation Board | Cedar Lake Regional Trail | T23 |

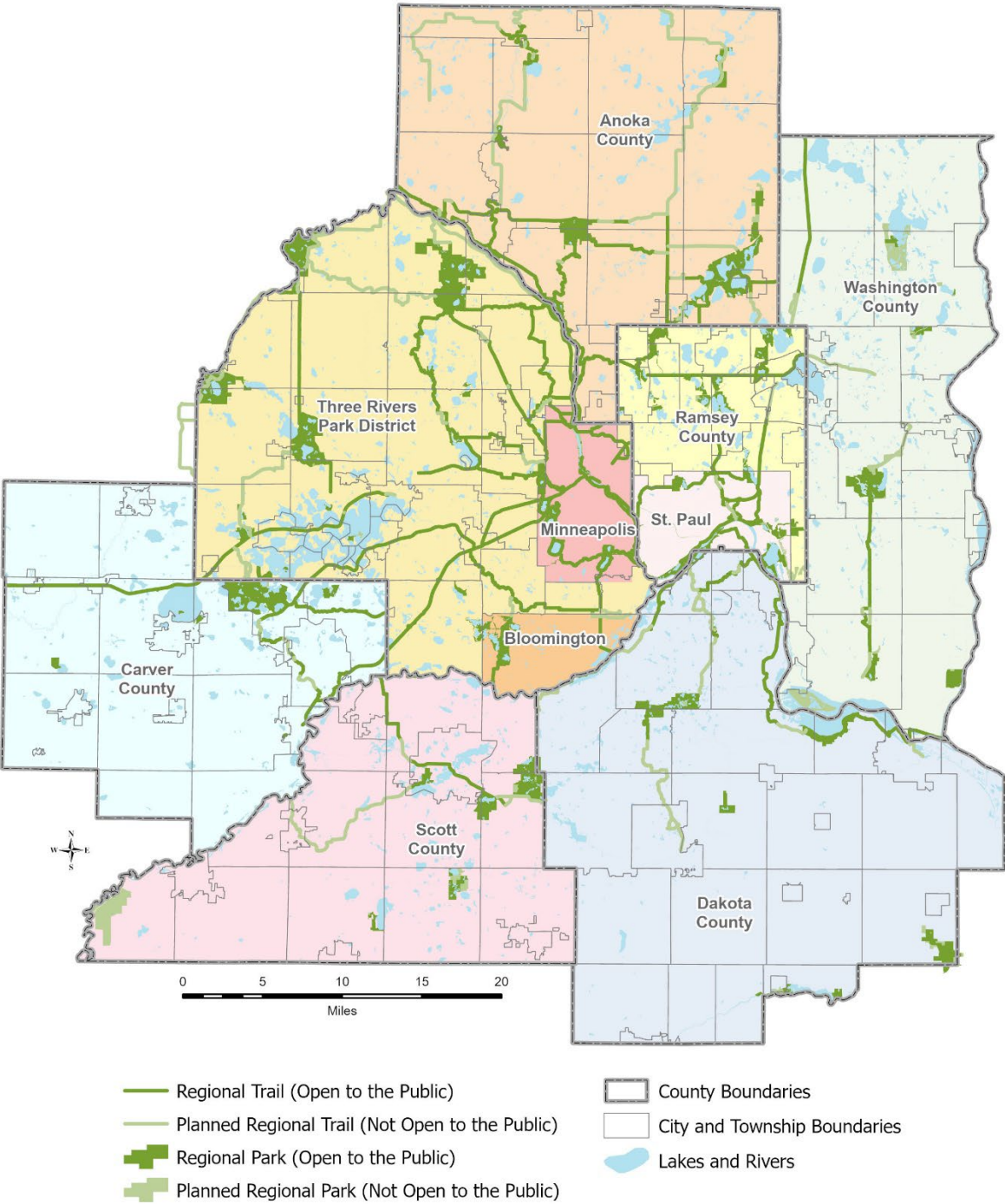
| Regional Park Implementing Agency | Regional Trails | Map # |
|---|--|-------|
| Three Rivers Park District/Bloomington | Canadian Pacific Rail Regional Trail - Segment A | T11 |
| Three Rivers Park District | Crow River Regional Trail | T45 |
| Three Rivers Park District | Crystal Lake Regional Trail | T46 |
| Three Rivers Park District/Carver County | Dakota Rail Regional Trail | T13 |
| Three Rivers Park District | Lake Independence Regional Trail | T47 |
| Three Rivers Park District/Carver County | Lake Minnetonka Regional Trail | T15 |
| Three Rivers Park District/Minneapolis Park and Recreation Board | Luce Line Regional Trail | T26 |
| Three Rivers Park District | Medicine Lake Regional Trail | T48 |
| Three Rivers Park District/Carver County | Minnesota River Bluffs Regional Trail | T16 |
| Three Rivers Park District | Nine Mile Creek Regional Trail | T49 |
| Three Rivers Park District/Bloomington/Minneapolis Park & Rec Board | Nokomis-Minnesota River Regional Trail | T12 |
| Three Rivers Park District | North Cedar Lake Regional Trail | T50 |
| Three Rivers Park District/Minneapolis Park and Recreation Board | Northeast Diagonal Regional Trail | T28 |
| Three Rivers Park District | Rush Creek Regional Trail | T51 |
| Three Rivers Park District/Minneapolis Park and Recreation Board | Shingle Creek Regional Trail | T30 |
| Three Rivers Park District | Twin Lakes Regional Trail | T52 |
| Three Rivers Park District | West Mississippi River Regional Trail | T53 |
| Washington County | Central Greenway Regional Trail – South and Central Lake Elmo Segments | T54 |
| Washington County | Hardwood Creek Regional Trail | T55 |
| Washington County/Ramsey County | Lake Links Regional Trail | T36 |
| Washington County | Point Douglas Regional Trail | T56 |

Figure 2-2. Regional trails open to the public



*This map shows regional trails that are open to the public and the portions of these trails that are planned and not open to the public. Figure 2-4 shows planned regional trails that are entirely not open to the public.

Figure 2-3. Regional Parks and Trails System facilities open to the public



Planned Regional Parks and Trails System facilities

In addition to the facilities that are open to the public, there is one regional park and one park reserve that have Met Council-approved long-range plans but have not yet been developed. These facilities are listed in Tables 2-5 and 2-6 and shown in Figure 2-4.

Table 2-5. Planned regional parks and park reserves not open to the public

| Regional Park Implementing Agency | Regional Park | Map # |
|-----------------------------------|---------------------------------|-------|
| Washington County | Grey Cloud Island Regional Park | PP1 |
| Regional Park Implementing Agency | Park Reserve | Map # |
| Scott County | Blakeley Bluffs Park Reserve | PPR1 |

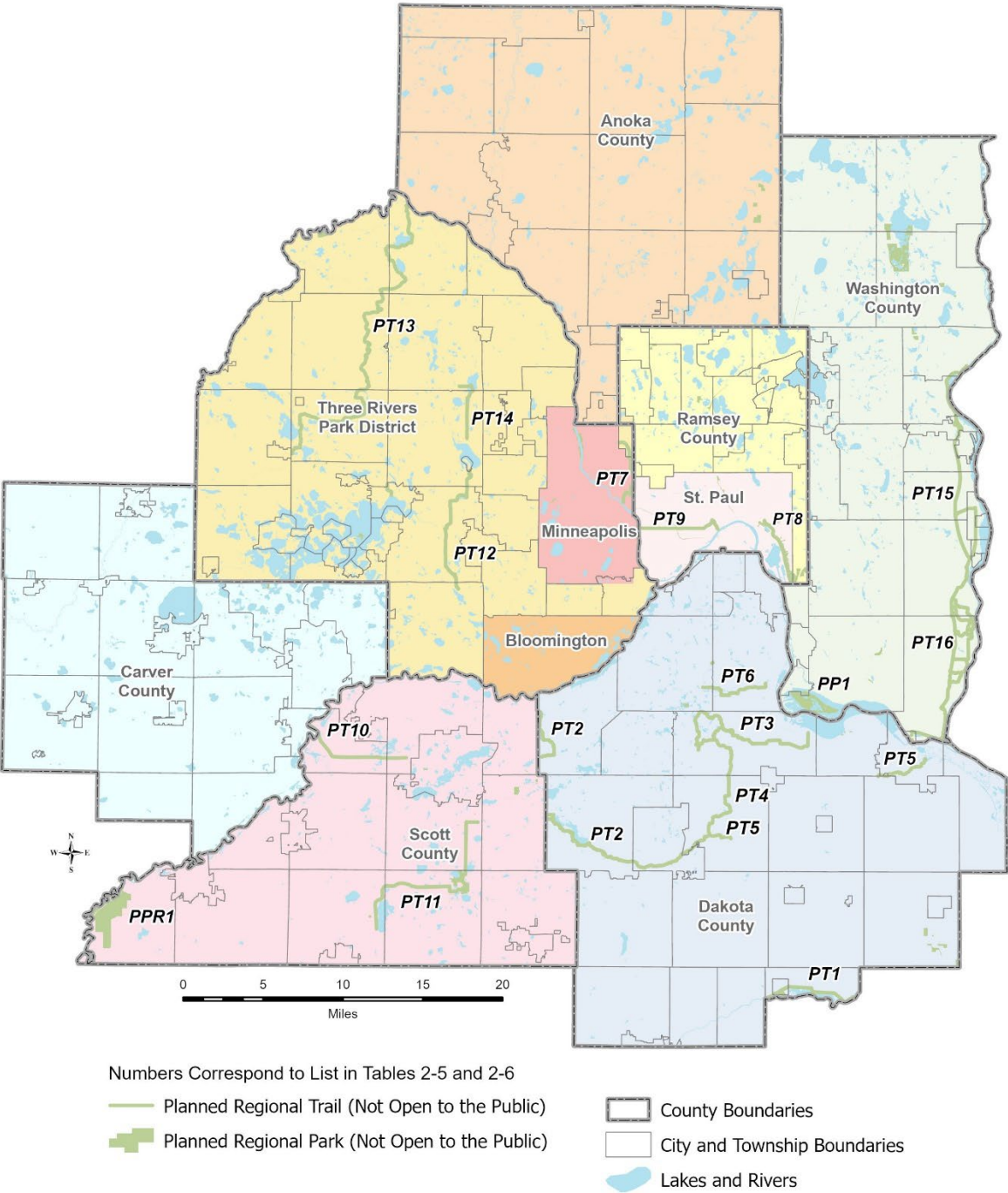
16 regional trails have Met Council-approved long-range plans but are not yet developed or open to the public, as listed in Table 2-6 and shown in Figure 2-4.

Table 2-6. Planned regional trails not open to the public

| Regional Park Implementing Agency | Regional Trail | Trail Mileage | Map # |
|---------------------------------------|---|---------------|-------|
| Dakota County | Lake Byllesby Greenway Regional Trail | 3 | PT1 |
| Dakota County | Lake Marion Greenway Regional Trail | 20 | PT2 |
| Dakota County | Rosemount Greenway Regional Trail | 13 | PT3 |
| Dakota County | Vermillion Highlands Greenway Regional Trail | 13 | PT4 |
| Dakota County | Vermillion River Greenway Regional Trail | 5.35 | PT5 |
| Dakota County | Veterans Memorial Greenway Regional Trail | 5 | PT6 |
| Minneapolis Park and Recreation Board | Grand Rounds Missing Link Regional Trail | 5 | PT7 |
| Saint Paul | Point Douglas Regional Trail (formerly Point Douglas (Bruce Vento-Washington Co)) | 4 | PT8 |
| Saint Paul | Summit Avenue Regional Trail | 5.4 | PT9 |
| Scott County | Merriam Junction Regional Trail (formerly Minnesota River Bluffs Extension and Scott County Connection Regional Trail including the Louisville-Merriam Junction Regional Trail) | 7.9 | PT10 |

| Regional Park Implementing Agency | Regional Trail | Trail Mileage | Map # |
|-----------------------------------|---|---------------|-------|
| Scott County | Shallow Waters Regional Trail (formerly a part of the Southern Scott Trail Search Corridor) | 17 | PT11 |
| Three Rivers Park District | Bryant Lake Regional Trail (formerly Eagle-Bryant Lake Trail Search Corridor) | 4.7 | PT12 |
| Three Rivers Park District | Diamond Lake Regional Trail (formerly Diamond Lake Trail Search Corridor) | 28.1 | PT13 |
| Three Rivers Park District | Eagle Lake Regional Trail (formerly Eagle-Bryant Lake Trail Search Corridor) | 12.3 | PT14 |
| Washington County | Middle St. Croix Valley Regional Trail (formerly Middle St. Croix Valley Search Corridor) | 14 | PT15 |
| Washington County | St. Croix Valley Regional Trail | 17.4 | PT16 |

Figure 2-4. Planned regional parks and trails not yet open to the public



Boundary adjustments

The 2050 *Regional Parks and Trails Policy Area* recommends a long-range plan boundary adjustment for Carver County's Baylor Regional Park to protect high-quality natural features and provide recreational opportunities.

The proposed boundary adjustment is included in the 2050 System Plan and described in Table 2-7 and Figure 2-5.

Table 2-7. Long-range plan boundary adjustments

| Regional Park Implementing Agency | Regional Parks System Unit | Estimated Acreage | Description | Map # |
|-----------------------------------|----------------------------|-------------------|--|-------|
| Carver County | Baylor Regional Park | 100 | Acquire approximately 100 acres of land adjacent to Eagle Lake, including lakeshore. | BA1 |

Regional park search areas

Six regional park search areas, totaling approximately 3,586 acres, are described in Table 2-8. Figure 2-5 shows a map of the boundary adjustments, regional park search areas, and special feature bridging facility search areas. Regardless of estimated acreages, regional park search areas are depicted with the same size symbols in Figure 2-5. Regional park search areas are meant to denote general areas and do not specify exact locations at this scale. Future long-range planning work by regional park implementing agencies will determine specific boundaries for these regional park search areas.

