

GREATER MINNESOTA REGIONAL PARKS AND TRAILS STRATEGIC PLAN

GREATER MINNESOTA REGIONAL PARKS AND TRAILS COMMISSION



DISTRICT 1 – NORTHEAST



DISTRICT 2 – NORTHWEST



DISTRICT 3 – WEST CENTRAL



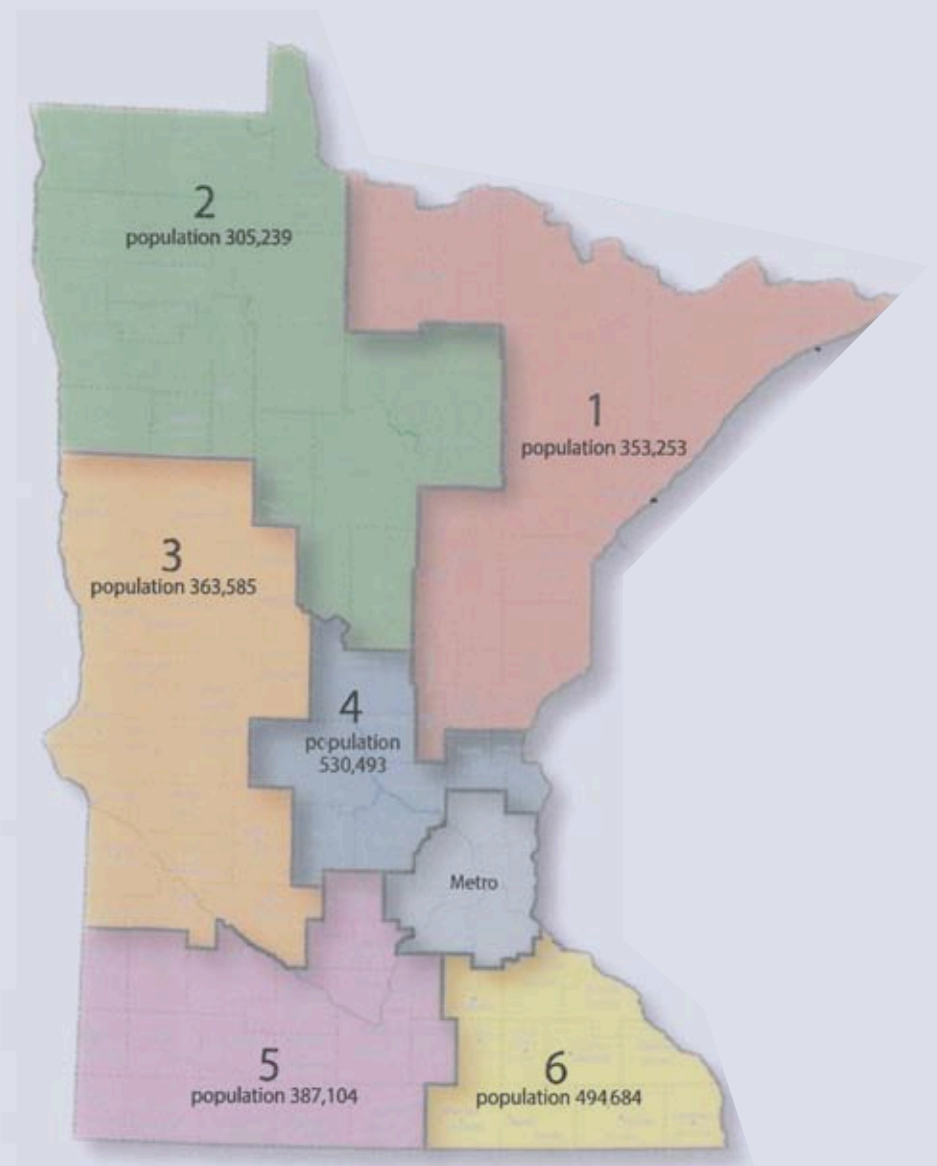
DISTRICT 4 – EAST CENTRAL



DISTRICT 5 – SOUTHWEST



DISTRICT 6 – SOUTHEAST



Adoption Date: June 25, 2014

IT IS THE INTENT OF THE COMMISSION THAT THIS
STRATEGIC PLAN BE A DYNAMIC WORKING DOCUMENT
THAT WILL EVOLVE OVER TIME.

THIS ADOPTED PLAN SHALL BE USED FOR FISCAL YEAR
2016 PLANNING PURPOSES.

Adoption Date: June 25, 2014

Introduction and Enabling Legislation

Under 2013 Minnesota Statutes 85.536, the Minnesota State Legislature created the Greater Minnesota Regional Parks and Trails Commission (Commission). Under the statute, the Commission “is created to undertake system planning and provide recommendations to the legislature for grants funded by the parks and trails fund to counties and cities outside of the seven-county metropolitan area for parks and trails of regional significance.” The commission includes 13 members appointed by the governor, with two members from each of the six regional parks and trails districts.

