
My name is Holly Jenkins, founder and director of Wilderness in the City. Our mission is dedicated to preserving and enhancing urban natural areas, and our main focus is the Metropolitan Regional Parks System.

I am here today to provide comments regarding the Met Council portion of the Parks and Trails bill, HF653, Sec. 4. I've had the opportunity to meet with several committee members and Chair Lillie, so I won't repeat what we've already discussed, but rather will put it in context with the bill.

I also would like to mention that when we've discussed this issue with Met Council staff, we've been told repeatedly that their hands are tied and it's a statutory issue -- which is why we are here.

Sec. 4 (b) states: money must be used only to fund the list of projects approved by the elected representatives of each of the metro parks implementing agencies."

The project list before you includes an appropriation request from Dakota County for projects that are based on a yet to be created master plan update. That update has not yet even started so those projects have not been approved by the elected representatives, nor has there been any public engagement to date. Approval of this bill without changes means that funding comes before any public input, and based on past experiences when funding is approved ahead of public engagement, it makes a mockery of a meaningful public process.

In addition, while this language undoubtedly is well intended, it has essentially taken away the opportunity for comprehensive review and recommendation of projects. As a result, the people requesting the funds are the same people approving the projects, and that in itself is an inherent conflict. This process is different than the DNR and Greater MN, both with processes in place that allows projects to be submitted for review and recommendation. It also is different than the other legacy funds, which have processes in place for review and recommendation by groups other than those requesting the funds. We believe it would benefit citizens if the regional parks project approval process was revised to eliminate this conflict.

At this point, the committee chair told Ms. Jenkins her two-minutes were up, and she was not allowed to finish her brief testimony. There were no other testifiers.

Sec. 4 (b) states: any money remaining after completing the listed projects may be spent by the implementing agencies on projects to support parks and trails.

This incorporates a concerning lack of transparency and would create an undue burden on the public in how Legacy funding is being spent. We would request the language be deleted or revised to state that any money remaining be returned to the parks and trails fund for future appropriation.

Sec. 4 (a) states: funds should be distributed according to MN Statute, section 85.53.

85.53 defines that money appropriated to the Met Council shall be distributed to implementing agencies according to a formula. Distribution by formula conflicts with the guidelines of the 25-year P&T Legacy Plan which state "don't establish a set distribution formula for parks and trails Legacy Funds." Therefore, the statute language should be amended to reflect the 2011 Legacy Plan guidelines, which will better meet the public expectations to recommend projects based on merit versus a funding formula.

Although we have several additional concerns regarding the specific project list, as well as the project approval process, I will limit my comments for the sake of time.

We believe that by managing these parks with an eye to the future, we will both preserve these valuable areas for future generations, which provide critical habitat for pollinators, birds and other wildlife, help to mitigate the impacts of climate change, and also provide high-quality nature based opportunities for recreation and education.

To achieve that, we have to be very thoughtful as there will always be demand for more "stuff", but as we expand built infrastructure, we will and already are diminishing these critical natural resources, and increasing unfunded but ongoing maintenance expenses.

Most people who supported Legacy cited clean water and preserving nature as their reasons for voting YES. The DNR's 10-year Legacy report (2019) shows that taking care of natural resources is the public's top priority for the parks and trails fund. Yet since inception the vast majority of P&T Legacy investments for the regional park system have been in the form of built infrastructure -- and this project list is no different, including maintenance sheds, administrative buildings and even a wave pool reconstruction, which really isn't nature-based so curious how that got in there.

As a grassroots nonprofit organization, we don't have the luxury of high paid lobbyists to help with our ask, but on behalf of citizens from around the metro region we respectfully ask that committee members review the merits of the 53 proposed projects comprehensively for compliance with the 25-year Legacy plan and the overall intent of the Legacy Amendment before approving the requested \$40 million.

At the very least, we request you pull those projects which are not part of approved master plans, and also those that will diminish, rather than improve, the natural-resource base of this park system.

Thank you.