Table 2-8. Regional park search areas

| Regional Park Implementing Agency | Regional Park Search Area | Estimated Acreage | Description | Map # |
|-----------------------------------|---|---------------------|--|-------|
| Anoka County | Rum River Regional Park Search Area | Additional acres 86 | Three parks connected by the Rum River, a Wild and Scenic River. | PSA1 |
| Anoka County | Sugar Hills Regional Park Search Area (formerly Northwest Anoka County) | 2,500 | Very high-quality natural resource area unique in Anoka County. | PSA2 |

| Regional Park Implementing Agency | Regional Park Search Area | Estimated Acreage | Description | Map # |
|-----------------------------------|--|-------------------|---|-------|
| Carver County | Miller Lake Regional Park Search Area | 200 | Very attractive lake resource and appropriate setting for a regional park. | PSA3 |
| Carver County | Minnesota Bluffs and Ravines Regional Park Search Area | 500 | Large areas of regionally significant natural resources, excellent recreation potential. | PSA4 |
| Three Rivers Park District | Minnetonka/Minnehaha Creek Regional Park Search Area | 100 | A linear, creek-based regional park/greenway along the Minnehaha Creek corridor within Hennepin County. | PSA5 |
| Three Rivers Park District | Rogers-Corcoran Regional Park | 200 | Rich in wetlands, rolling hills and scenic vistas. | PSA6 |

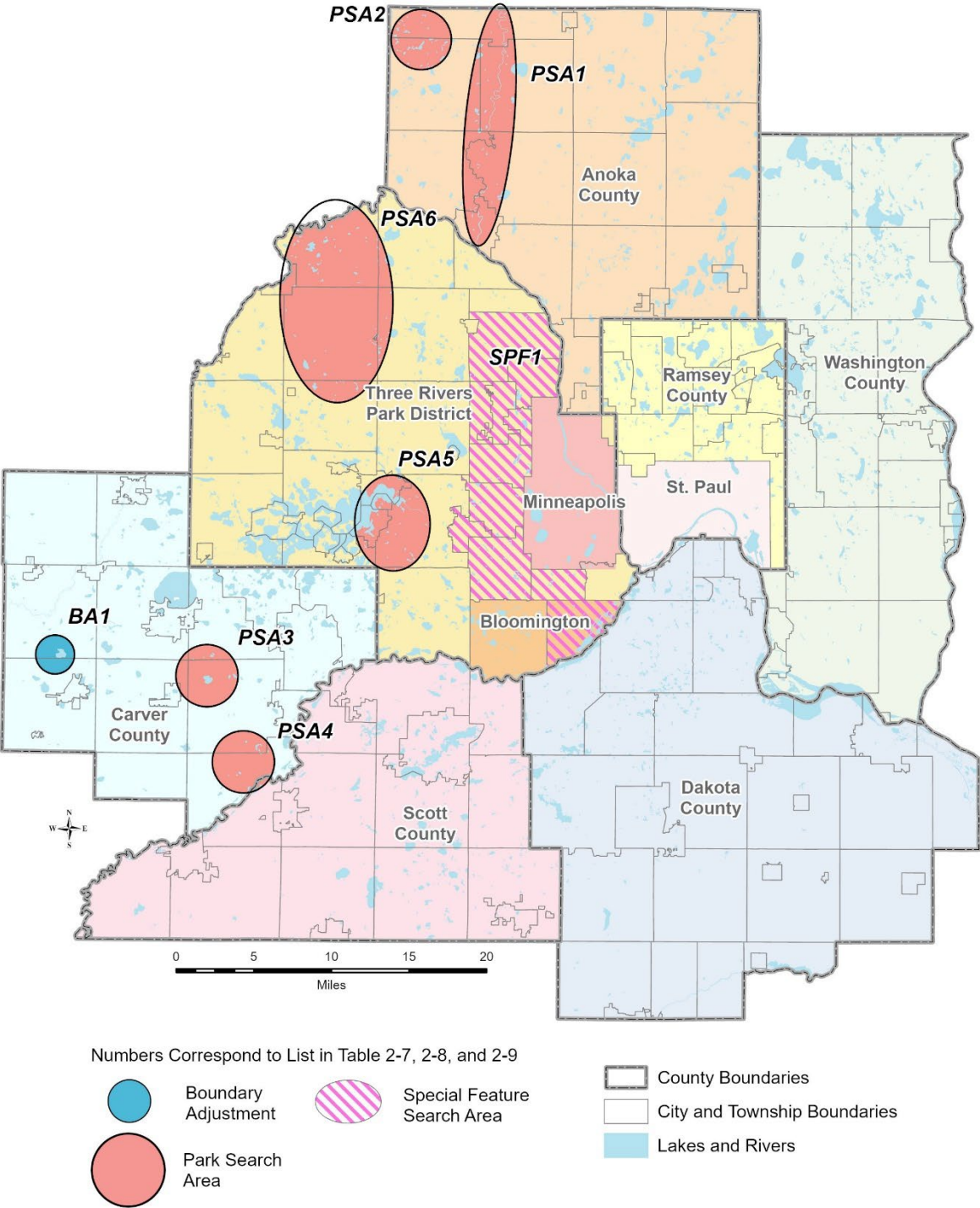
Special feature search area

One special feature bridging facility search area, spanning 11-cities, is described in Table 2-9. Figure 2-5 shows a map of the boundary adjustments, regional park search areas, and special feature bridging facility search areas.

Table 2-9. Special feature search area

| Regional Park Implementing Agency | Special Feature Search Area | Description | Map # |
|--|---|--|--------------|
| Three Rivers Park District | First-Ring Cities Bridging Facility Search Area | A set of several unique proposed bridging facilities spread across the cities. | SPF1 |

Figure 2-5. Boundary adjustments and regional park and special feature search areas



Boundary adjustments and regional park search areas are meant to denote general areas and do not specify exact boundaries at this scale. Future long-range planning work by regional park implementing agencies will determine specific boundaries.

Regional trail search corridors

There are 48 proposed regional trails without Met Council-approved long-range plans that identify the trail alignments. Many of these trails have been considered part of the Regional Parks and Trails System for several years and were mapped in previous Regional Parks Policy Plans as proposed trails showing a tentative alignment. Since alignments for these trails have not yet been approved by the Met Council as part of a long-range plan and are therefore not eligible for Regional Parks and Trails System funding for acquisition and development, they are being shown as regional trail search corridors. The regional trail search corridors are listed in Table 2-10 and shown in Figure 2-6.

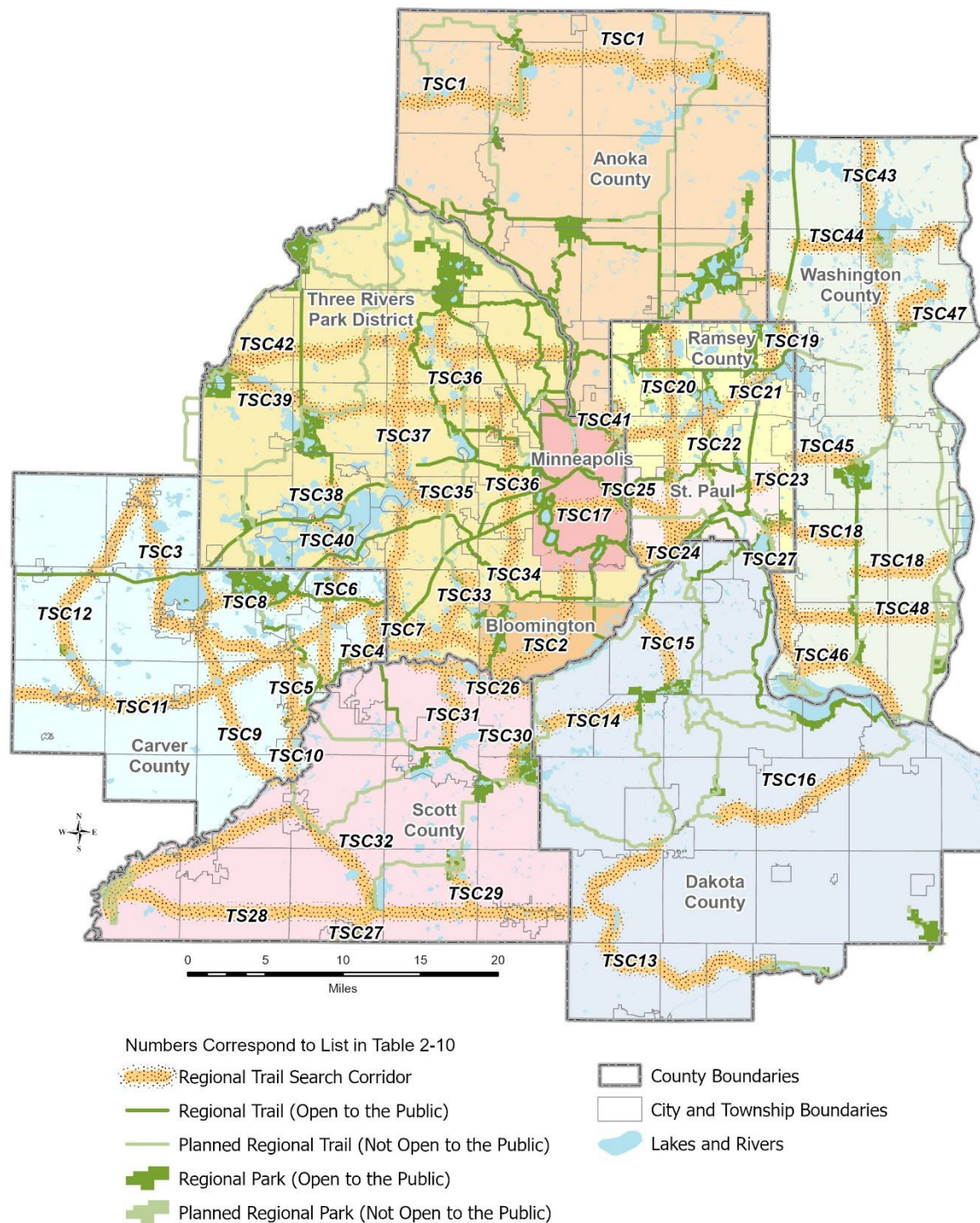
Table 2-10. Regional trail search corridors*

| Regional Park Implementing Agency | Regional Trail Search Corridor | Est. Miles | Map # |
|--|---|------------|-------|
| Anoka County | North Anoka County | 30 | TSC1 |
| Bloomington/Three Rivers Park District | Progressive Rail | 9 | TSC2 |
| Carver County | County Road 10 | 19 | TSC3 |
| Carver County | County Road 61 | 1 | TSC4 |
| Carver County | Highway 11 | 4 | TSC5 |
| Carver County | Highway 41 | 3 | TSC6 |
| Carver County/Three Rivers Park District | Highway 101 | 4.8 | TSC7 |
| Carver County | Lake Waconia | 6 | TSC8 |
| Carver County | Lake Waconia-Carver | 17 | TSC9 |
| Carver County | Minnesota River Bluffs LRT Extension | 6 | TSC10 |
| Carver County | Twin Cities & Western | 25 | TSC11 |
| Carver County | Western Carver County | 17 | TSC12 |
| Dakota County | Chub Creek Greenway | 20 | TSC13 |
| Dakota County | Lebanon Hills-Lake Marion Greenway | 7 | TSC14 |
| Dakota County | Lebanon Hills-Minnesota River Greenway (formerly Lebanon Hills-Big Rivers Greenway) | 7 | TSC15 |
| Dakota County | Vermillion River Greenway | 12.2 | TSC16 |
| Minneapolis Park & Recreation Board | Midtown Greenway | 6 | TSC17 |

| Regional Park Implementing Agency | Regional Trail Search Corridor | Est. Miles | Map # |
|-----------------------------------|---|------------|-------|
| Ramsey County/Washington County | Afton Bluffs | 3 | TSC18 |
| Ramsey County/Saint Paul | Bruce Vento | 0.5 | TSC19 |
| Ramsey County/Saint Paul | Lexington Avenue/Parkway | 9 | TSC20 |
| Ramsey County | St. Anthony RR Spur | 10 | TSC21 |
| Ramsey County | Trout Brook Extension | 4 | TSC22 |
| Saint Paul | Grand Round - Lake Elmo Park Reserve | 6.8 | TSC23 |
| Saint Paul | Hidden Falls Regional Park to Samuel Morgan Regional Trail/ "Ford Spur" | 4.7 | TSC24 |
| Saint Paul/Ramsey County | Lexington Avenue/Parkway | 6 | TSC20 |
| Saint Paul | Mississippi Gorge Regional Park (Saint Paul) to Samuel Morgan Regional Trail/Midtown Greenway Extension | 5.7 | TSC25 |
| Scott County | Big Rivers Extension | 5 | TSC26 |
| Scott County | Cedar Lake Farm to New Prague | 6 | TSC27 |
| Scott County | Elko New Market-Blakeley-Doyle Kennefick | 32 | TSC28 |
| Scott County | Elko New Market-Doyle Kennefick | 5 | TSC29 |
| Scott County | Lake Marion to Big Woods | 6 | TSC30 |
| Scott County | Prior Lake Outlet | 6 | TSC31 |
| Scott County | Southern Scott | 18 | TSC32 |
| Three Rivers Park District | Bryant Lake (formerly Eagle-Bryant Lake Trail Search Corridor) | 10 | TSC33 |
| Three Rivers Park District | Canadian Pacific Rail - Segments B – D | 15.38 | TSC34 |
| Three Rivers Park District | Dakota Rail Extension (terminus refinement) | 3.6 | TSC35 |
| Three Rivers Park District | Eagle Lake (formerly Eagle-Bryant Lake Trail Search Corridor) | 5.2 | TSC36 |

| Regional Park Implementing Agency | Regional Trail Search Corridor | Est. Miles | Map # |
|--|--|------------|-------|
| Three Rivers Park District | Grey's Bay (formerly part of North-South 1; 9.5-mile extension) | 10.5 | TSC37 |
| Three Rivers Park District | Lake Independence | 2.6 | TSC38 |
| Three Rivers Park District | Lake Sarah (4-mile extension) | 18 | TSC39 |
| Three Rivers Park District | Mid-Lake (formerly part of Lake Independence Extension) | 4 | TSC40 |
| Three Rivers Park District/Bloomington | Progressive Rail | 10 | TSC2 |
| Three Rivers Park District/Carver County | Purgatory Creek (Formerly Highway 101; (6-mile extension) | 14 | TSC7 |
| Three Rivers Park District | Silverwood Connector | 2 | TSC41 |
| Three Rivers Park District | Weaver Lake | 23 | TSC42 |
| Washington County/Ramsey County | Afton Bluffs | 10 | TSC18 |
| Washington County | Central Greenway Regional Trail – North Segment (6.8-mile extension) | 18.5 | TSC43 |
| Washington County | Glacial Hills | 12 | TSC44 |
| Washington County | Lake Elmo Park Reserve to Phalen-Keller Regional Park | 7.6 | TSC45 |
| Washington County | Mississippi River | 17 | TSC46 |
| Washington County | Pine Point Regional Park to Square Lake Special Recreation Feature | 4.3 | TSC47 |
| Washington County | Prairie View | 9 | TSC48 |

Figure 2-6. Regional trail search corridors



Regional Trail search corridors are meant to denote general areas and do not specify exact alignments at this scale. Future long-range planning work by regional park implementing agencies will determine specific boundaries.

