

Wilderness in the City



Preserving urban natural spaces

Statement for the Senate Committee on Environment and Natural Resources Policy and Legacy Funding Senate File 708, Article 2 Section 4 Parks and Trails, Metropolitan Council

March 24, 2017

Chair Ruud and Committee Members:

Wilderness in the City, a 501c3 organization based in Eagan, Minnesota, is dedicated to preserving and enhancing urban natural areas for people and wildlife, now and in the future.

We urge you to oppose Senate File 708 unless changes are made to Article 2 Sec. 4 to better reflect funding priorities and the original intent of the Legacy Amendment:

- Re-balance spending of the Metropolitan Council's portion of Parks and Trails Legacy Funds with less funding for New Development and more funding for Natural Resources. This change would be consistent with guidelines and the desired outcomes defined by the *25-year Parks and Trails Legacy Plan*.
- Amend language in lines 21.14-21.18 to read "Any funds remaining after completion of the listed projects may be spent by the implementing agencies on natural resource restoration to support parks and trails."

For your consideration, the Metropolitan Regional Parks System was established by the Legislature 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)

Since 1974, parklands have been acquired, protected and developed; however, we are witnessing a lack of accountability to the "preserve" component, which threatens the future of our unique and valuable nature-based regional parks system.

Regional Parks contain significant natural resources such as lakeshore, wetlands, hardwood forests, native prairies and groundwater recharging areas. In many of our Parks, these natural resources are compromised, resulting in diminished ecosystems for wildlife, and poor quality experiences for nature-based recreation and education.

S.F. 708, Article 2 Sec. 4(b) lines 21.11 thru 21.14 state: "Projects funded by the money appropriated under this section must be substantially consistent with the project descriptions and dollar amounts in the report [*FY2018-19 Legacy Project Priority List*]."

Review of the FY2018-19 project list shows a significant number of development projects, but lacks projects specifically aimed at stewardship, despite the fact that natural resources in many of our regional parks and trail corridors are degraded. We request funding be rebalanced to 50% for natural resource stewardship to help reset unbalanced spending since 2010.

Project Tails -- As infrastructure increases, so do annual expenses for ongoing maintenance and upkeep. In 2015, operations and maintenance costs for the regional parks system exceeded \$100 million. There are currently funding shortfalls for upkeep of DNR state parks and trails, as well as metro city park systems. Approval of this bill without changes would result in a Legacy of more stuff to take care of.

Unbalanced spending favoring New Development is inconsistent with guidelines of the 25-Year Parks and Trails Legacy Plan, increases unfunded but ongoing maintenance expenses, and is inconsistent with the intent many Minnesotans had when they voted to support the Legacy Amendment.

S.F. 708, Article 2 Sec. 4(b) lines 21.14 thru 21.18 states: "Any funds remaining after completion of the listed projects may be spent by the implementing agencies on projects to support parks and trails."

To assure that natural resources are not further diminished, we request this be amended to "Any funds remaining after completion of the listed projects may be spent by the implementing agencies on natural resource restoration to support parks and trails."

In conclusion, most people who supported the Legacy Amendment cited reasons such as clean water and preserving nature as their reason for voting "yes". Yet contrary to this, the majority of Parks and Trails Legacy spending for our metropolitan regional parks system has been used for projects that increase built amenities and asphalt throughout our natural resource based parks system — fragmenting our forests and prairies, compromising water quality and degrading wildlife habitats.

We urge you to oppose Senate File 708, Article 2 Sec. 4 unless changes are made to bring funding and priorities more in line with the original intent of the law.

Respectfully,

Holly Jenkins
Wilderness in the City, President