Through the adoption of this plan, the Commission fulfills its obligation to “develop a strategic plan and criteria for determining parks and trails of regional significance that are eligible for funding from the parks and trails fund and meet the criteria under subdivision 6.”

Subdivision 6 states that “the commission must determine whether a park or trail is regionally significant based on the definitions and criteria determined in the *Greater Minnesota Parks and Trails Strategic Plan*, along with the following criteria:

- 1) Park must provide a natural resource-based setting and should provide outdoor recreation facilities and multiple activities that are primarily natural resource-based;
- 2) Trail must serve more than a local population and where feasible connect to existing or planned state or regional parks or trails;
- 3) Park or trail must be utilized by a regional population that may encompass multiple jurisdictions; and
- 4) Park may include or a trail may pass unique natural, historic, or cultural features or characteristics.

This strategic plan addresses and incorporates these requirements of the enabling legislation as defined by the statute.



Greater Minnesota is graced to have many natural resource-based parks offering a wide variety of outdoor recreational opportunities.

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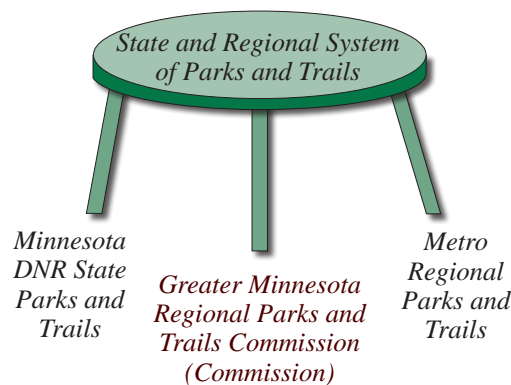


Section 1 Strategic Framework and Organizational Plan

Planning Context: Greater Minnesota as a New Planning Entity

Prior to the establishment of Greater Minnesota Regional Parks and Trails Commission (Commission) in 2013, Greater Minnesota did not have an established history of comprehensive planning for regional parks and trails. This strategic plan is the starting point for that process.

Under this plan, the Commission formally takes on this responsibility by becoming what is essentially the third leg of a three-legged stool in meeting regional and state-level park and trail needs across Minnesota.



Organizational Plan

The organizational plan establishes the operational structure for the Commission. The plan also addresses related organizational development issues to support its activities.

Key strategies guiding the Commission include:

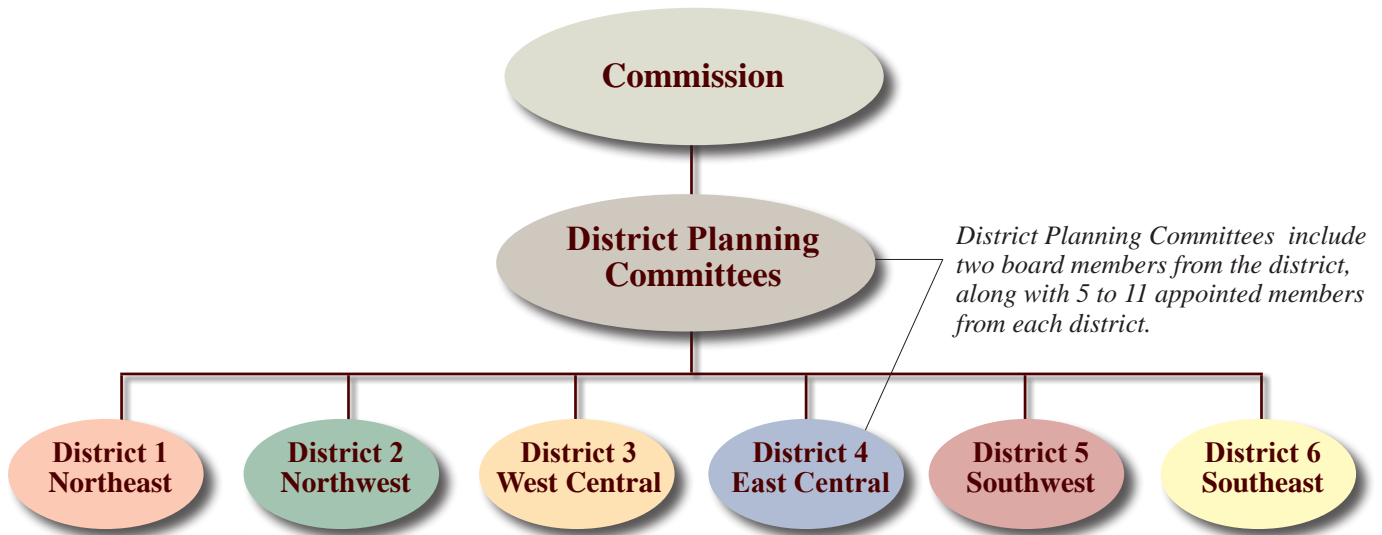
- **Being a proactive organization** – that is responsive to the needs of a diverse population within different geographic areas of Minnesota
- **Functioning as a highly motivated and well-managed organization** – that emphasizes flexibility to respond to changing needs and productive working relationships with DNR and Metro Regional Parks to ensure that the regional and state-level park and trail needs of Minnesotans are seamlessly met
- **Providing for ongoing constituent/citizen involvement** – in the planning and decision-making process that allows for regional differences to be accommodated and acted upon
- **Emphasizing development of a regional system of parks and trails in Greater Minnesota based on the merit of projects** – to ensure that those that get funded are the ones that will be most valued
- **Being an accountable and responsible organization** – that is performance driven, transparent in its decisions, and can stand up to public scrutiny