2050 Regional Parks and Trails System Plan Summary

As Figure 2-7 illustrates, the updated 2050 System Plan includes:

- Regional Parks System facilities open to the public (2025)
 - 46 regional parks
 - 12 park reserves
 - 8 special features
 - 56 regional trails
- Planned Regional Parks System units that are not yet open to the public
 - 1 regional park
 - 1 park reserve
 - 16 regional trails
- Regional Parks System boundary adjustments
 - 1 regional park
- Regional park search areas
 - 6 regional park search areas
- Special recreation feature search area
 - 1 location siting multiple unique bridging facilities
- Regional trail search corridors
 - 48 regional trail search corridors

The total park acreage and trail mileage for each implementation phase is listed below:

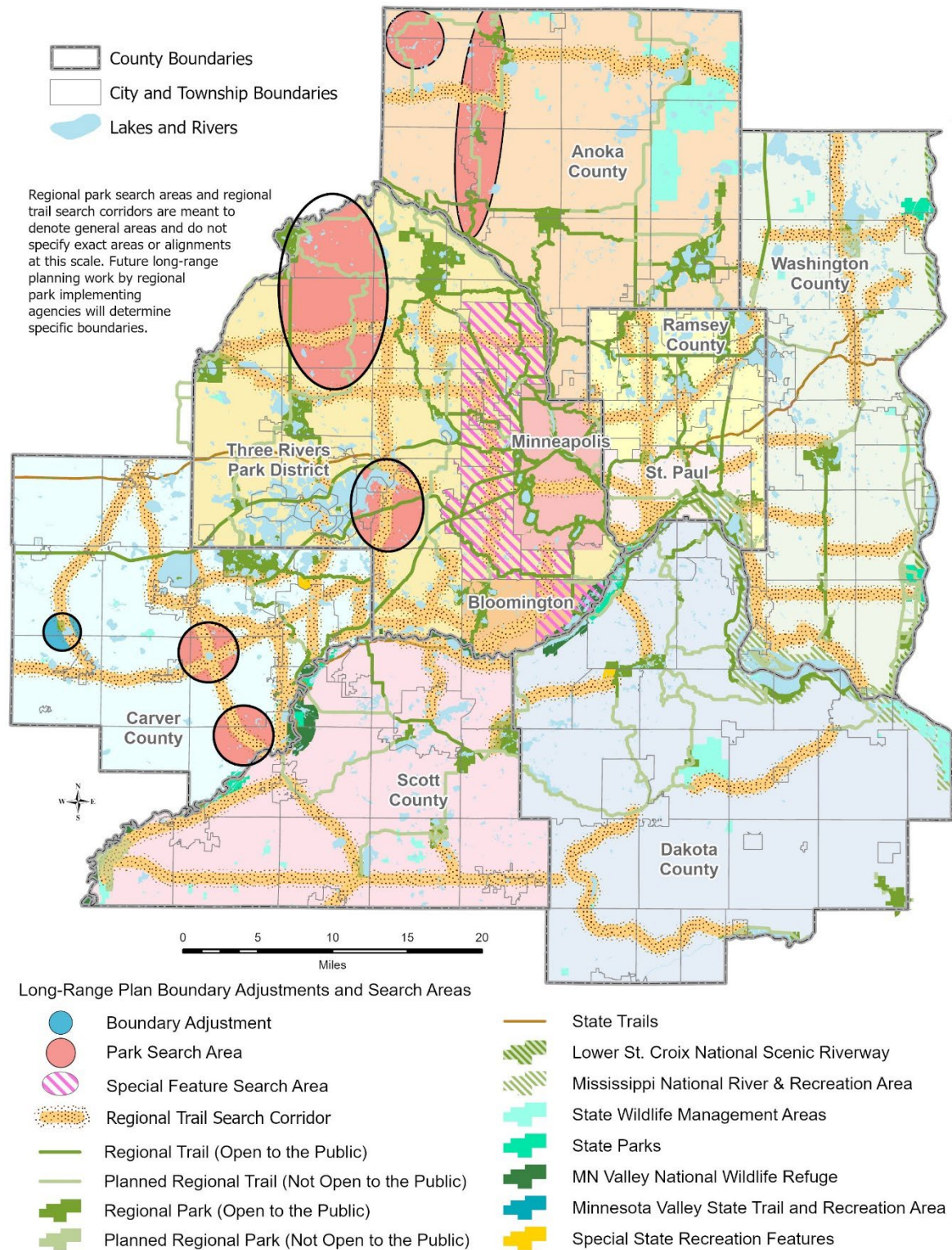
- Open to the Public
 - Regional parks, park reserves, and special features: over 60,000 acres
 - Regional trails: 487 miles
- Planned
 - Regional parks, park reserves, and special features: 8,170 acres
 - Regional trails (includes planned segments that are part of trails open to the public): 331.9 miles
- Search
 - Regional parks, park reserves, and special features: 3,586 acres
 - Regional trails: 518 miles

System-level changes

The 2025 system-level changes reflect implementing agency proposed modifications to existing units within the Regional Parks and Trails System, as well as future 2028/2029 system addition candidates. These 12 changes to the Regional Parks and Trails System include seven name changes, two trail refinements, and three 2028/2029 system addition candidates. The changes are listed below in further detail.

- Unit name changes (seven):
 - Anoka County:
 - “Northwest Search Area” changed to “Sugar Hills Search Area”
 - Dakota County:
 - “Lebanon Hills-Big Rivers Greenway Regional Trail Search Corridor” changed to “Lebanon Hills-Minnesota River Greenway Regional Trail Search Corridor”
 - “Lebanon Hills-Mendota Greenway Regional Trail, Highway 62 segment” changed to “Lebanon Hills Greenway Regional Trail”
 - Scott County:
 - “Scott West Regional Trail” changed to “Big Woods Regional Trail”
 - “Minnesota River Bluffs Extension and Scott County Connection Regional Trail” changed to “Merriam Junction Regional Trail”
 - “Louisville Trail Search Corridor” changed to “Merriam Junction Regional Trail”
 - Portion of “Southern Scott Trail Search Corridor” changed to “Shallow Waters Regional Trail”
- Trail refinements (two):
 - Three Rivers Park District’s Dakota Rail Regional Trail Search Corridor Extension moving the trail terminus from Highway 494 to Minnetonka City Hall
 - Three Rivers Park District is transferring a portion of the Lake Minnetonka Regional Trail to Carver County
- Future 2028/2029 System Additions Process candidates (three):
 - Ramsey County’s Rice Creek North Regional Trail Boundary Adjustment adding 2,407 acres to the current 792 acres at former Twin Cities Army Ammunition Plant
 - Three Rivers Park District’s 5.5-mile West Minnehaha Creek Trail Corridor Study Area
 - Dakota County’s 58-acre Thompson County Park Study Area in West St. Paul serving the outdoor recreational needs of the more than 50,000 residents who live in the northern portion of Dakota County

Figure 2-7. 2050 Regional Parks and Trails System Plan Map*



Estimated cost to implement the system plan

State law requires that the regional parks policy plan estimate the cost of the recommended acquisitions and development of the park system, including an analysis of what portion of the funding is proposed to come from the state and Met Council levies, and other local government units (Minn. Stat. 473.147, subd. 1). The following analysis is an estimate of funding required to complete the system.

The estimated cost to complete the existing Regional Parks and Trails System is \$2.99 billion, including \$1.08 billion in acquisition costs and \$1.91 billion in development costs (Table 2-11).

Table 2-11. Estimated acquisition and development costs to complete the Regional Parks and Trails System

| Category | Acquisition Cost | Development Cost | Total Cost |
|--|------------------------|------------------------|------------------------|
| Unbuilt portions of existing regional parks and trails | \$777,429,000 | \$986,715,000 | \$1,764,144,000 |
| Planned regional parks and trails | \$87,447,000 | \$146,053,000 | \$233,500,000 |
| Boundary Adjustments, Park Search Areas and Corridors | \$140,021,000 | \$104,500,000 | \$244,521,000 |
| Regional Trail Search Corridors | \$72,168,000 | \$671,241,000 | \$743,409,000 |
| Total | \$1,077,065,000 | \$1,908,509,000 | \$2,985,574,000 |

Purpose and use

This estimate is intended to fulfill the state requirement for a metro-wide cost to complete the Regional Parks and Trails System. This is a high-level estimate that demonstrates the scope of the future development and acquisition plans for the system.

The estimate is not intended to indicate costs for any single project or implementing agency.

Methodology

The Met Council refined the approach from the 2020 update to use the most recent and available data related to cost estimates within the Regional Parks and Trails System. The Met Council worked with implementing agency staff to identify and confirm the cost components, data sources, assumptions and results.

The Regional Parks and Trails System Plan includes regional parks, park reserves, special features, and regional trails in various degrees of completion:

- Already in use (which may include additional unbuilt or unacquired elements)
- Planned or acquired but not yet open to the public
- Yet to be acquired and developed search areas

Acquisition costs

Land acquisition costs were calculated by summarizing the county assessor's total estimated market value for properties that are identified as inholding parcels. Where individual parcel data was not available, such as parks search areas and trail search corridors, average per-acre costs were used for parcels inside the Metropolitan Urban Services Area (MUSA) and outside the MUSA. The provision of wastewater service is not the only factor contributing to higher land values in the region's core. Other locational attributes that matter for land values are spatial situation (centrally located or remote), accessibility to employment centers and other destinations, proximity to lakes and rivers, neighborhood amenities, and other urban services (for example, high frequency transit service).

Development costs

Development costs for parks and trails already in use or planned but not yet open to the public were derived from cost estimates included in long-range plans. The cost estimates included in long-range plans define the development needs specific to each unit. Cost estimates were updated to current dollars using the Consumer Price Index (CPI). Implementing agencies provided an estimated percentage of completion for each park or trail unit. The inverse percentage needed to complete the unit was applied to the long-range plan estimate to calculate future development cost.

Development costs for search areas and corridors were estimated by respective implementing agencies.

Limitations

The estimate is intended for use only at a regionwide level. Application to an individual project or single implementing agency is inappropriate. Actual costs for individual projects will vary depending on the location and complexity of each project. Refer to long-range plans, project funding applications, and recent construction for more information on project costs. Lastly, this calculation is completed with current cost estimates and market values. Factors such as changing long-range plan timelines, inflation, and market drivers affect the actual cost of future development and acquisition.

Analysis

Total acquisition and development costs to complete the Regional Parks and Trails System are nearly \$3 billion, including \$1.76 billion for the unbuilt portions of the existing parks and trails, \$234 million for planned units, and \$988 million for search areas and corridors (Figure 2-8). Table 2-12 shows acreage, mileage and costs associated with each category.

Table 2-12. Combined total costs for the system completion

| Category | Park Acreage | Trail Acreage | New Trail Mileage | Acquisition Cost | Development Cost | Total Cost |
|---|--------------|---------------|-------------------|-----------------------|-----------------------|-----------------------|
| Unbuilt Portions of Existing Regional Parks, Park Reserves, Special Features, and Regional Trails (Figure 2-9) ^{a.} | 2,785 | 2,621 | 250 | \$777 million | \$987 million | \$1.76 billion |
| Planned Regional Parks, Park Reserves, Special Features, and Regional Trails (Council-approved long-range plan, not yet open to the public) (Figure 2-10) ^{a.} | 3,383 | 248 | 122 | \$87 million | \$146 million | \$234 million |
| Regional Park Search Areas and Boundary Adjustments (Figure 2-11) ^{b.c.} | 3,586 | N/A | N/A | \$140 million | \$105 million | \$245 million |
| Regional Trail Search Corridors (Figure 2-11) ^{b.c.} | N/A | 896 | 534 | \$72 million | \$671 million | \$743 million |
| GRAND TOTAL | 9,754 | 3,765 | 906 | \$1.08 billion | \$1.91 billion | \$2.99 billion |

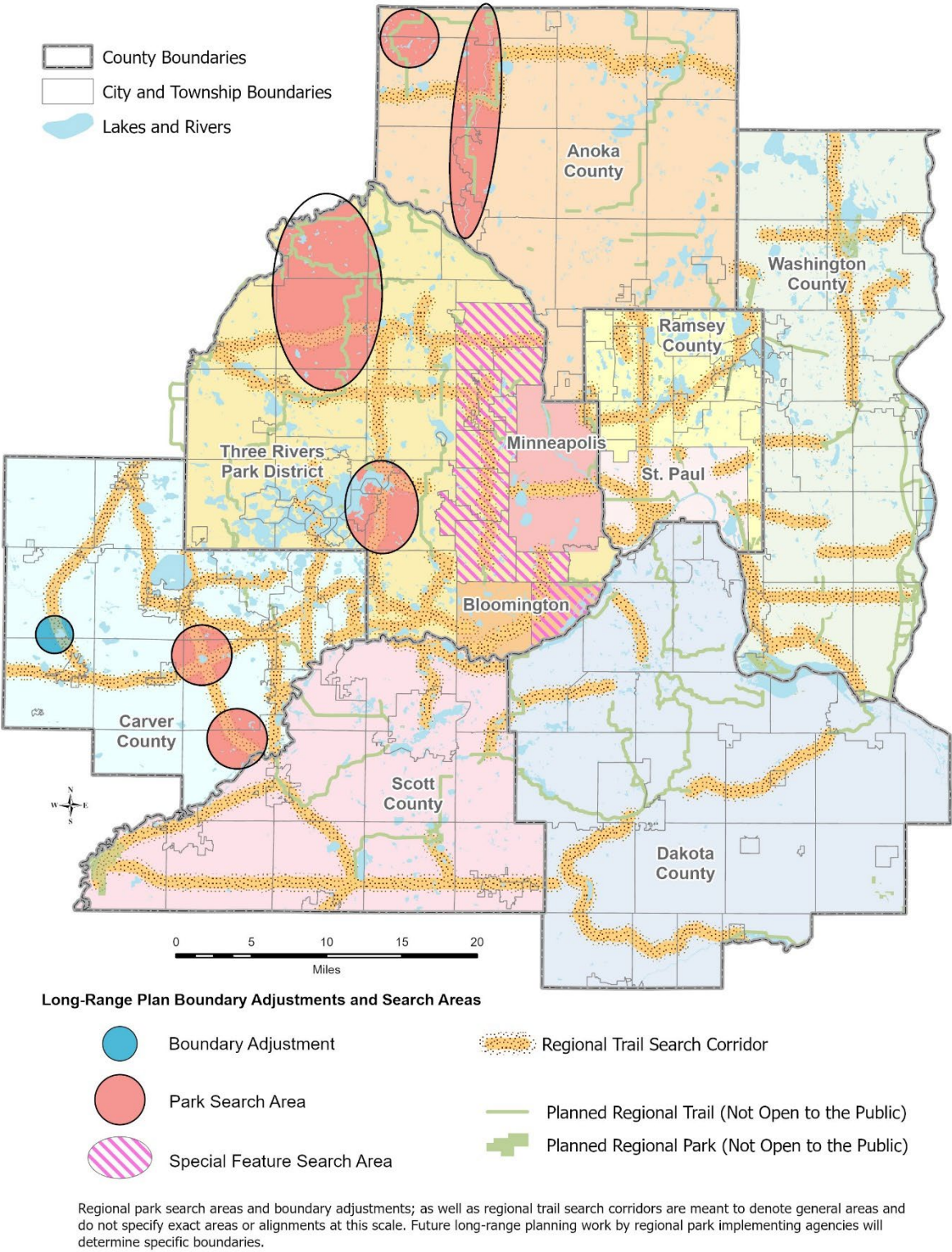
Data Sources:

