



Regional Parks Policy Plan Update

Additional Information and Supporting Facts

Metropolitan Regional Parks: Gateways to Nature -- or A Missed Opportunity

What We Have

Regional parks contain significant regional natural resources such as lakeshore, wetlands, hardwood forests, native prairies and groundwater recharging areas. It is considered a Nature-based Parks System providing a variety of low-impact opportunities. Regional parks complement amenities and services found in city parks and has the potential to provide every resident and visitor access to nature, close to home.

These parks offer the potential to serve as Gateways to Nature, where we can:

- increase healthy ecosystems for pollinators and other wildlife,
- improve health and wellness with low-impact recreation opportunities,
- introduce our kids to nature and inspire the next generation of environmental stewards,
- exemplify and promote sustainable practices.

The proposed draft update puts what we have at risk.

As built infrastructure increases within these parks, nature-based opportunities are diminished and ongoing (yet unfunded) costs for maintenance and operations increase. Currently, a skate park is being proposed in a regional park setting. Water parks and splash pads, built playgrounds instead of nature playgrounds, open ball fields, more buildings, expanded asphalt parking lots and more.

Concerning Changes Being Proposed

The Regional Parks Policy Plan is the document which establishes criteria and guides development and management of Regional Parks. Metropolitan council staff and park implementing agencies have updated this plan, and their proposed changes:

- trend towards more built infrastructure and undefined recreation amenities --
 - skate park, splash pads, buildings and additional built amenities are currently being proposed
 - undefined amenities leaves the door open to developing based on availability of funds, rather than managing parks with a minimal footprint to avoid adverse impacts to natural resources
 - additional built amenities will increase ongoing, but unfunded, operations and maintenance expenses resulting either in unmaintained amenities or additional costs for visitors and taxpayers
- encourage integration of Met Council's transportation planning with regional parks planning --
 - this concept will result in excessive construction through the parks to meet criteria for commuting standards; conflict with park visitors who are there for recreation;
 - concern for safety as speeds of bikes increase (especially with the growth in electric bikes) on the same trails as elderly or disabled, young children, and others enjoying serenity of the parks;
 - irreversible changes to high quality natural resources, exemplified by the irreversible damage to ecologically sensitive bluffs at Spring Lake Park Reserve

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- lack accountability for natural resource restoration and ongoing management:
 - although master plans are required to include a natural resource component describing restoration and management, there is no criteria for implementation, and as such, these conservation initiatives often fall through the cracks
 - There is no criteria for ecology consultants in the planning or approval process, although the draft update does encourage transportation consultants in the process
- erodes the stronger conservation language from previous plan:
 - the redlined version of the draft plan is not readily available, so difficult for the public to see specific language changes, which also raises the question of transparency of this process
- filled with contradictory language subject to interpretation:
 - the policy plan reflects on the importance of conservation, yet also opens the door for development of undefined amenities and overlaps with transportation planning, at the discretion of park planners

Supporting Facts

The Regional Parks System was established by the Minnesota Legislature in 1974:

"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." (MN Statute, sect. 473.302)

NOTE: These valuable open spaces were not set aside to serve as future extensions of the metropolitan areas transportation network.

The Regional Parks System "cannot and was never intended to provide all the metropolitan area's recreational opportunities. [It] is one component of the greater recreation and open space system for the metropolitan area that includes local, state and federal parks and open space areas, and private facilities. All these other facilities and services complement those of the Regional Parks System."

"Preserving natural areas with an eye toward the future is critical to our region's livability, sustainability, stewardship, and prosperity. The Regional Parks System represents a major, well-established conservation effort for land and water resources." (*RPPP draft update, p. 25*)

\$2.6 billion: Estimated to complete the system based on current plans

\$110.6 million: 2017 operations and maintenance expense for the Regional Parks System. As built infrastructure increases, this figure will increase with no dedicated source of funding.