- **Limiting the organizational size to only that which is needed** – to perform defined tasks, ensure consistency in practices across the state, and, most importantly, make wise choices for investments in parks and trails in Greater Minnesota

These baseline strategies provided the basis for the organizational plan, with the goal being to keep it simple, understandable, and directly accountable for decisions and outcomes.

Organizational Structure to Support Plan Development and Oversight of Funding Allocations

The following illustrates the organizational structure for the Commission.



As the organizational structure and accompanying map illustrate, the state is divided into six districts. Although these geographical boundaries are different than those used by DNR’s, strategic alignment between the Commission and the agency on planning issues and funding priorities remains important.

In addition to working closely with DNR, Districts 4, 5, and 6 will coordinate with Metro Regional Parks to ensure that all investments in regional parks and trails are complementary and well-considered.

Commission and Committee Makeup and Roles

The following defines the makeup, roles, and responsibilities of the Commission and District Planning Committees (DPCs).

Commission

Makeup: Appointed board by the Governor, the Commission has 13 members, with two from members for each of six districts and one at-large member.

General Role/Responsibilities:

- General power to manage and control the affairs of the organization
- Full power, by majority vote, to adopt rules and policies governing the actions of the organization

Key Points of Focus:

- Running the organization
- Ensuring that the interests of all regions within Greater Minnesota are well-represented on the commission and committees
- Ensuring that the public has adequate opportunity to participate in defining regional park and trail needs and the interests of residents within the 6 districts of the state

Planning-Related Role/Responsibilities:

- Understanding factors influencing planning decisions and outcomes, including trends on a statewide and regional basis
- Oversight of developing, applying, and refining the:
 - Classification system for Greater Minnesota regional parks and trails, including weighting of each criteria
 - Process for formally designating a park or trail as regionally-significant, including its merit ranking and level of priority against established criteria
 - Funding priority list, as defined under *Greater Minnesota Regional Parks and Trails Funding Program*
- Oversight of granting process, including final selection of projects each year

Relationship with DNR/Metro Regional Parks: The Commission will actively coordinate planning and development efforts at a statewide and regional level. Particular emphasis will be on ensuring overall system plans and funding strategies are complementary and focus on meeting key park and trail demands across Greater Minnesota.

District Planning Committees (DPCs)

Makeup: Each of the six DPCs will have a minimum of seven and a maximum of 13 members, including the two Commissioners from that district. All other members are appointed by the Commission.

Role/Responsibilities:

- Understanding factors influencing planning decisions and outcomes, especially district-level trends
- Participating in developing, applying, and refining the:
 - Classification system at the district level, including advisory role in weighting of each criteria in response to regional needs
 - Process for formally designating a park or trail as regionally significant at the district level, including its merit ranking and level of priority against established criteria
 - Making recommendations on regional funding priorities, as defined under Greater Minnesota Regional Parks and Trails Funding Program in the Strategic Plan
- Making recommendations on selection of projects each year for funding

Relationship with DNR/Metro Regional Parks: Each DPC will coordinate regional planning and development efforts with DNR and Metro Regional Parks to ensure that district system plans are complementary to state and metro-regional parks and trails within a given region of the state. In all districts, correspondence between DPCs and DNR will be through a district liaison appointed by DNR to coordinate the agency’s planning efforts with each of the DPCs. With districts abutting the metro area, correspondence between DPCs and Metro Regional Parks will be through a district liaison appointed by Metro Regional Parks to coordinate planning with abutting DPCs. Where Greater Minnesota districts abut more than one Metro Regional Park implementing agency, additional liaisons may be appointed by Metro Regional Parks to avoid gaps in planning coordination.

Protocol for Selecting DPC Members: A *District Planning Committee Application Form* is available from the Commission. All prospective members must go through the application process to ensure a cross-section of interests/geographic representations are accommodated on the DPCs.