^a Council approved long-range plans

^b 2040 Regional Parks Policy Plan (2018)

^c Estimates from regional park implementing agencies

Figure 2-8. Unbuilt portions of the regional parks and trails system including existing, planned, and search areas



Capital improvement plan

As directed by Minn. Stat. 473.147, subd. 1, the regional parks policy plan must include a five-year capital improvement plan (Table 2-13). These figures are subject to change based upon legislative action. The projections are provided by the park agencies and are based on their current estimate of funding levels.

Table 2-13. Regional Parks and Trails System Five-Year Capital Improvement Plan, 2025-2029 (in millions)

| Funding Source | 2025 | 2026 | 2027 | 2028 | 2029 | Total |
|---------------------|----------------|---------------|----------------|---------------|----------------|----------------|
| Regional | \$12.0 | \$2.6 | \$9.3 | \$3.0 | \$9.0 | \$35.8 |
| State | \$73.9 | \$43.7 | \$102.6 | \$42.8 | \$99.4 | \$362.3 |
| Other ^{a.} | \$52.4 | \$25.5 | \$46.1 | \$20.3 | \$33.1 | \$177.5 |
| Total | \$138.2 | \$71.8 | \$158.0 | \$66.1 | \$141.5 | \$575.6 |

Table 2-14. Use of Funding for the System Capital Improvement Plan, 2025-2029 (in millions)

| Use of Funds | 2025 | 2026 | 2027 | 2028 | 2029 | Total |
|--------------|----------------|---------------|----------------|---------------|----------------|----------------|
| Expansion | \$8.7 | \$7.6 | \$7.9 | \$7.6 | \$7.9 | \$39.8 |
| Improvements | \$76.6 | \$36.1 | \$63.9 | \$25.3 | \$49.6 | \$251.4 |
| Preservation | \$52.9 | \$28.1 | \$86.2 | \$33.1 | \$84 | \$284.4 |
| Total | \$138.2 | \$71.8 | \$158.0 | \$66.1 | \$141.5 | \$575.6 |

^{a.}"Other" includes all other sources of funding invested in the system by implementing agencies including local, federal, etc.

System Plan – Action 2: Identify and conduct research

Identify and conduct research to inform park policy, funding, and operations. Study results will contribute to understanding visitors' needs, systems additions criteria, estimated visitation, equitable use, natural systems, and emerging issues.

Research provides evidence to guide high-quality decisions through statutory efforts such as the Annual Use Estimates and the twice-per-decade Park and Trail Visitor Survey. Additionally, research findings are valuable information to guide decisions around parks policy (including systems additions), funding, and supporting agency partners in their operations, programming, and natural systems care. Emerging issues identified by park agency and Met Council staff, as well as external trends, can be more effectively addressed through spatial data, quantitative analysis, and qualitative research.

Purpose: Evidence-based decision making is central to the Regional Parks and Trails System. The following research activities have been identified to occur between 2024 to 2030:

Annual Use Estimates. This annual study is mandated by state statute and completed in partnership with the regional park implementing agencies. This product estimates the number of visits to parks and trails in each implementing agency based on a methodology relying on sample counts. The results are used in formulas to calculate each agency's share of Met Council-awarded grant program dollars. The estimates also allow monitoring of trends over time.

Park and Trail Visitor Surveys. These studies are mandated by state statute and are conducted every five years. A sample of visitors respond to survey questions as they visit a park or trail during the summer of the study. The results provide information about visitor satisfaction, preferred activities, suggestions for improvement, barriers to visiting, information seeking, new visitor experiences, and visitor demographics. The study identifies the proportion of local vs. nonlocal visitors, the mean number of people visiting per vehicle, and the ratio of summer visits to other seasons. These three findings are used in the annual use estimates. The next Visitor Study will be done in 2025. The Met Council will continue to explore the possibility of data collection across four seasons as well as at the park and trail level within funding constraints.

Climate and Natural Systems. The Met Council will provide research in response to needs identified by implementing agencies regarding identification of regionally significant ecological areas and data regarding climate resilience and risk mitigation. Implementing agencies identified the following priorities: (1) analysis of return on investment of natural systems inventories, (2) climate resiliency mapping and strategy planning, (3) demonstration of systemwide linkages of species/habitat (for example, wildlife corridors), (4) calculation of total regional numbers for prairie and oak savanna restoration, (5) comparison of our regional park system with other systems nationwide, and (6) estimation of carbon footprint from park operations. Additionally, qualitative and survey research could be planned to identify how communities of color, youth, and other key populations frame climate change for better inclusion of perspectives and activities.

Use of relevant Met Council and external research. Met Council staff will respond to requests to support their work. This includes technical assistance in applying existing research findings to policy, funding, and other key topics. The Met Council has completed research projects dedicated to building a

more equitable system in response to the goals articulated in *Thrive 2040* and *Imagine 2050*. The 2021 Youth and Parks study identified obstacles to visitation, developed a model for welcoming new users, showed the most desired areas of skills-learning, and explored the activities young people, predominantly youth of color, want to do in the parks.

The Young Leaders Collaboration (2023-2024) brought recommendations from young people across the region regarding the ways parks and trails mattered in their lives and their recommendations for protecting natural systems. Analysis of engagement with agency staff around climate actions and visitor study results provide in-depth understanding of how implementing agencies approach these topics and what they need from the Met Council. This research continues to have vital importance in creating evidence-based policy and funding decisions.

New research in response to emerging topics. Research is needed to support the needs of implementing agency partners and the goals outlined in *Imagine 2050*. Implementing agencies continue to need quantitative data about nonusers in the general regional population and more extensive visitor data valid at the park and trail level. The Met Council will continue to explore options within funding constraints and identify emerging issues requiring additional research.

System Plan – Action 3: Annually update map datasets

The Met Council will annually update map datasets to reflect the most current status of the system in coordination with the data “owners” - our 10 regional park implementing agency partners.

Regional Parks and Trails System geographic information systems (GIS) data is housed within the Met Council for implementing agency and Met Council processes. The implementing agencies and the Met Council have been working in partnership to establish an annual update process for regional parks and trails GIS data for timely and accurate information. The Met Council initiates a data request that is updated when needs arise collaboratively with the regional park implementing agencies. The desired outcomes are:

- Accurate GIS data that is consistent with Met Council’s Regional Parks and Trails System Plan and regional parks and trails long-range plans from implementing agencies
- Use of the GIS data for operations and maintenance funding requests. Use of the GIS data as the ‘document of record’ for regional park and trails with old or no long-range plans on file. These regional parks and trails existed within the system at its inception in 1974, making them eligible for investment in their current state and use.

Section Three: Natural Systems Policy and Actions

Natural Systems policy

Identify lands with high-quality natural features and/or with high restoration potential that are desirable for Regional Parks and Trails System activities and put these lands in a protected status so they will be available for recreational uses and preservation purposes in perpetuity.

Natural Systems policy performance measure(s): To be developed.

The Regional Parks and Trails System is primarily nature-based and focuses on protecting and restoring high-quality natural areas for regional recreation opportunities. The protection, restoration, and enhancement of these natural systems is a foundational policy for the Regional Parks and Trails System. The Met Council collaborates with regional park implementing agencies to strategically locate and acquire lands with high-quality natural features or potential for restoration to create an interconnected regional recreation system. More details of the criteria used to identify lands for incorporation into the regional system can be found in the Regional Parks and Trails Planning Handbook.

Desired outcomes in natural systems protection:

- Protection of lands across the region that have been identified as having high-quality natural features, restoration potential, or recreational opportunities
- Improved access to the Regional Parks and Trails System for all communities
- Greater collaboration between implementing agencies to carry out restoration work and maintenance of restored lands
- More robust data that can be used to develop acquisition and development strategies

Natural Systems – Action 1: Locate and acquire land

The Met Council partners with regional park implementing agencies to locate and acquire lands with natural features, access to water, or restoration potential for conservation, recreation, and protection.

Future Met Council designation of lands for the Regional Parks and Trails System should emphasize important natural systems, access to water bodies, and natural resource features that enhance outdoor recreation. Water is a major attraction in almost every park within the system and a feature along many regional trails. Most surface water is publicly held, with the waterbeds owned by the state, so it is a critical function of the regional system to provide this access.

Section Three: Natural Systems Policy and Actions

Major considerations when deciding 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 and 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 metropolitan area or distributed in proportion to the existing and forecasted population growth and development.
- **Equity:** The ability to strengthen equitable use of regional parks and trails by all our region's residents, such as across age, race, ethnicity, income, national origin, and ability.

"A goal for the region is to work with communities to ensure that green space is equally distributed, ensuring accessibility to all residents."

*Community Resource Center and
Shakopee Diversity Alliance, Scott
County participant*

Natural Systems Foundation

Past acquisition activity has tended to favor lands with high-quality natural systems over even geographic distribution. As the Regional Parks and Trails System matures, and available land with high-quality natural resources becomes scarcer, acquisition of lands with restoration potential have increased in importance. For example, lands with restoration potential include agricultural lands that were formerly prairie and channelized streams that can be naturalized.

The restoration of urban areas that include natural resource features (for example, Above the Falls Regional Park and Bruce Vento Regional Trail) have provided opportunities to create regional parks and trails in urban areas that have been home to a range of uses, including cultural and industrial ones. All privately owned parcels within a Met Council-approved long-range plan boundary are "in-holdings" until they are acquired. Whenever possible, the regional park implementing agencies should pursue the acquisition of these "in-holdings" on a willing-seller basis. Additional details about the acquisition process are outlined in the Parks and Trails Planning Handbook.

Because of strong public attraction to water resources, acquisition of any additional public water frontage identified in a Met Council-approved long-range plan should be given high priority. The high demand and rapidly escalating value of water frontage will only make these lands costlier in the future. Trying to convert land with water frontage to public use after it has been developed is difficult and expensive.

Geographic Distribution

As the region continues to grow, it is important to regularly assess whether the residents of the region are being adequately served by the Regional Parks and Trails System. As such, it is important to strategically locate and acquire park and trail lands that are regionally significant. Regional significance means that the unit offers a natural setting, is significant in size, and serves multiple communities. Additionally, it provides regional recreational opportunities that are currently lacking in these areas. Geographic distribution helps the Met Council prioritize where new additions to the system would be

Section Three: Natural Systems Policy and Actions

most beneficial, and it ensures that regional parks and trails are well distributed spatially, in proportion to population growth, development, and recreational offerings available.

Equity

With the objective of fostering equity and belonging in the Regional Parks and Trails System, it is important to consider service gaps across the region. The Met Council is committed to identifying areas that are not well served by using a variety of resources and factors such as understanding of where underrepresented communities have historically lived, available recreational opportunities, and distance to regional parks and trails.

Natural Systems – Action 2: Research natural systems

The Met Council provides regional park implementing agencies with research and data that will better inform restoration and protection of natural systems.

Both qualitative and quantitative data-informed strategies are important to the Regional Parks and Trails System as they ensure that the investments into the system are effective, efficient, and desired by local communities and implementing agencies. The Met Council will play a lead role convening conversations among regional park implementing agencies, providing data and research, and inviting in interested parties. The Met Council will need the assistance of implementing agencies to understand local context and issues, and will explore funding opportunities to help support these efforts.

In addition to the research areas identified in Section Two, Action 2, the Met Council plans to further research on the following topics:

- **Tree canopy:** The Met Council aims to continue the success of the “Growing Shade” tool and use tree canopy data to inform which parts of the Regional Parks and Trails System need additional vegetation.
- **Regionally significant ecological areas:** Work on updating the regionally significant ecological areas and use data to identify areas that need protection.
- **Water monitoring:** Collaborate with Met Council’s Environmental Services division to pilot a water monitoring project on lakes within regional parks.

Natural Systems – Action 3: Coordinate support for natural systems

The Met Council coordinates efforts with regional park and trail implementing agencies and external partners to protect, restore, and maintain natural systems across the Regional Parks and Trails System.

While the Met Council does not own or operate any land within the Regional Parks and Trails System, the Met Council has the ability to convene the 10 regional park implementing agencies and coordinate efforts around protection and restoration work. The Met Council will collaborate with the implementing

Section Three: Natural Systems Policy and Actions

agencies to both expand and protect natural areas while enhancing lands already in the system, to deliver a wide range of desired outcomes, including:

- **Find additional funding sources:** Identify additional sources of funding for acquisition and maintenance. For more information, please see Section Eight: Finance, Action 5.
- **Foster external partnerships:** Partner with local organizations to advance the work of restoration, protection, enhancement, and education.
- **Strengthen collaboration with existing partners:** Continue to work with other state agencies and Council divisions to carry out protection and restoration efforts.

