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March 29, 2023

Dear Senator Hawj and members of the Senate Natural Resources and Environment Committee:

On behalf of the more than 135 cities, counties, businesses, non-profits, and individuals that comprise the Greater Minnesota Parks and Trails organization, we are writing to provide our feedback on the Senate Natural Resources and Environment Committee Omnibus bill.

We must express our profound thanks to all of you for stepping forward to recognize and support the regional parks and trails of Greater Minnesota. Regional parks and trails play an essential role in our recreation systems throughout Minnesota. They serve as a bridge between the local park around the corner and Minnesota's outstanding state parks, offering a close-to-home option for both the community and visitors.

Regional parks and trails have existed outside the metro area for decades, but they were not truly recognized until after the passage of the Legacy amendment in 2008 and subsequent discussions shed light on the fact that the regional parks and trails of Greater Minnesota were being ignored. In 2013, the Legislature created the Greater Minnesota Regional Parks and Trails Commission, which has been tasked with developing a system of regionally designated facilities in the 80 counties not served by the Metropolitan Council. Since then, more than 74 facilities across the state have been designated through a rigorous evaluation process. These parks, trails, and special features that serve Greater Minnesota are as deserving of funding as the parks and trails that serve the metropolitan area.

That is why we are so appreciative you have proposed amending the Lottery-in-Lieu formula to include 2 % for the regional parks and trails of Greater Minnesota. Although it is a modest amount, it is an important step forward to achieving more parity with the Metropolitan Regional Parks and Trails.

We must also, however, express our extreme disappointment that the committee did not include the funding for the Greater Minnesota Regional Parks and Trails Commission as requested in Senator Hauschild's bill, S.F. 527. This simple bill requested \$500,000 per year to fund the Commission. As explained during the hearing, Greater Minnesota receives only half of the Legacy Share (20%) that the Metropolitan Parks and Trails and the DNR state parks receive (40%) each. Despite that lower amount, only Greater Minnesota must fund the operations of its governing commission out of its share. Funding the Commission with general fund money would provide additional funds that could be spent on parks and trails projects while allowing the Commission to complete its important work.

The regional parks and trails of the Metropolitan area will receive nearly \$40 million in this omnibus bill. It is only fair that Greater Minnesota receive \$1 million to help fund the Commission, freeing up additional funding for projects.

We respectfully ask that you amend this bill to include at minimum \$1 million directed to the Greater Minnesota Regional Parks and Trails Commission to make one more small step towards parity between the regional parks of Greater Minnesota and the metropolitan area. Thank you for your time and consideration.

Sincerely,

A handwritten signature in blue ink, appearing to read "Ben Anderson".

Ben Anderson
Chair, Greater Minnesota Parks & Trails
Stearns County, Parks Director

A handwritten signature in blue ink, appearing to read "Gina Hugo".

Gina Hugo
Vice Chair, Greater Minnesota Parks & Trails
Sherburne County, Parks Coordinator