Project Proposal Evaluation Team (ETeam)

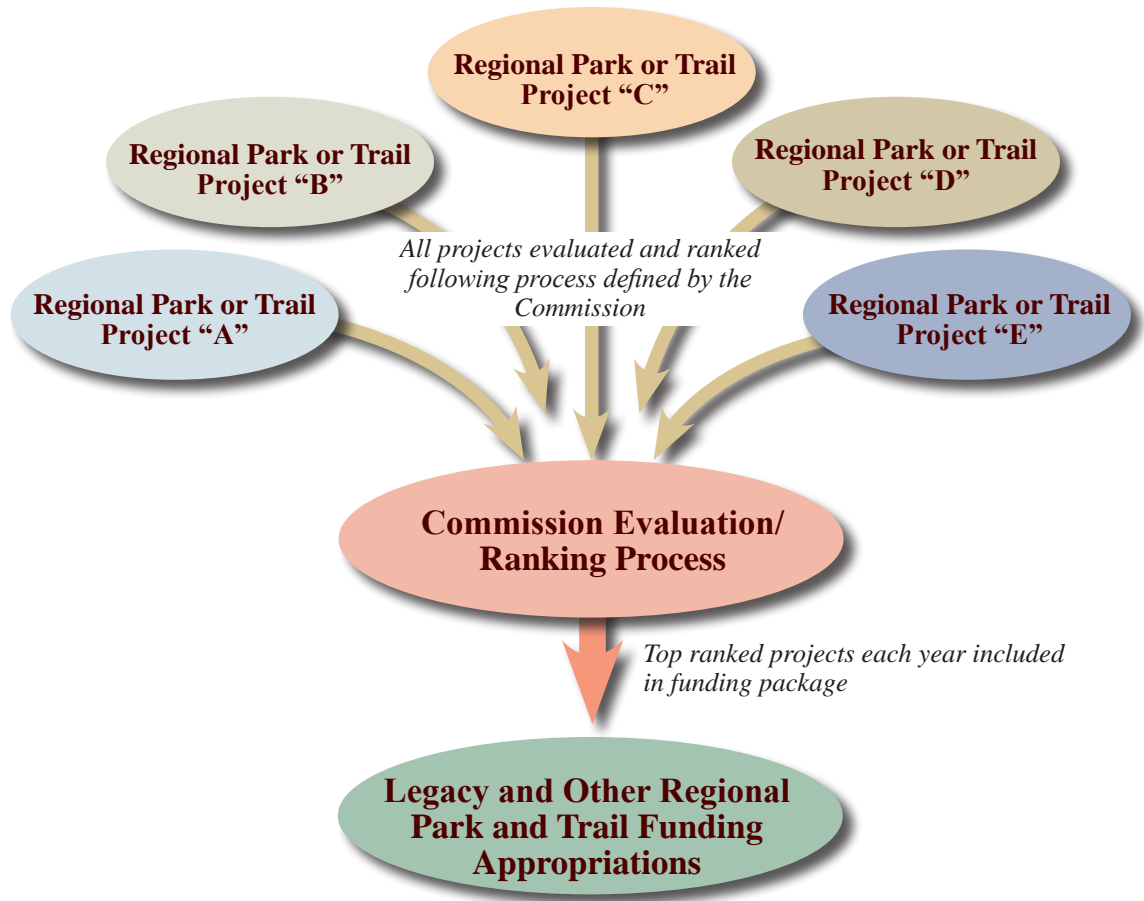
To maintain the credibility of the vetting process, individual park and trail proposals submitted for regional consideration will be evaluated by the ETeam made up of select professionals without any connection to, or a vested interest in, outcomes. The protocol for selecting ETeam members is included in the *Regional Park and Trails Project Proposal Evaluation Team Application Form* that is available from the Commission.

The core focus of the ETeam is evaluating park and trail proposals against established criteria, along with recommending any modifications/updates of protocols and criteria based on changing circumstances. The team will also assist in preparing the *Greater Minnesota Regional Parks and Trails Funding Program*, including evaluating grant applications and advising on overall funding allocations for consideration by planning committees.

Commission Determines Funding Recommendations for Regional Parks and Trails in Greater Minnesota

As defined under this plan, the Commission will evaluate, rank, and determine funding recommendations for *regionally-significant projects of highest merit*. As the following graphic illustrates, all regional park and trail projects will flow through the Commission’s evaluation process to ensure consistency with the protocol and criteria defined under this plan.

As the following illustration highlights, **the vetting process defined and implemented by the Commission is the only route to Legacy or other funding sources as related to regional parks and trails in Greater Minnesota**. This authority is critical to the Commission being successful in carrying out its responsibilities – the most important of which is ensuring that the physical system plan that emerges over time only reflects parks and trails that are well-vetted and formally recognized as being regionally-significant and essential to meeting regional needs.



Dovetailing Existing Funding Priorities into the Commission Process

In some areas of the state, varying types of regional partnerships have been established to address local and regional planning issues. In some cases, this has included establishing funding priorities associated with what are thought to be regional-level parks and trails within a given district. Where advantageous, the Commission will dovetail these planning efforts with its own evaluation process, most namely using the findings to help pre-screen projects to determine which merit further vetting. Importantly, *all projects will have to be vetted against the Commission’s criteria to ensure consistency in evaluating the merit of regional parks and trails within regions and across Greater Minnesota.* Nonetheless, these existing planning efforts are expected to be of value, especially in helping to ensure that high quality projects are identified and duly evaluated.