Section Four: Climate Resilience Policy and Actions

Climate Resilience policy

Adapt and enhance the Regional Parks and Trails System to promote resilience to climate change, including the mitigation of greenhouse gas emissions.

Climate Resilience policy performance measure(s): To be developed.

Climate change and its impacts are a critical concern, and the Met Council recognizes the crucial role that the Regional Parks and Trails System plays in mitigation and regional adaptation. Regional parks and trails provide a central opportunity to educate visitors about the impacts of climate change in the region, and what each implementing agency is doing to mitigate and adapt to those impacts. The Met Council will support this work through innovative solutions leading to achieving desired outcomes, including how best to mitigate and adapt to those impacts:

- Building public awareness of the climate work being done in the Regional Parks and Trails System and encouraging communities to become intentionally involved.
- Fostering an equitable regional parks and trails system, including landscapes within the system that can withstand the impacts of climate change.
- Developing innovative solutions to reduce greenhouse gas emissions while incorporating ways to connect recreation and adapt to the changing climate.

Climate Resilience – Action 1: Advance climate action

The Met Council supports regional park implementing agencies' efforts to advance climate work through partnership and collaboration.

One of the Met Council's primary roles is to convene the regional park implementing agencies to coordinate efforts at a regional scale. The Met Council will work in partnership with the regional park agencies to identify common goals and collaboration opportunities that would benefit from a coordinated, regional effort. By supporting and coordinating climate work at a regional scale, agencies may share learnings and resources with one another, and the Regional Parks and Trails System may be better positioned to seek additional funding resources. Other areas that the Met Council will explore include:

- **Long-range planning:** Continue to work with implementing agencies as the Met Council explores the addition of climate resiliency dimensions to the long-range plan requirements listed in the Regional Parks and Trails Planning Handbook.
- **Operations:** Convene frontline parks staff (for example, operations, maintenance, naturalists) from the implementing agencies to share best management practices, lessons learned, and coordinate climate work across agency boundaries. Other efforts may include developing regional initiatives to improve operations and exploring workforce development opportunities for naturalists.

Climate Resilience – Action 2: Research climate impacts

The Met Council partners with regional park implementing agencies to research the Regional Parks and Trails System’s impacts on climate change.

Prioritize research that accurately quantifies the Regional Parks and Trails System’s impact on mitigating and adapting to climate change. This research will help regional park implementing agencies identify aspects of the system that are working well and areas for improvement. Conduct research to capture a wide range of data, including:

- Greenhouse gas emissions inventory from facilities and operations.
- An inventory that calculates the level of carbon sequestration from completed restoration and potential sequestration of future restoration work.
- Measurable metrics that show the positive impact regional parks and trails have on climate mitigation and adaptation (flood control, cooling, etc.).
- The exploration of additional opportunities for tracking water quality in regional parks and trails.
- Monitor the effects on emissions of actions taken by implementing agencies such as land restoration and efficiency improvements made in buildings and facilities.

Climate Resilience – Action 3: Drive awareness

The Met Council will partner with regional park implementing agencies to develop strategies to share stories that increase public awareness of the importance of the Regional Parks and Trails System’s role in climate mitigation and adaptation.

One of the Met Council’s primary roles is to convene the regional park implementing agencies to coordinate efforts at a regional scale. The Met Council will work with implementing agencies to discuss communication strategies to build awareness of the Regional Parks and Trails System’s role in climate change. In addition to highlighting the adaptation and mitigation capabilities of the system, provide accurate information that explains the long-term benefits of certain actions, including:

- **Water quality and quantity:** Work with Environmental Services and implementing agencies to educate the public about the impact of algal blooms and water pollution.
- **Habitat restoration:** Provide education on native habitat restoration, its benefits, and how controlled burns contribute to the ecosystem.
- **Adaptation:** Educate on the many ways parks can be used to adapt to climate change through efforts such as flood control and planting drought-resistant and/or shade-providing vegetation.
- **Programming:** Increase community awareness by coordinating climate-oriented programming, such as data collection, restoration work, and education.

“Young people need direct exposure to plants and animals so they can develop a connection with nature and a desire to care for it.”

*Community Resource Center and
Shakopee Diversity Alliance, Scott County
participant*

Climate Resilience – Action 4: Climate and environmental justice

The Met Council will incorporate equity into the climate change conversation by gathering perspectives from historically underserved communities and shaping it into future actions.

The Met Council will incorporate more diverse voices into climate work, identifying areas of improvement for the Regional Parks and Trails System. By focusing more heavily on the impact climate change places on overburdened communities, we can start to minimize harm, support reparative action, and build community autonomy.

This policy plan prioritizes a wide range of actions to encourage feedback from more diverse audiences, including:

- Defining what “areas not well served” means for the location and acquisition priority of “geographic distribution.”
- Informing programming and marketing efforts to invite new visitors into regional parks and trails.
- Enhancing awareness of green gentrification and how it occurs when new or improved regional park or trail units attract increased investments and development. Sometimes these investments increase the cost of nearby housing resulting in an increased cost of living on existing residents, requiring them to relocate.¹⁴ Find strategies to reduce and mitigate the impacts that new or improved parks and trails have on communities. Refer to the Met Council’s 2050 Housing Policy Plan for more information.

¹⁴ Anguelovski et al., 2019; Curran and Hamilton, 2012; McClintock, 2018a

Section Five: Planning Policy and Actions

Planning policy

Promote long-range planning and help provide integrated resource management across jurisdictions in order to create a seamless system that connects everyone to the outdoors.

Planning policy performance measure(s): To be developed.

Long-range planning plays a key role in implementing the policies and actions identified in this plan. Long-range plans identify boundaries and corridor alignments but do much more. They also define the implementing agencies' approach to providing recreational opportunities and maintaining, conserving, and restoring the natural environment in response to engagement with current and future visitors, local units of government, and other stakeholders. The plans are also the basis for the Met Council's funding distribution and protection of the system.

Planning – Action 1: Long-range plan requirements

Regional park implementing agencies are required to prepare a long-range plan for each Regional Parks and Trails System unit they own and/or operate.

Minn. Stat. 473.313 requires a long-range plan to be developed by each regional park implementing agency in consultation with all affected municipalities. While the statute requires only one long-range plan per regional park implementing agency, the Met Council requires individual long-range plans for each regional park, park reserve, regional trail, and special feature. Long-range plans prepared by the regional park implementing agencies are critical in defining the specifics of acquisition, development, and operation of regional facilities.

Among other components, long-range plans must include a demand forecast and summaries of partner and community engagement, including an equity analysis. Long-range plans must also include boundary information, acquisition costs, and a development concept, including estimates of future use and costs. Accessibility, operations, and public services are also key components. In addition, long-range plans should address the protection and restoration of natural systems, as well as climate adaptation and mitigation efforts. Long-range plans must also address other state laws, such as those of the Mississippi River Corridor Critical Area, where applicable.

Long-range plan requirements are grouped into three major areas and include a subset of required content areas, which will be detailed below:

- Engagement
 - Demand forecast
 - Public and partner engagement and equity analysis
- Development concept
 - Boundaries
 - Acquisition costs
 - Development concept

Section Five: Planning Policy and Actions

- Accessibility
 - Operations
 - Public services
- Natural systems
 - Natural systems
 - Mississippi Corridor Critical Area

Specific long-range plan requirements for regional parks, park reserves, regional trails, and special features now reside in the Regional Parks and Trails Planning Handbook. The planning handbook is a reference document meant to primarily serve implementing agency and Met Council staff. It will be updated as needs arise and resources become available.

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

Collectively, these long-range plans form the regional park implementing agencies' part of the regional system plan. The Met Council reviews long-range plans for consistency with this Regional Parks and Trails Policy Plan and other regional policy plans. Inconsistent plans will be returned with comments to the regional park implementing agency. Next, the agency must revise and resubmit their plans to the Met Council. For a regional park implementing agency to receive a grant for acquisition or development, the proposed project must be consistent with a Met Council-approved long-range plan.

To inform demand forecasts, public engagement, and equity analyses, the Met Council will provide agencies contextual information such as demographic data for the region and their jurisdictions, disaggregated by race, ethnicity, household income, ability, age, and gender. This information will help identify communities who may be underserved by the Regional Parks and Trails System.

Acquisition long-range plans

Once the Met Council designates a unit to be a part of the Regional Parks and Trails System, the next step is for the regional park implementing agency to conduct a long-range planning process, as described above. There are times when a regional park implementing agency has an opportunity to acquire – or protect under an option to purchase – land that does not yet have a development concept, which is one of the requirements for long-range planning. In these situations, the regional park implementing agency may choose, in consultation with Met Council staff, to develop an acquisition long-range plan, to establish the long-range plan boundary, or to adjust an existing Council-approved long-range plan boundary. The acquisition long-range plan or amendment may focus solely on the land under option to purchase. For a detailed list of the long-range plan requirements, please go to the Acquisition Long-Range Plan Criteria and Process section of the Regional Parks and Trails Planning Handbook (Section Five).

Boundary adjustments

When a regional park implementing agency has an opportunity to add, modify, or remove a land holding from one of its units, it must change its long-range plan's boundary. These changes happen for a variety of reasons. For instance, the regional park implementing agency may better understand the land needed to implement the long-range plan vision, a previously unwilling landowner may become ready to sell property adjacent to the unit, or land may be donated to the agency.

Major boundary adjustments are handled through the system additions process, which requires amending the Regional Parks and Trails Policy Plan. This process happens on an approximately four-year cycle. If an opportunity for a major boundary adjustment arises off-cycle, the Met Council may consider a focused policy plan amendment, which will determine whether the addition should be brought into the system.

Extensions for existing and planned regional trails are major boundary adjustments addressed during the system additions process, which typically occurs on a four-year cycle.

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

For more information on boundary adjustments, please visit the Regional Parks and Trails Planning Handbook.

Amending a long-range plan

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

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

Section Five: Planning Policy and Actions

Long-range plan amendments are required to demonstrate how changes to the Regional Parks and Trails System remain consistent with the Met Council's expectations as outlined in this plan for several reasons. These include, but are not limited to:

- Improvements that substantially differ from the original intentions of the Met Council-approved long-range plan.
- Changes to a park or trail boundary.
- Significant changes or additions to a regional park concessioners' agreement (see Section Seven: Recreation, Facilities, and Programming – Action 2).
- Proposals for placement of telecommunications towers on Regional Parks and Trails System land (see Section Six: System Protection – Action 3).

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

Focused long-range plan amendments

Occasionally, regional park implementing agencies seek to make minor changes to a long-range plan that may only impact a subset of long-range plan requirement areas. For example, an agency may be interested in integrating a new outdoor recreation facility (for example, several miles of new mountain bike trails) that is outside the scope of the original vision or development concept, or proposes to make minor changes to only one part of a much larger park unit. In those instances, regional park implementing agency staff should discuss the scope of the desired plan amendment with Met Council staff prior to commencing the amendment process to determine the required subset of long-range plan requirements. Focused long-range plan amendments are considered through the Met Council committee process with a typical 60-day duration.

For more information on the process for focused long-range plan amendments, please visit the Regional Parks and Trails Planning Handbook.

Administrative process for minor long-range plan amendments

Occasionally, plan amendments are made to address minor changes or proposals that have no material change to the regional park or trail. Examples of amendment candidates for the administrative process may include minor corrections, changes to natural area management, or trail implementation that result in no material change to the park or trail, and/or underground utility improvements. Amendments reviewed administratively must meet all the relevant criteria adopted by the Met Council, which may be amended from time to time outside of this policy plan.

Administrative reviews of minor long-range plan amendments are conducted by Met Council staff with delegated authority granted by the Met Council, and they are not required to be presented to the regular Met Council committees for review and approval. There may be instances when Met Council staff direct minor amendment proposals to the regular Met Council committees due to political sensitivity or other contextual factors. Administrative review is proposed to be completed within 15 business days once the long-range plan amendment has been deemed complete.

Section Five: Planning Policy and Actions

For more information on the administrative process for minor long-range plan amendments, please visit the Regional Parks and Trails Planning Handbook.

Planning – Action 2: Enhanced multimodal access

The Met Council will promote enhanced multimodal access to regional parks, regional trails, and the transit system.

The Regional Parks and Trails System plays a key role in advancing the livability of the region by increasing access to nature and outdoor recreation, thereby supporting healthy lifestyles and active living. The Met Council has a unique opportunity to help achieve this objective, through its role in operating the transit system as well as planning for the Regional Parks and Trails System. In partnership with the Met Council, regional park implementing agencies are encouraged to:

- Provide transit schedules and information at regional parks that are served by transit.
- Include information on how to access regional parks or trails by transit on their agency's website, where applicable.
- Improve wayfinding signage systems.
- Promote regional trails with existing transportation management organizations that provide marketing and advocacy to promote multimodal options for daily commutes.
- Coordinate with local jurisdictions to identify and plan for local trail connections to regional parks and trails as well as last-mile connections from transit.
- Collaborate with bike-share programs to locate bike stations near regional parks and trails.

The Met Council will explore the following projects:

- Collaborate with local agencies to develop strategies for improving wayfinding across agency boundaries. This could involve:
 - Using GIS data to provide the public with information about trail connections.
 - Exploring additional funding opportunities to help with regional connectivity.
 - Collaborating with agencies on developing minimum requirements for signage.
- Collaborate with Metro Transit and local transit providers to determine the feasibility of the following actions:
 - Promoting regional parks and trails at bus stops
 - Exploring options for locating new park-and-rides near or adjacent to regional parks, or new regional trails near park-and-rides or fixed-route transit lines
 - Promoting a transit day pass or family pass for accessing regional parks
 - Providing free rides to large special events in regional parks
 - Adding transit stops that are convenient to regional parks and trails

Section Six: System Protection Policy and Actions

System Protection policy

Protect public investments in acquisition and development by assuring that every component in the system is able to fully carry out its designated role.

System Protection policy performance measure(s): To be developed.

