

## A Legacy of Nature

The campaign to ensure ecosystems are restored and preserved throughout the metropolitan regional parks system, providing high quality habitat for wildlife, and year-around Nature-based opportunities to inspire the next generation of environmental stewards.



### Regional parks background

In the early 1970s, the Minnesota state legislature, in recognition of the rapid development in the Twin Cities metro area, voted for setting aside of some of the last remaining tracts of open space for preservation and protection to provide for the public's outdoor recreation. Thus began the regional park system.

### A Nature-based parks system

The regional park system is a Nature-based system consisting of more than 55,000 acres within 64 parks. The parks include scarce natural resources such as habitats for endangered species, fens, forests, prairies, savanna, wetlands and water resources. Over half of the regional park acreage, 30,700 acres, have been designated as "regionally significant ecological areas." The regional parks are the metro area's "state parks".

The benefits of the Twin Cities' metro regional park system are many including "Nature Rx" which provides stress reduction, attention restoration and improved cognitive functioning.

The regional parks system also provides habitat for Wildlife, biodiversity enhancement, urban heat island mitigation, climate resilience, stormwater management and improvements to air and water quality.

### The concern

Preserving Nature includes ongoing management, and the natural resources throughout the regional parks system are stressed and declining. Planning and spending by park agencies is heavily focused on additional built amenities for recreation, rather than conserving and restoring the natural resource base of the parks.

The regional parks are one component of a greater recreation and open space system that includes city, county, state, and federal parks and, open space areas, as well as private facilities. All these other facilities and services complement the regional parks system. The metro regional parks cannot, and were never intended to provide all the metropolitan area's recreational opportunities.

If the trend of more built infrastructure continues, the potential for a high-quality, Nature-based system is diminished.

### Legacy Parks & Trails fund background

In 2008 Minnesota's voters supported the Legacy amendment to the state constitution; 3/8 of 1% of sales taxes provides monies for natural resource conservation, water protection and clean up and, arts and cultural heritage. According to the state constitution, Legacy monies are split into four funds: Arts and Culture (20%), Clean Water (33%), Outdoor Heritage (33%) and Parks and Trails (14%).

The metro regional parks system via the Metropolitan Council receives 40 percent of the Parks and Trails fund, which equates to \$40 million for the current 2020-2021 biennium and over \$204 million since inception. The remainder is appropriated to the Minnesota Department of Natural Resources (MN

DNR) and the Greater Minnesota Parks and Trails Commission.

In 2011, the *25-year Parks and Trails Legacy* plan was created to guide the spending of Legacy Parks and Trails monies. Citizens from around the state were involved in the creation of the plan; their overarching vision for Legacy Parks and Trails funds was “protecting Nature and creating the next generation of stewards.”

That vision is still relevant today. In 2018, the MN DNR conducted surveys throughout Minnesota asking citizens their priorities for spending Legacy Parks and Trails funds. Citizens reiterated their desire to protect Nature; the highest priority for is protecting natural resources; the lowest priority is building new infrastructure.

### **Ongoing spending conflicts**

Local non-profits Wilderness in the City and Women Observing Wildlife-MN have reviewed the past eight years’ spending of the metro portion of the Legacy Parks and Trails fund. They found that since 2008, regional park agencies have viewed Legacy dollars as additional funding for capital improvements, conflicting with the spending guidelines prescribed by the *25-year Parks and Trails Legacy* plan and prioritized by citizens.

Since inception, over 80% of metro area parks and trails monies have been spent on new infrastructure including asphalt trails and parking lots, diesel generators, lighted signs, maintenance sheds, office buildings, pole barns and water parks (rather than restoring lakes, rivers and streams). Seventeen percent has been spent on programming and partners and less than **three percent** of the metro parks and trails fund have been dedicated specifically to natural resources.

All indications show that this will continue until there is a process in place to provide a comprehensive review of projects proposed for Legacy funding to assure compliance with the *25-year Parks and Trails*

*Legacy* plan. Additionally, a requirement for future spending to include a 50% minimum to be spent on natural resource conservation, protection and restoration will help make up for unbalanced spending during the previous decade.

### **The remedy**

Legislative action to require a 50% minimum spend of metro Legacy Parks and Trails funds on natural resource conservation, protection and restoration and, establish an oversight commission to conduct a comprehensive review of all proposals for compliance with the *25-year Parks and Trails Legacy* plan.

### **Nature needs your help!**



We will be lobbying at the Legislature for statutory changes to remedy the unbalanced spending of Legacy Parks and Trails funds and redirect them to Nature. We will provide you with timely information when decisions are pending, and ask you to help by calling, emailing and attending hearings to support the *Legacy of Nature* campaign.

Please sign up now.

For additional information and to sign up contact Catherine Zimmer, [wow-mn@usfamily.net](mailto:wow-mn@usfamily.net) or Holly Jenkins, [hollyj@wildernessinthecity.org](mailto:hollyj@wildernessinthecity.org)

“Man’s heart away from Nature becomes hard.”  
Standing Bear