Interrelationship with Minnesota DNR (DNR) and Metro Regional Parks

As defined in the Legacy Plan, **a seamless working relationship between the Commission, DNR, and Metro Regional Parks is both a clear expectation of Minnesotans and essential to the efficient and effective use of Legacy and other public funding sources.** As defined under this plan, the Commission is committed to working with these partners to ensure overall system plans and planning efforts are complementary and focus on meeting priority park and trail needs across Greater Minnesota.

Commission Will Act to Support *Local* Park and Trail Systems in Greater Minnesota

The Commission recognizes that across Greater Minnesota the need for funding for regional and local-level parks and trails remains profound. Although this plan focuses on regional parks and trails, **the Commission fully appreciates that regional and local-level system planning are intrinsically linked and require close coordination between planning entities.** To that end, the Commission will support and actively foster local planning and funding efforts that are consistent with its regional planning activities. More specifically, this includes:

- Taking a leadership role – in establishing a working collaboration with local and regional partners in order to more fully define park and trail needs across Greater Minnesota, and then develop complementary plans to address those needs
- Supporting legislative activities – that focus on establishing more robust and stable regional and local-level funding programs in Greater Minnesota
- Advocating for a structured and complementary approach to evaluating and ranking locally-significant parks and trails across Greater Minnesota – to ensure that local projects of highest merit and greatest public value are ultimately funded and complementary to investments made at the regional level

Fostering Greater Minnesota Partnerships

Where advantageous, **the Commission will actively foster and support public partnerships formed to address regional park and trail needs.** This includes, for example, partnerships between cities, townships, and counties to plan, develop, operate, manage, maintain, and program individual or a grouping of parks and trails associated with a district or regional center. The goal is to use these types of regional partnerships to help define regional opportunities and priorities consistent with the principles and criteria set forth in this plan. Note that the Commission will require partnerships between public entities to be formally defined through joint powers or other forms of agreements before any projects will be eligible for funding.

The Commission, will also, at its discretion, foster partnerships with established regional advocacy, planning, and/or development entities when it serves a defined purpose and is in the best interest of achieving organizational goals. This may include, but is not limited to, the Association of Minnesota Counties, *League of Minnesota Cities*, and various regional development commissions. These organizations may also be able to provide varying types of technical assistance to the Commission within each of the districts.

Limited Organizational Support

Initially, the Commission will rely upon contracted services to undertake the forthcoming responsibilities and functions. This approach will allow it to get the needed support while limiting financial obligations. Over time, the Commission will yearly assess the most efficient means to secure support services, which may include continuing with contracted services, getting assistance from established public agencies, hiring limited staff, or some combination thereof.

Key Support Functions

The following provides a baseline list of key responsibilities/functions that will be undertaken by some combination of Commission members and support services to ensure that this plan is responsibly and successfully implemented.

Management-Related Functions

Role supports the organization’s business functions and legal responsibilities, with key functions including:

- Financial management and overall budget process oversight
- Organizational leadership/management of board and committees
- Organizational development, training, professional development, and planning
- Secretary to the Commission
- Risk management
- Vendor contract policy, procedure, and oversight
- Organizational liaison to outside partners
- Outreach

Planning and Funding Oversight Functions

Directly supports the Commission’s planning efforts and is involved in regional parks and trails planning activities. Extensive involvement with outside partners to coordinate planning efforts. Key functions include:

- Coordinate regional system planning efforts undertaken by the Commission and DPCs
- Manage public outreach program to allow for robust public input
- Manage research/measurement program, to ensure that priorities are in alignment with public needs
- Manage ongoing development, application, and refinement of state-wide information management system, with an initial focus on gathering inventory information about regionally-significant parks and trails
- Manage distribution of information throughout the state
- Administer granting process consistent with the criteria and ranking protocol defined under this plan (general grant applications, procedures, conformance, etc.)
- Liaison with other planning agencies, including, but not limited to, DNR and Metro Regional Parks
- General lead on grant applications, procedures, and conformance
- Development of physical system plan as plan is implemented and regionally-significant parks and trails are formally vetted and defined
- Management and record keeping of all grant allocations to ensure conformance with requirements

Note: Listing of key responsibilities and functions does not necessarily relate to an individual staff person or persons. Some roles will likely be filled with by the same staff, consultant, or some combination thereof.

Information Technologies/GIS Functions

Directly supports ongoing upkeep and development of the Commission's information technologies/GIS system. Key functions include:

- Routine upkeep of GIS system, including input data from Greater Minnesota entities as needed for park and trail inventories
- Routine upkeep of website and related communications tools
- Ongoing development of information management system to support organizational activities

Grant Administration Transition Plan

Historically, DNR has been the authority for the majority of grant programs made available to Greater Minnesota for parks and trails. This has included Legacy Funds. Making a transition between this historic relationship into a new one that takes into consideration the provisions of this plan will take time to assess and determine what best serves the purpose. To that end, as a first step in implementing this plan, **the Commission will work with DNR to prepare a transition plan that will define the working relationship between the entities in the future.** It is expected that this transition will occur over a one to three year period, which allows adequate time to establish the new relationship and put new practices into place.