The Met Council has several mechanisms in place that protect the integrity of the Regional Parks and Trails System and its individual parts of the system:

- **Long-range plans:** The long-range plan defines acceptable activities within a system unit. The regional park implementing agencies must receive Met Council approval before proceeding with any activities inconsistent with the existing Met Council-approved long-range plan.
- **Restrictive covenants:** Regional park implementing agencies are required to record restrictive covenants on lands purchased with Met Council funds to ensure that the land remains in regional recreation open space use in perpetuity, unless the Met Council agrees to a change.
- **Metropolitan Land Planning Act:** The Metropolitan Land Planning Act was passed in 1976 and requires local governments in the seven-county region to develop comprehensive plans for their communities every 10 years. These plans help ensure that the Regional Parks and Trails System is protected from system impacts. Any potential substantial impacts to the system plan may be subject to a required plan modification by the Met Council to ensure that the system is protected.
- **Metropolitan significance:** Proposed development projects outside of the Regional Parks and Trails System that have a substantial impact on or represent a substantial departure from the system plan may be required to undergo a review for metropolitan significance (Minn. Stat. 473.173; Minn. R. Ch. 5800), with up to a one-year delay in development if the project is found to adversely affect the system.

These standards in the metropolitan significance rules and in the following plan guidelines are used to determine a substantial impact on or a substantial departure from the Regional Parks and Trails System:

- Impacts on the use of Regional Parks and Trails System facilities include, but are not limited to traffic, safety, noise, visual obstructions (for example, to scenic overlooks), impaired use of the facilities, or interference with the operation or maintenance of the facilities.
- Impacts on natural systems include, but are not limited to, the impact on the level, flow, or quality of a facility's water resources (lakes, streams, wetlands, and/or groundwater) and impact on a facility's wildlife population or habitat (migration routes, breeding sites, and/or plant communities).

Section Six: System Protection Policy and Actions

- A proposed project is considered to have an impact on the system if it may preclude or substantially limit the future acquisition of land in an area identified in the Regional Parks and Trails System Plan.

System Protection – Action 1: Local comprehensive plans

Local comprehensive plans may need to be changed if planned land uses would have a negative impact on current or planned regional park lands or facilities.

The Met Council may require plan modifications to local comprehensive plans, updates, or amendments if they:

- Are more likely than not to have adverse and substantial impacts on the current or future intended uses of the Regional Parks and Trails System lands or facilities.
- Are likely to have adverse and substantial impacts on land that is officially recommended for acquisition in an adopted policy plan.

There is a strong case for intervention in situations where potentially adverse land uses are proposed after a location for a Regional Parks and Trails System facility has been adopted by the Met Council in the system plan section of this policy plan. Local governments will be notified of any changes to the 2050 Regional Parks and Trails Policy Plan following Met Council adoption of the changes and will be given nine months to bring local plans and ordinances into conformance with the Met Council's plan.

The Met Council will review local comprehensive plan amendments and environmental documents to ensure that Regional Parks and Trails System locations and facilities are protected from land uses or projects that represent substantial departures from the Regional Parks and Trails System Plan, or are likely to have a substantial impact on the system. For more information about the Met Council's review methodology of comprehensive plans please refer to the Regional Parks and Trails Planning Handbook.

Substantial departures from the Regional Parks and Trails System Plan or impacts on the Regional Parks and Trails System may include, but are not limited to:

- Plans that do not acknowledge the presence of the regional park or trail unit.
- Projects that create safety issues for system users.
- Projects that impair the use and enjoyment of the system unit due to excessive visual, noise, air pollution, or water pollution.
- Projects that interfere with the operation and maintenance of the system unit.
- Projects or plans that ultimately prohibit or significantly reduce the realization (in other words, acquisition, development, and operation) of Met Council-approved long-range park and trail plans.

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Examples of substantial departures to the Regional Parks and Trails System are listed below.

- Existing regional parkland being guided for redevelopment
- Regional park inholdings being guided for residential or commercial development
- Transportation plans having collector streets through a regional park
- Communities changing the alignment of regional trails

Where appropriate, the Met Council will initiate or accept for initiation a metropolitan significance review of specific projects if it is necessary to help protect the Regional Parks and Trails System.

In the implementation of local comprehensive plans, local governments shall not adopt any official controls, such as park dedication and subdivision ordinances, that permit activity in conflict with the metropolitan system plans—including the Regional Parks and Trails Policy Plan (Minn. Stat. 473.858, subd. 1). When a new subdivision is created, the local government must include land for a planned regional trail or be in conflict with the Regional Parks and Trails Policy Plan and state statute.

In accordance with the Met Council's *Imagine 2050* approach, increasing population densities in urban areas is preferable to scattered developments throughout the rural and agricultural areas of the metropolitan region. Increasing population densities adjacent to urban Regional Parks and Trails System units is not a detriment to those units if the development is designed in ways that ensure:

- Natural features and systems, as well as scenic views of the unit, are not impacted.
- Public access is provided to the regional park and/or trail.
- Adjacent and regionally diverse demographic groups are engaged to understand barriers. These groups include but are not limited to historically underserved communities including people of color and American Indian communities; as well as the elder and disability communities. Such engagements support improved access to parks and trails, greater inclusion of cultural amenities, and strengthened community connections.
- Culturally significant landscapes, including American Indian burial grounds, are recognized and preserved.
- Operation and maintenance of the unit can be completed without interference.

The Met Council will work cooperatively with local governments to help ensure urban development and land use in areas adjacent to the Regional Parks and Trails System units occur in ways that preserve the integrity of the system. Refer to the Met Council's other system plan chapters, including the 2050 Housing and Land Use Policy Plans for more information.

System Protection – Action 2: Conversions

Conversion of Regional Parks and Trails System lands to other uses is allowed only in limited circumstances and with approval of the Met Council.

Park and trail land conversions are rare instances where competing conditions occur within regional park and trail boundaries, requiring regional park or trail land to be used for something other than parkland. An example of a land conversion is removing parkland for a transportation interchange improvement. Land conversions are challenging for regional park implementing agencies because they are complex and often originate from reasons outside of the agency's scope of work. The Met Council reviews land conversion requests in relation to the regional park or trail's long-range plan, as well as, for consistency with this land conversion action and other Met Council systems and policies.

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

Recommended, desired approach

“Equally valuable land” is defined as land that:

- Is contiguous to the Regional Parks and Trails System unit containing the land proposed to be exchanged (within the same park/trail unit). This approach is the preferred option.
- Has comparable or better natural systems or features.
- Could provide comparable or better recreation opportunities than the land being released from the covenant.

Secondary, less desirable approach

In exceptional circumstances, the Met Council may accept as equally valuable land the addition of land located in another unit of the Regional Parks and Trails System. This approach is a less desirable option than securing contiguous land in the same unit. It is viewed as the second-best option where:

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

Third option, for extenuating circumstances

An **“equally valuable facility exchange”** is defined as an exchange of land for facilities when recreational benefits and/or natural system benefits are increased as a result of the exchange. For example, some land within a regional trail corridor may be exchanged to widen a highway if

Section Six: System Protection Policy and Actions

a highway department constructs a trail overpass or underpass of the widened road at no cost to the regional park implementing agency. This approach is less desirable than the above two.

The Met Council will consider conversion of regional park or trail land to other uses only if the conversion will not harm the particular regional parks and trails unit.

The Met Council will review land conversion requests using the criteria below. If the Met Council approves the conversion request, then the long-range plan boundary will be updated in the system plan and the Geographic Information System dataset to reflect the changed boundary. Any removals or replacements that are outside of the current park or trail boundary will require a boundary adjustment. This may be accomplished through a secondary Met Council action.

Land conversion criteria

The intent of the land conversion criteria is to ensure that the proposed change will not have an adverse effect on the regional unit and it will continue to be able to function as it was conceived in its long-range plan. For more information related to park and trail classifications, refer to Section Two, System Plan – Action 1: Classifications.

Additionally, the proposed change must be consistent with the locating and acquisition criteria in Section Three, Natural Systems – Action 1: Locate and Acquire Land.

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

Issues with respect to the existing park system unit:

- The regional park system unit can continue to function as originally planned, meeting Met Council standards for sites and site attributes established for the particular type of park system unit (regional park, park reserve, trail greenway, or special feature)
- The environmental features (for example, wildlife habitat, water quality) will not be adversely affected and can be protected or mitigated with the new use.
- The loss of land or function will be made up through acquisition of equally valuable land in acreage, natural, and/or recreational benefits or a facility exchange that is equally valuable to the value of the land proposed for removal.
- The replacement land or facility exchange is consistent with Met Council policies.
- The replacement land or facility exchange a benefits the regional park or trail unit.

Issues with respect to the land proposed for removal:

- The proposed project is unique and/or critical.
- The proposed project does not create safety issues or impair the use and enjoyment of the regional park or trail due to excessive traffic, public services, visual, noise, air pollution, or water pollution.
- The project does not interfere with the operation and maintenance of the regional park or trail.

Section Six: System Protection Policy and Actions

- The proposed project does not have the potential for a cumulative or material impact on the regional park or trail's recreational opportunities, natural areas, or cultural resources.

Restrictive covenants

The Met Council requires that a restrictive covenant be recorded on all land that has been acquired for the Regional Parks and Trails System using Met Council funds. The restrictive covenant ensures the parkland is used in perpetuity for Regional Parks and Trails System purposes and ensures that there is no sale, lease, mortgage of the parkland or other conveyance, restriction, or encumbrance filed against the property unless the Met Council approves the action in writing and the Met Council's approval is recorded on/with the parkland.

Land conversion proposals with no equally valuable exchange

The only instance in which the Met Council will consider a consent to easement or land conversion where no land is required to be exchanged is if:

- The proposed change is a benefit to the regional park or trail.
- The Met Council-approved long-range plan can still operate as planned or is in a better state after the improvement.
- The proposed change does not change the above-ground use from regional recreation open space, nor does it adversely impact the quality or function of the natural area.
- The proposed project does not have the potential for a cumulative or material impact on the regional park or trail's recreational opportunities, natural areas, or cultural resources.

The Met Council reserves the right to determine if the magnitude of the conversion proposal warrants an equally valuable exchange or a long-range plan amendment. Additionally, this provision does not exempt the proposal of requirements from other funding sources. Refer to the Regional Parks and Trails Planning Handbook for more information about funding requirements.

System Protection – Action 3: Telecommunication towers

Telecommunication towers will only be allowed in regional facilities if there is no alternative location and if mitigation efforts are made to minimize the impact on Regional Parks and Trails System lands and users.

The growth in wireless cellular and broadband systems and implementation of the regional public safety radio system has resulted in requests that Regional Parks and Trails System land be leased for antenna towers, or that towers be located on or near system lands. Federal laws allow local governments to regulate the placement of towers as long as there is no ban preventing reasonable market access for that communication system.

Generally, antenna towers for telecommunication services and the regional public safety radio system are prohibited on regional park and trail lands within Met Council-approved long-range plan boundaries unless certain criteria are met. Regional park implementing agencies must

Section Six: System Protection Policy and Actions

prepare a focused long-range plan amendment on the proposed tower placement for the Met Council's review and approval. For more information about the process and requirements related to including telecommunication towers within a regional park and trail boundary, refer to the Regional Parks and Trails Planning Handbook.

System Protection – Action 4: Placement of utilities

Regional wastewater infrastructure

Regional wastewater conveyance facilities are sometimes located in regional parks or trails to serve the unit and/or other areas. The Met Council works cooperatively with regional park implementing agencies to locate facilities when needed. In situations where the Met Council constructs new wastewater infrastructure or needs to repair existing infrastructure in the regional park or trail, they will work to restore the park or trail to a similar or better condition than they found it. Collaborative opportunities between the Met Council and regional park implementing agencies to educate visitors about the importance and benefits of the Regional Wastewater System are encouraged.

To provide sanitary sewer services to Regional Parks and Trails System facilities and/or to implement the regional wastewater system plan, the Met Council will work cooperatively with regional park implementing agencies to locate regional wastewater conveyance facilities on system lands in a manner that minimizes the impact on existing and planned park system facilities and natural systems.

If the Met Council maintains regional wastewater infrastructure on existing Regional Parks and Trails System land without an easement, the Met Council shall have the option to negotiate the terms of an easement. For new system facilities, the Met Council reserves the option to include an easement for future regional wastewater infrastructure as a condition of a Met Council grant used to acquire land, provided that the conveyance is consistent with the Met Council-approved long-range plan.

Other utilities

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

Utilities should be placed in a way that minimizes impacts on the Regional Parks and Trails System unit's natural systems and on its existing and future recreation and visitor support facilities, while providing reasonable access to utility lines for repair and maintenance. The Met Council will consider utility easements through the land conversion program discussed in Action 2 of this section.

Easement Criteria

Regional park implementing agencies may either sell or grant a utility conveyance (an easement, conditional use permit, or a license) to the utility provider. The utility provider may have to pay for the easement, conditional use permit, or permit based on the benefit the utility provides to the Regional Parks and Trails System unit. Agencies must follow the System Protection Process for land conversions described earlier in this section for Met Council consideration of utility easement conveyances. Utility conveyances should specify the following information:

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

Section Seven: Recreation, Facilities, and Programming Policy and Actions

Recreation, Facilities, and Programming policy

Foster a sense of belonging by providing a wide spectrum of leisure and play opportunities while connecting people, places, and the natural world.

Recreation, Facilities, and Programming policy performance measure(s): To be developed.

Recreation, Facilities, and Programming – Action 1: Increase equity in programs, activities, and places

The Met Council supports opportunities, programs, and spaces that strive to uplift community connections to the outdoors while counteracting barriers and harm placed on underrepresented communities.

To create a Regional Parks and Trails System that welcomes all residents of the region to its range of amazing opportunities, it is imperative to identify and understand the barriers to participation, as well as recognize the harm that has been placed on underrepresented communities. Engagement with these specific communities can reveal the harms and barriers that exist and offer opportunities to co-create durable solutions for a better future. The Met Council will support regional park implementing agency efforts to identify and reduce barriers to access, with the intent of building a Regional Parks and Trails System that will:

- **Listen to historically underserved communities to inform future action:** As the region's population becomes more diverse, it is important to continue engaging with communities of color, American Indians, and other underrepresented communities to understand barriers to access and inform programming, recreational facilities, and partnerships with local organizations.
- **Honor cultural considerations across diverse communities:** Through engagement with communities of color and American Indian groups, the Met Council will have a better understanding of how to support implementing agency efforts to amplify community voices and to foster increased cultural connections across the Regional Parks and Trails System.
- **Offer recreational opportunities for all users:** To accommodate a region that will be older and more diverse, it is important that the Met Council continues to encourage the incorporation of universal design in park and trail facilities to ensure accessibility and safety for all. Additionally, the Met Council will explore ways to support implementing agency efforts to create programming that promotes safety and belonging for people of color, LGBTQ+ individuals, people over the age of 65, people with disabilities, and other underserved communities.

Recreation, Facilities, and Programming – Action 2: Build relationships between people and natural systems

The Met Council supports the conservation and restoration of natural systems, alongside leisure, play, and creative opportunities in ways that connect people to each other and the outdoors.

The Regional Parks and Trails System is made up of many unique natural spaces that serve a wide variety of needs and provide numerous benefits for visitors and the environment.

During the Imagine 2050 engagement conversations, many important ideas emerged that will help inform how the Met Council and regional park implementing agencies can build stronger relationships between people and natural systems. These ideas include:

- Exploring stacked functions as the future of our Regional Parks and Trails System. This means creating holistic places that fulfill multiple functions, including establishing safe spaces for people to connect to the natural world in addition to creating spaces for wildlife habitat, water storage, and other ecological services.
- Recognizing that programming is key to connecting people with the outdoors. This means that the old adage of “build it and they will come” is no longer accurate. Programming is critical to introducing people to the outdoors, showing them how to get involved, and unlocking the many benefits of an active, outdoor lifestyle.
- Moving from protecting to restoring with community. While our partnership’s shared mission of conservation remains vital, when done in ways that center community, the potential benefits grow significantly. This means listening to community, particularly those voices that have been absent from past planning conversations, including people of color, LGBTQ+ individuals, people over the age of 65, people with disabilities, and other underserved communities.

Activities and facilities criteria

One of the main roles the Regional Parks and Trail System serves is to provide the metropolitan area with regional recreational open space that is defined in Minnesota Statutes, Section 473.121 as “...land and water areas, or interests therein, and facilities determined by the Met Council to be of regional importance in providing for a balanced system of public outdoor recreation for the metropolitan area, including but not limited to park reserves, major linear parks and trails, large recreation parks, and conservatories, zoos, and other special use facilities.”

Based on this legislative direction and definition of regional recreation open space, the activities and facilities in the Regional Parks and Trails System should align with the system’s vision, mission, and values listed in Section One *and* meet criteria below:

- Be consistent with the community engagement findings of the implementing agency-led long-range planning processes
- Serve a regional audience

Section Seven: Recreation, Facilities, and Programming Policy and Actions

- Not duplicate neighborhood parks and trails systems
- Connect and support the system's nature-based foundation
- Be compatible with other uses and activities, minimize user conflicts, and preserve user experiences
- Stay consistent with the expectations of the Met Council's review and approval process

Implementing agencies that wish to propose new Regional Parks and Trails System activities should consult the "Recreational Activities Evaluation Process" and "Process for including New Activities" sections of the Regional Parks and Trails Planning Handbook.

Recreation, Facilities, and Programming – Action 3: Establish and broaden cross-sector opportunities

The Met Council supports a wide spectrum of connections and partnerships in the outdoors through recreation, arts, programming, transit, public health, education, stewardship, and community.

Parks and trails have a large capacity to support community through a broad array of partnerships around the region. They play an important role in our physical, social, spiritual, and mental health. Their value goes beyond their "existence value" because they bring deep importance to people's quality of life. They are a critical tool for combatting America's loneliness epidemic as they provide spaces for community connections and well-being. Expanding and strengthening our cross-sector partnerships will increase the impact of parks and trails and will open new revenue streams and ideas for what is possible for parks and trails.

Recreation, Facilities, and Programming – Action 4: Raise awareness

Expand how we connect people to regional parks and trails with a focus on underrepresented communities through intentional outreach.

The Regional Parks and Trails System is a vast and unique system that stretches across the Twin Cities region, and yet many residents do not know it exists. Creating outreach initiatives that invite communities, especially those that have been excluded from the benefits of the system in the past, is a pivotal step to creating a more equitable region. For example, the Minneapolis Park and Recreation Board found that Black communities living near Theodore Wirth Regional Park do not benefit from the park as much as other communities, even though the Black communities live in the neighborhoods surrounding much of the park. As our region's racial diversity grows, the Regional Parks and Trails System should experiment and collaborate on ways to genuinely and effectively raise awareness, particularly among underrepresented communities.

Recreation, Facilities, and Programming – Action 5: Trail system coordination

Bicycle and pedestrian facilities will be coordinated between the Regional Parks and Trails System and the transportation system.

Safe, high-quality, continuous, and barrier-free bicycle and pedestrian facilities shall be developed, maintained, and improved to function as integral parts of the Regional Parks and Trails System and transportation system. The Met Council is responsible for planning regional transportation projects, including bicycle transportation facilities, and since many regional trails also serve as commuter bikeways, it is important that Regional Parks and Trails System and transportation planners work together when developing trail and transportation plans.

A comprehensive network of trails and bikeways that serve both recreation and transportation needs is an important priority for the Met Council. This network should link state, regional, and local trails, and should be integrated with other transportation modes and networks, including the regional transit system. It should connect population centers with important regional destinations, including economic hubs, schools, shopping areas, parks, and trails.

In practice, the Regional Bicycle Transportation Network (RBTN), regional trails, and all local trail and bikeway networks complement each other to serve the overall bicycle transportation and recreation needs of the region. All of these elements serve to provide an integrated and cohesive system that supports all forms of bicycling and the full range of bicycle trip needs.

Developing a more integrated and collaborative planning approach between regional trails and the RBTN is needed by the Met Council and its implementing agency partners. Met Council staff will work to define these opportunities for increased collaboration involving transportation and regional park implementing agencies' bicycle professionals and stakeholders and will incorporate those opportunities into future planning and implementation efforts. For more information about this future work, see Section Nine, 2025-2028 Workplan and Section Seven in the Regional Parks and Trails Planning Handbook.

With over 487 miles of multiuse trail facilities open to the public, regional trails support a wide range of activities. From recreational pursuits to commuting to work and school, regional trails play a vital role in the lives of our region's residents.

E-bikes are a growing trend on the regional trail system as well as across the region and country. They take the form of electric, pedal-assist bicycles and are generally allowed on regional trails. While e-bikes are gaining acceptance on trails across the country, concerns about speed and safety are topics that need further study (see Section Nine, 2025-2028 Workplan).

In general, regional trails should be developed away from roadways. However, in some instances, it may be necessary for a short stretch of trail to be located on, or adjacent to, a road in order to bypass natural or artificial barriers or private property.

Section Seven: Recreation, Facilities, and Programming Policy and Actions

The RBTN, established in the *2040 Transportation Policy Plan*, is intended to serve as a “backbone” arterial network for accommodating daily bicycle transportation needs by establishing an integrated and seamless network of on-street bikeways and off-road trails. The network prioritizes corridors and alignments for regional transportation investment. Cities, counties, park agencies, and the state play an important role in planning and implementing future bikeways and trails in support of the network vision.

The RBTN is based on a Regional Bicycle System Study analysis and prioritization of potential bicycle corridors.¹⁵ The study incorporated factors such as bicycle-trip demand, network connectivity, social equity, population density, regional job centers, major destinations (including highly visited regional parks), and connections to transit. Alignments are defined where there are existing or planned bikeways, or where roadways and planned trails would most effectively meet the regional corridor's intent. Corridors are retained where alignments have not yet been identified.

The presence of corridors allows for local bike plans to determine effective alignments that follow the corridor's orientation and use on-street bikeways and off-road trails to achieve efficient facility routes. Tier 1 corridors and alignments (highest priority for transportation investment) are planned in locations where they can attract the most riders and most effectively enhance mode choice in favor of biking, walking, and transit over driving alone. Tier 2 corridors and alignments (second highest priority for transportation investment) also provide transportation connectivity and they serve to support the Tier 1 corridors and alignments.

Regional trails were an important input during the development of the original RBTN, and many regional trails have been identified as important alignments within it. These include Cedar Lake, Samuel Morgan, Lake Minnetonka, and Bruce Vento regional trails, to name a few.

Increasing the coordination and communication between the regional trail system and the RBTN will result in a stronger and more connected overall system. Both regional trails and the RBTN seek to support active lifestyles, connecting people with where they want to go.

The regional trail system was originally envisioned as an off-road system that sought to connect regional parks, park reserves, special features, and regional trails by providing safe and separated opportunities to serve recreation and transportation purposes. While these goals remain vital, it is important to recognize that regional trails serve as transportation corridors, connecting important local and regional destinations. They also serve as a “backbone” for connecting and supporting local bicycle networks. This is evidenced by the significant overlap between the regional trail system and the RBTN corridors and alignments.

The RBTN is planned to facilitate daily bicycling for transportation that includes commute trips to work and school, shopping trips, trips to entertainment venues, medical-related trips, and social trips. The RBTN focuses on connecting its designated regional destinations to and between

¹⁵ Metropolitan Council. (2014). *Regional bicycle transportation study, 2040 transportation policy plan*. www.metrocouncil.org

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local bicycle networks by integrating on-street bikeways and off-road trails that offer the most direct and efficient routes.

An integrated system of regional trails and the RBTN requires a collaborative approach to regional trail and bicycle transportation planning by the Met Council and its implementing agency partners. For example, one of the strengths of the regional trail system is the wealth of trails serving exurban and rural areas. These trails, like Carver County's Minnesota River Bluffs Regional Trail, connect visitors to needed amenities and destinations important for daily life. Met Council staff will continue to seek opportunities to enhance collaboration and coordination among transportation and parks agency planners to maintain and build upon a cohesive and integrated regional system.

Developers of trails and bikeways that are included in both networks may need to resolve competing considerations such as design speed, needs of expected users, or protection of natural features.

For more information on the Regional Bicycle Transportation Network, please refer to the 2050 Transportation Policy Plan, Bicycle Investment Chapter.

Relationship to other technical guidance

The 2050 Regional Parks and Trails Policy Plan should be used in conjunction with the current versions of the *MnDOT Bikeway Facility Design Manual* and DNR's *Trail Planning, Design, and Development Guidelines*. There are also other important design and development resources available.

Recreation, Facilities, and Programming – Action 6: Ineligible Activities and Facilities

The Met Council determined that some activities and facilities are ineligible at the regional level because they are more closely aligned with the role of other recreational providers.

When the Regional Parks and Trails System was established in 1974, it included existing parks and trails that had facilities not considered eligible for regional funding. These include:

- Formal ball fields, diamonds, and organized athletic complexes
- Tennis courts
- Golf facilities
- Amateur athletic facilities and sports complexes
- Off-road vehicle areas (ATV, off-road motorcycle, and 4X4 truck opportunities, and snowmobiles), as the Minnesota DNR provides and supports these opportunities
- Enterprise facilities that generate enough revenue to pay for their own costs (for example, some water parks and downhill ski areas).

These activities remain ineligible for regional funding, as they more closely align with the responsibilities of other recreational providers. Additional information and criteria for

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incorporating new facilities and activities into the Regional Parks and Trails System can be found in the Regional Parks and Trails Grant Administration Guide.

Section Eight: Finance Policy and Actions

Finance policy

The Met Council administers, provides financial oversight, and collaborates with a range of partners to fund the 10 regional park implementing agencies in support of the Regional Parks and Trails System.

Finance – Statutory requirements: distribution of funds

Funds will be granted only to regional park implementing agencies.

Any funds provided by or through the Met Council for the Regional Parks and Trails System will be granted only to regional park implementing agencies for projects consistent with Met Council-approved long-range plans, capital improvement programs, or state law. As previously noted in Chapter 2, and defined by Minn. Stat. 473.351, the regional park implementing agencies are:

- Anoka County
- City of Bloomington
- Carver County
- Dakota County
- Minneapolis Park and Recreation Board
- Ramsey County
- City of Saint Paul
- Scott County
- Three Rivers Park District
- Washington County

Finance – Statutory requirements: regional and state bond funds

Bond funds are used for acquisition, development, redevelopment, and natural resource restoration within Regional Parks and Trails System units.

Capital projects proposed for funding must be consistent with a Met Council-approved long-range plan. Projects proposed by each regional park implementing agency are prioritized by that agency. Each regional park implementing agency has unique capital needs that each individual agency can best determine.

Regional and State Bond Funds

State bonds along with other state funding sources (for example, General Fund) have been appropriated to the Met Council since 1976 to help finance the Regional Parks and Trails System's capital plans. Since 1994, the Met Council has financed the parks capital plans with a combination of state bonds and regional bonds; the Met Council matches every \$3 of state

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bonds with \$2 of Met Council funds. The premise for this mix of state and regional bonds is that people who live outside the seven-county metropolitan region visit and use the Regional Parks and Trails System and should therefore help finance its capital costs. Taxes collected statewide and within the region to pay off the bond debt are proportional to the share of visits to the park and trail system made by both people living within and outside the region. Minn. Stat. 473.325 allows the Met Council to issue general obligation bonds for the acquisition and betterment of the parks and trails system. No more than \$40 million of bond debt can be outstanding at any point in time.

Finance – Statutory requirements: Operation and maintenance

The Met Council will distribute operation and maintenance appropriations to agencies.

Regional park implementing agencies raise funds to finance the costs associated with operating and maintaining their portion of the Regional Parks and Trails System through the following sources:

- Fees collected from people using their parks. Examples include vehicle entrance fees, picnic shelter rentals, recreational equipment rentals, room rentals at visitor centers, and tuition for educational programs
- Local property taxes
- Local Government Aid payments from the State of Minnesota

In 1985, legislation was enacted that allowed state appropriations from the general fund to be disbursed to regional park implementing agencies to supplement funding for operating and maintaining their portion of the Regional Parks System (Minnesota Statutes, section 473.351).

State appropriations for Regional Parks and Trails System operation and maintenance are distributed to regional park implementing agencies according to the following formula:

- 40% based on each agency's proportion of total regional system visits
- 40% based on each agency's proportion of total regional system operation and maintenance expenditures in the previous calendar year
- 20% based on each agency's proportion of total regional system acreage, with park reserve resource management lands divided by four

In 2000, legislation was enacted that directed a portion of state lottery proceeds into a "natural resources fund," with the stipulation that a portion of the receipts deposited "may be spent only on metropolitan park and trail grants." This funding source is commonly called "lottery in lieu of sales tax" revenue (Minnesota Statutes, section 297A.94(h)(3)). The Met Council disburses the appropriations from these two sources to the regional park implementing agencies based on the results of the formula contained in Minnesota Statutes, section 473.351.

Finance – Statutory requirements: Parks and Trails Legacy Funds

Parks and Trails Legacy Funds spending must conform to the statewide Parks and Trails Legacy Plan.