Section 2 Planning Context / Factors Influencing Outcomes

Planning Context

A variety of planning studies are of value, to varying degrees, in shaping the planning context and helping ensure that outcomes take into consideration broader planning issues and strategic directions at the state and regional level. In particular, these included:

- **Parks and Trails Legacy Plan (and Recreation Opportunities Work Group Report)** – 25 year long-range plan for parks and trails of state and regional significance
- **Minnesota State Parks and Trails: Directions for the Future** – DNR’s strategic 10 year plan
- **Metropolitan Council’s Regional Park Policy Plan** – strategic plan for metro-area parks and trails
- **State Comprehensive Outdoor Recreation Plan (SCORP)** – is Minnesota’s outdoor recreation policy plan

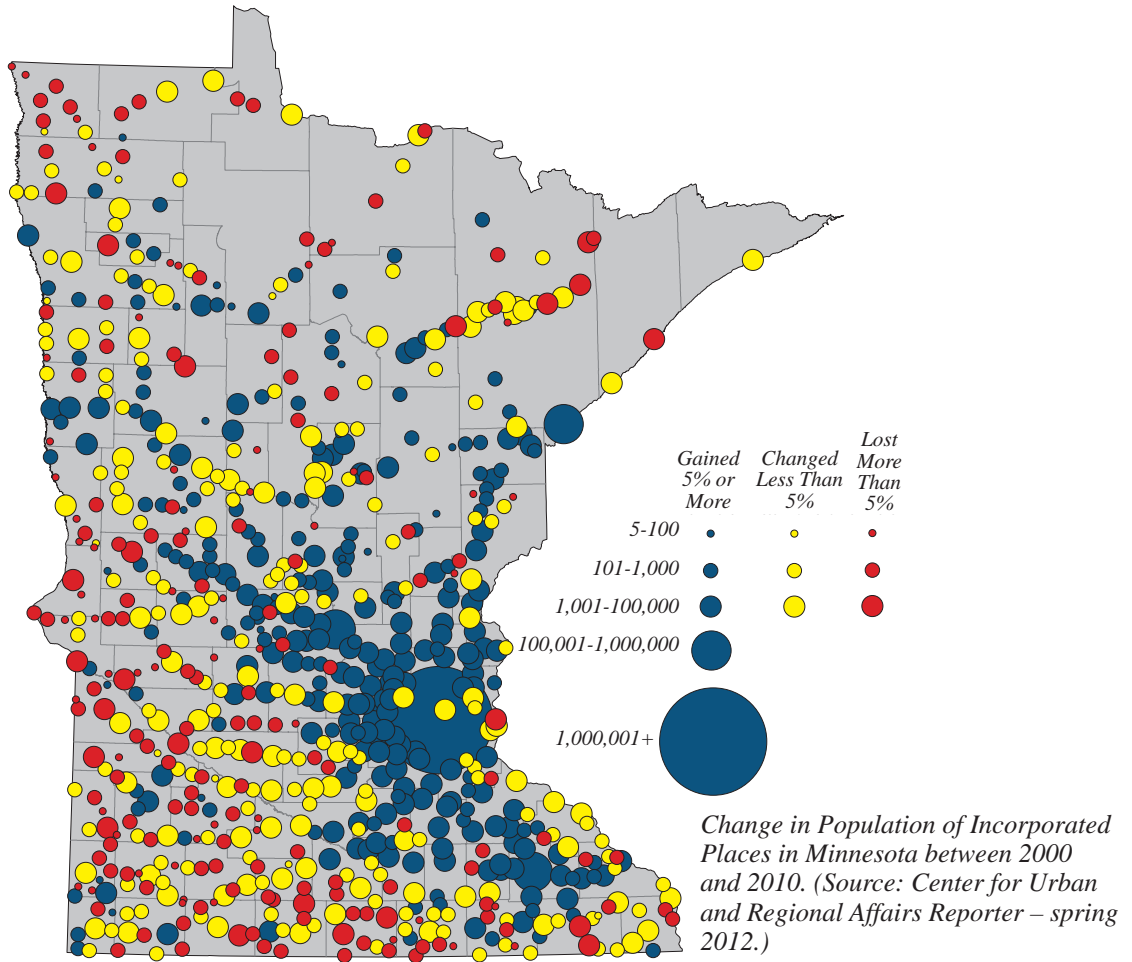
Influencing Demographic Factors

The following outlines a variety of demographic factors influencing planning outcomes and shaping the criteria for determining where regional parks and trails in Greater Minnesota are most warranted.