In November 2008, Minnesota citizens approved a constitutional amendment, commonly called the Clean Water, Land and Legacy Amendment. The amendment created a new three-eighth-cent sales tax to be collected from July 2009 to June 2034. Revenue from the sales tax is placed into four dedicated accounts. One of those accounts is the Parks and Trails Fund, which may only be used to support parks and trails of regional or statewide significance. These funds must supplement, not substitute, traditional sources of funding. The Met Council is the fiscal agent responsible for administering appropriations from the Parks and Trails Legacy Fund to the regional park implementing agencies. The Met Council will ensure regional park implementing agencies spend the funds on projects that capture the strategic direction outlined in the Parks and Trails Legacy Plan.

The Parks and Trails Legacy Plan specifies four strategic directions:

- Connect people and the outdoors
 - Develop stewards of tomorrow through efforts to increase lifelong participation in parks and trails
- Acquire land, create opportunities
 - Create new and expanded opportunities to serve current and future users
- Take care of what we have
 - Provide safe, high-quality experiences through regular reinvestment in infrastructure and natural systems management
- Coordinate among partners
 - Enhance coordination among the network of public, private, and nonprofit park and trail partners

Legislation enacted in 2009 directs how money appropriated from the Parks and Trails Fund to the Met Council is distributed to the regional park implementing agencies under the following formula codified in Minnesota Statute 85.53:

- 45% based on the operation and maintenance formula in Minnesota Statutes 473.351, provided in the section above
- 31.5% based on each agency's proportion of the population of the region
- 13.5% based on each agency's proportion of total nonlocal visits to the Regional Parks and Trails System
- 10% set aside for Park Acquisition Opportunity Fund Program

Finance – Action 1: Regional and state bonds funding formula

Regional Parks Bonding Program funding will be distributed based on a defined formula.

Since 2008, the Met Council has used a formula to determine how much of the state and regional bonds would be allocated to each regional park implementing agency. The formula balances two factors:

- The population within the jurisdiction of each park implementing agency compared to the region's total population. (This factor is weighted 70%)
- The number of visits a regional park implementing agency hosted from people who live outside the agency's jurisdiction (nonlocal visits — This factor is weighted 30%)

The population factor recognizes the need to provide funds for park capital improvements to serve every person in the region relatively equally. Using nonlocal visits as a factor recognizes that these regional parks serve a regional and statewide population. Therefore, a combination of both factors is accounted for in the Regional Parks Bonding formula.

Finance – Action 2: Improve equitable use of the Regional Parks and Trails System

Equitable usage is an important consideration in Regional Parks and Trails System funding and investment.

In *Thrive MSP 2040*, the Met Council committed to strengthening equitable usage of regional parks and trails by all our region's residents across age, race, ethnicity, income, national origin, and ability. To honor this commitment, the Met Council created and implemented the Regional Parks and Trails System Equity Grant Program in 2019 with a pilot program using Council bonds. Additional funding was dedicated for the 2021 and 2024 grant cycles using parks interest earnings and Met Council bonds to fund programming and noncapital projects.

Using regional bonds and other available funding, such as parks interest earnings, the Met Council will continue to fund and administer an equity grant program for projects explicitly aimed to strengthen equitable usage of the Regional Parks and Trails System. The Met Council will work in close collaboration with regional park implementing agencies, Metropolitan Parks and Open Space Commissioners, Community Development Committee members, and other partners to refine criteria and measures for each cycle of awarding grants to regional park implementing agencies for projects aimed to strengthen equitable use.

Finance – Action 3: Park Acquisition Opportunity Fund

The Met Council will use the Park Acquisition Opportunity Fund to help fund the acquisition of Regional Parks and Trails System land.

In 2001, the Met Council established the Park Acquisition Opportunity Fund program to assist regional park implementing agencies in acquiring land for the Regional Parks and Trails System.

The Park Acquisition Opportunity Fund consists of two accounts:

- The Environment and Natural Resources Trust Fund acquisition account, which is financed with 60% state appropriations from the Environment and Natural Resources Trust Fund as recommended by the Legislative-Citizen Commission on Minnesota Resources. The remaining 40% of the account is financed with Met Council funds.
- The Parks and Trails Legacy Fund acquisition account, which is financed with 60% Parks and Trails Fund appropriations from the Land and Legacy Amendment. The remaining 40% is financed with Met Council bonds.

The Park Acquisition Opportunity Fund grant may finance up to 75% of the costs to acquire land and related costs. Each implementing agency may receive up to \$2 million from the Parks and Trails Legacy and regional bonds account and up to \$3 million from the Environment and Natural Resources Trust Fund and regional bonds account per state fiscal year (July 1 to June 30). The implementing agency must finance at least 25% of the acquisition costs as a local match to the Park Acquisition Opportunity Fund grant.

Finance – Action 4: Regional funding commitment

The Met Council will actively analyze its regional funding budget strategy and pursue increasing its regional funding commitment for the Regional Parks and Trails System wherever possible.

The Met Council will continue to provide funding for the regional system through statutorily required match to state funds. The Met Council will also continue to allocate funds to the Equity Grant Program. In addition, the Met Council is committed to examining the current capital improvement program (CIP) strategy to explore opportunities and flexibility in providing additional funds to the regional system within the current \$40 million bonding cap, as outlined in Minnesota Statute 473.325. The Met Council will also continue to pursue legislative initiatives that would provide increased flexibility in raising funds for the regional system, in addition to the authorization to issue bonds.

Finance – Action 5: Other funding

The Met Council will actively seek funding opportunities from the state and other sources.

The Met Council will seek continued state funding for acquisition, development, rehabilitation, operations and maintenance, programming, and restoration and management of natural systems for all components in the Regional Parks and Trails System. In partnership with the 10 regional park implementing agencies and partners, the Met Council will pursue other sources of funding where appropriate for the benefit of the entire Regional Parks and Trails System. The system has been funded through a combination of state and local funding sources over the last 40 years.

The Met Council will work to assist agencies and provide information for funding opportunities through the Met Council's Regional Solicitation and any other potential future Met Council grant program funding opportunities and/or federal funding opportunities.

The Met Council will work with the park implementing agencies to ensure that all sources of funding are used appropriately and in accordance with all legal requirements.

Finance – Action 6: Transit corridors

Regional trail corridors that may be used for transit in the future are eligible for Regional Parks System funding only if it is clear the corridor will be used as a trail for at least 10 years.

Regional Parks and Trails System funds should only be used to acquire or develop a corridor identified for future transit use in a Met Council-approved transit implementation plan when there is a guarantee that the trail facility will be operational for its useful design life, as negotiated by the transit provider and the regional park implementing agency. As defined by the Federal Highway Administration, the useful design life of a trail is 10 years or more. In cases where trail recreation is to be a permanent partner with a transitway within the corridor, Regional Parks System funds will be used only for that part of acquisition and development attributable to trail use.

Section Nine: 2025 – 2028 Work Plan for the Regional Parks and Trails Policy Plan

The following work plan summarizes specific topic areas that the Met Council intends to cover over the next several years. These topics emerged from engagement with agency-Met Council workgroups and other community conversations. These items will evolve and change as the Met Council works with partners and stakeholders during implementation.

Table 9-1. 2025-2028 Work Plan for the 2050 Regional Parks and Trails Policy Plan

| Projects by Theme | Time Frame | Location in Policy Plan |
|---|------------|---|
| <i>Accountability and Research</i> | | |
| 1. Develop a process to create a small set of performance measures at the policy level to measure progress toward our key Regional Parks and Trails System priorities. | 2025-2026 | Section One |
| 2. Implement the 2025 Regional Parks and Trails System Visitor Study. | 2024-2026 | Not included |
| 3. Explore expanding cost-effective research approaches, including forecasting tools, that provide implementing agencies with the management information at the park and trail unit level. | 2025-2028 | Section Two, Action 2 |
| <i>Protection and Restoration</i> | | |
| 4. Explore establishment of a Special Feature – Historical Landscape subclassification. | 2026-2027 | Section Two, Action 1 |
| 5. Explore the establishment of a Special Features – Open Space/Natural Systems subclassification in consultation with the Met Council's Natural Systems workgroup. This effort includes renewal of the Regionally Significant Ecological Area dataset. | 2025-2026 | Section Two, Action 1 |
| 6. Reconvene Climate and Natural Systems Workgroup to discuss implementation steps for climate resilience policy and actions. | 2025-2028 | Section Four |
| <i>Culture</i> | | |
| 7. Develop a cultural resources inventory requirement for long-range planning in partnership with key stakeholders. | 2025-2026 | Section Five, Action 1; Planning Handbook |
| 8. Continue to develop and refine the Cultural Landscape subclassification, in coordination with American Indian Tribes, other cultural communities, and regional park implementing agencies. | 2025-2026 | Section Two, Action 1 |
| 9. Develop an inventory of and guidelines for harvestable fruits, mushrooms, and other plants in partnership with regional park implementing agencies, American Indian groups, and other partners and interested stakeholders. | 2026-2028 | Section Seven, Action 1 |

Section Nine: 2025-2028 Workplan for the Regional Parks and Trails Policy Plan

| Projects by Theme | Time Frame | Location in Policy Plan |
|--|------------|----------------------------|
| 10. As part of a broader Met Council effort, develop a training program and learning opportunities for Met Council and regional park implementing agency staff to explore indigenous land management practices and other related topics. | 2026-2028 | Section Seven, Action 1 |
| <i>Trails</i> | | |
| 11. Continue to convene a trail coordination workgroup, supporting the development of a more coordinated, integrated, and connected regional trails system and Regional Bicycle Transportation Network. | 2025-2028 | Section Seven, Action 5 |
| 12. Create regional guidelines for e-bike use on regional trails. | 2025-2028 | Section Seven, Action 5 |
| 13. Explore systemwide wayfinding and signage minimum requirements. | 2025-2028 | Section Seven, Action 5 |
| <i>Finance</i> | | |
| 14. Explore scoping and development of a systemwide Asset Preservation Plan, or similar. | 2025-2028 | Section Eight |
| 15. Continue to pursue Pay-Go for greater flexibility to fund a wider range of activities, facilities, and programs. Pay-Go would provide an additional tool for funding the regional system. | 2025-2028 | Section Eight |
| 16. Explore changing/reducing the local match requirement for the Park Acquisition Opportunity Fund Program, as state rules allow. | 2025-2028 | Section Eight |
| 17. Continue discussion of strategic funding for the Regional Parks and Trails System, with a goal to better meet the needs of this growing system. | 2025-2028 | Section Eight, Actions 5-6 |

Appendix 1: Key Minnesota legislation for the Regional Parks and Trails System

Statutory Direction

Regional Recreation Open Space System (Minnesota Statutes, section 473.302)

“The legislature finds that the pressure of urbanization and development threatens valuable recreational open space areas in the metropolitan area at the same time as the need for such areas is increased. Immediate action is therefore necessary to provide funds to acquire, preserve, protect and develop regional recreational open space for public use.”

Regional Recreation Open Space (Minnesota Statutes, section 473.121, subd. 14)

“‘Regional recreation open space’ means land and water areas, or interests therein, and facilities determined by the Met Council to be of regional importance in providing for a balanced system of public outdoor recreation for the metropolitan area, including but not limited to park reserves, major linear parks and trails, large recreation parks, and conservatories, zoos, and other special use facilities.”

Regional Recreation Open Space System Policy Plan (Minnesota Statutes, section 473.147, subd. 1)

“The policy plan 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.”

“The policy plan shall include a five-year capital improvement program, which shall be revised periodically, and shall establish criteria and priorities for the allocation of funds for such acquisition and development.”

Grants for Recreation Open Space (Minnesota Statutes, section 473.315, subd. 1)

“The Met Council with the advice of the commission may make grants, from any funds available to it for recreation open space purposes, to any implementing agency, as defined in section 473.351, to cover the cost, or any portion of the cost, of acquiring or developing regional recreation open space in accordance with the policy plan; and all such agencies may enter into contracts for this purpose or rights or interests therein.”

Metropolitan Area Regional Parks Funding (Minnesota Statutes, section 473.351, subd. 1a)

“‘Implementing agency’ means the counties of Anoka, Washington, Ramsey, Scott, Carver, Dakota, the city of Saint Paul, the city of Bloomington, the Minneapolis Park and Recreation Board, and the Three Rivers Park District.”

Park and Trails Fund (Minnesota Statutes, section 85.53)

“Grants funded by the parks and trails fund must be implemented according to section 16B.98.”

Grant Management Process (Minnesota Statutes, section 16B.98, subd. 6)

“A granting agency shall diligently administer and monitor any grant it has entered into.”

Metropolitan Parks Interest Earnings (Laws of Minnesota 2015, First Special Session, Chapter 4, Article 4, Section 138)

“...the Metropolitan Council shall use the interest earnings in Laws 1985, First Special Session chapter 15, section 5, subdivision 2, for the use and betterment of all regional recreational open space lands under the jurisdiction of the Metropolitan Council.”

Session law also provides important directives. For instance, the Omnibus Legacy Bill, updated biennially, provides additional guidance and requirements related to Parks and Trails Legacy Fund spending.

Applicable funding formulas

Parks and Trails Fund (Minnesota Statutes, section 85.53, subd. 3)

“(1) 45% of the money must be disbursed according to the allocation formula in section 473.351, subdivision 3, to each implementing agency; (2) 31.5% of the money must be distributed based on each implementing agency’s relative share of the most recent estimate of the population of the metropolitan area; (3) 13.5% of the money must be distributed based on each implementing agency’s relative share of nonlocal visits based on the most recent user visitation survey conducted by the Met Council; and (4) 10% of the money must be distributed as grants to implementing agencies for land acquisition within Met Council-approved regional parks and trails master plan boundaries under the Met Council’s park acquisition opportunity grant program.”

Operation and Maintenance Funds (Minnesota Statutes, section 473.351, subd. 3)

“The Met Council shall distribute the operation and maintenance money as follows: (1) 40% based on the use that each implementing agency’s regional recreation open space system has in proportion to the total use of the metropolitan regional recreation open space system; (2) 40% based on the operation and maintenance expenditures made in the previous year by each implementing agency in proportion to the total operation and maintenance expenditures of all the implementing agencies; and (3) 20% based on the acreage that each implementing agency’s regional recreation open space system has in proportion to the total acreage of the metropolitan regional recreation open space system.”

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