Past Decade – Small Towns in Minnesota Showed Continued Growth

As defined in the Center for Urban and Regional Affairs Reporter (spring 2012), the 2010 U.S. Census found that the population increased by more than 5% in two-fifths of the incorporated places in Minnesota between 2000 and 2010, remained stable in one-third, and decreased more than 5% in a mere one-quarter. Other key points made include:

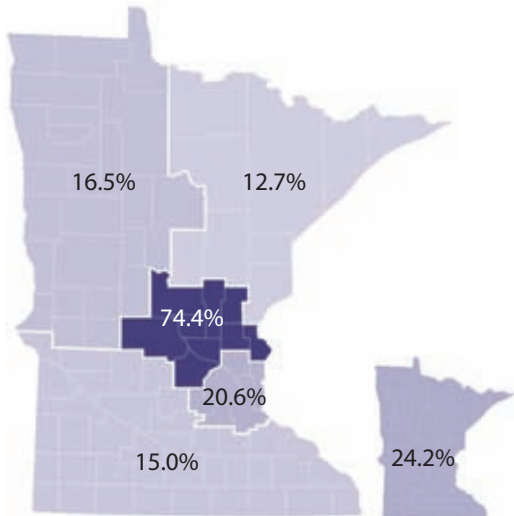
- Overall stability as a whole camouflages haphazard fluctuations in the population growth of individual places, some of which have grown erratically and unpredictably
- Minnesota places that grew more than 5% during the 2000s were heavily concentrated in the commutersheds of metropolitan areas (the Twin Cities, Rochester, St. Cloud, Duluth, and Fargo-Moorhead) and along the transportation tentacles radiating out from and connecting these places; smaller clusters of growth were in the Twin Cities–Mankato–Winona triangle
- Many small towns also have grown because they have taken on new economic activities, in addition to their function as dormitory communities
- Small towns in lakeshore areas have blossomed as resort and retirement centers; in the lakes area north of Brainerd, a new kind of dispersed metropolis – with more than 25,000 lakeshore residences – is quietly burgeoning



State-Wide Population Growth Characteristics

Minnesota’s Network of Parks and Trails: Framework (University of Minnesota) extensively considered projected changes in the state’s population between 2005 and 2035, with the following key findings:

- Projected average for statewide population growth is 24.2%
- More than half of the state’s population is in the Metro Area
- The Central and Metro Regions have a larger percentage of young people (younger than 18) than other parts of the state and a smaller percentage of older (65 or older) people
- The Metro Area has the highest proportion of non-white residents—although most American Indians live in the northern part of the state
- The Central region will see the most significant population change by 2035, followed distantly by the Metro region

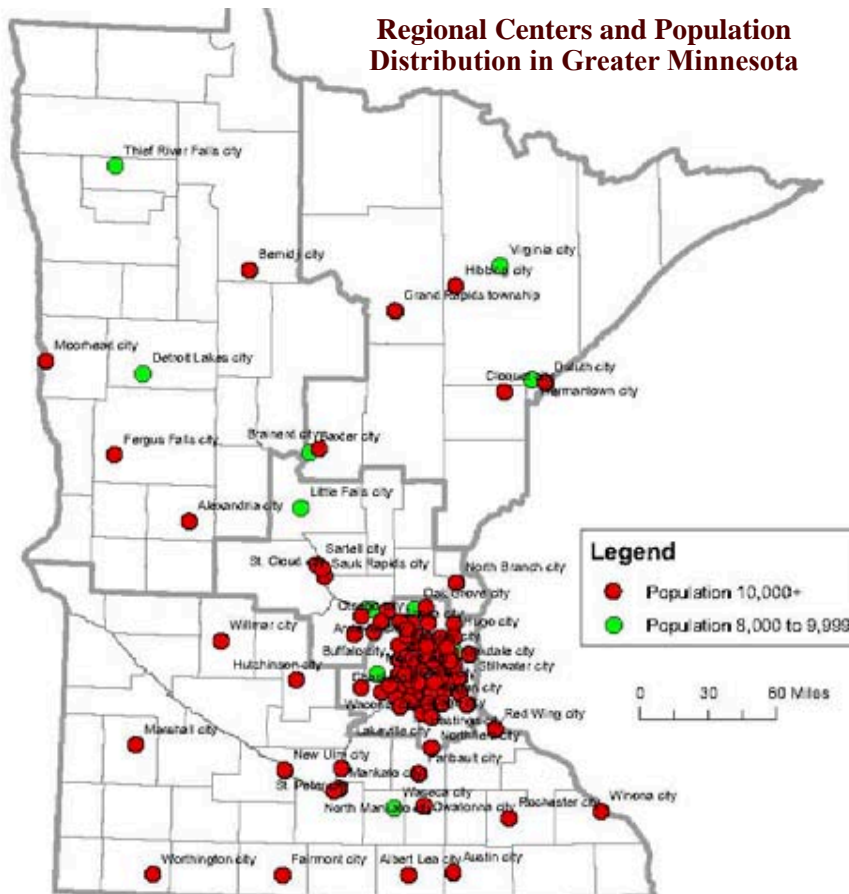


Projected change in population – 2005 - 2035. (Source: *Minnesota’s Network of Parks and Trails: Framework* - University of Minnesota.)

The map illustrates projected population growth on a regional basis, with the accompanying table summarizing the projected population growth statewide and regionally across Minnesota between 2005 and 2035.

Projected Population Growth across Minnesota

Area	Population Change
Statewide	Average population growth projection across the state is 24.2%.
Metro Region	More than half of the state’s population lives in the Metro Region, which has a population density eight times that of the state.
Central Region	Predicted to experience the greatest population growth, averaging 74.4% for the counties closest to the Metro Region, substantially higher than the statewide growth. This region will account for 15% of the State’s population in 2035, up from 10% in 2005.
Northwest Region	The population is concentrated in the southern half of the region, in the Bemidji Area, and in a few communities in the northwest. Populations in this region’s 24 counties are predicted to show both growth and decline. Beltrami (33.6%), Douglas (32.3%), Becker (26.7%), Cass (25.4%), and Clay (25.3%) are predicted to grow while Kittson (-25.1%), Traverse (-24.0%) and Wilkin (-6.0%) are predicted to lose population. The region is predicted to grow by 16.5%.
Northeast Region	The population is concentrated in the Greater Duluth area, in the Brainerd/Baxter area, and on the Iron Range in a line along the Laurentian Divide. Smaller communities are strung along the North Shore. The region’s predicted growth average of 12.7%.
South Region	The population is concentrated in Rochester, Mankato, and Willmar areas, and in county seats. The region is predicted to grow by 15.0%. Most of the regional population is in the east, which is expected to grow significantly.



Within Greater Minnesota, the population is clustered near or around regional centers – which under the Legacy Plan are defined as cities with a population of 8,000 or more. As might be expected, 95% of Minnesota residents live within 30 miles of a regional center. The map illustrates the general distribution of the population across Minnesota, with the regional centers outside of the Metro area highlighted for geographic context.

The population growth and characteristics projections and trends are important for a couple of key reasons:

- Minnesota’s population will continue to be more and more concentrated in already developed or developing areas
- Minnesota’s population will continue to be more and more diverse, bringing with it changes in demands for one type of recreational facility versus that of another

These last two points greatly influence where regional park and trail facilities are best located and the type of recreational facility most desired to serve residents of and visitors to Greater Minnesota in the future.

Participation Trends – Findings and Other Related Issues

A key factor in making sound resource allocations is basing decisions on reliable information related to participation trends and changes in demand for various types of outdoor recreational facilities. Review of available research findings proved enlightening but also limiting, with the following being the most pertinent.

Parks and Trails: A History of Support and Success in Minnesota

Each year, state and regional parks and trails receive tens of millions of visits, with Metro-regional parks and trails alone receiving an estimated 40 million+ visits. In 2009, there were 8,926,000 visits to the state park system, including nearly 1,082,000 campers and other overnight guests. Eighty-four percent of the visitors are Minnesota residents. Some 30% of all Minnesotans visit a state park at least once each year – a number that DNR is committed to increasing. In Greater Minnesota, many millions more use local and regional parks and trail, although no formal counts currently exist.

Based on 2007 research by DNR, satisfaction ratings of Minnesota State Parks visitor experiences are at an all-time high. Although traditional outdoor activities have indeed seen varying degrees of per capita decline in participation, new trends – such as providing “high service” items like park programs that cater to children and the opportunity to rent equipment and attend special events – are increasingly popular with many families and are bringing new populations to parks.

Clearly, **Minnesotans across the state value parks and trails and find them important to their quality of life.** Voter approval of the Legacy Amendment further reinforces Minnesotans’ general commitment to preserving the natural qualities of the state and having access to quality parks and trails. This history of success provides a sound platform to work from as the Commission considers how to best allocate its future resources in ways that will have lasting value to Minnesotans.

Building on Past Success Requires Recognizing and Addressing Challenges

Importantly, **building upon past successes and furthering the cause for parks and trails in Minnesota requires an understanding (and recognition) of new challenges, evolving trends, and changing participation patterns in outdoor recreation.** With overall participation over the past decade flat or even in decline, paying attention to key trend indicators cannot be taken lightly if the Commission is to ensure that future investments of time and resources are well-targeted. The following highlights some of the trend indicators to pay attention to and address through informed investments.

Trail-Related Findings

DNR trail-related research provides some interesting and at times cautionary findings, including:

- **Trail-use trends are generally negative** (i.e., declining use levels) – for both state trails and Twin Cities regional trails, with larger declines being realized with tourist trails (e.g., Paul Bunyan, Heartland, and Root River/Harmony-Preston Valley); one reason offered – but hard to measure – for the downward trend is expansion of trail opportunities, which basically results in the spreading out of existing users among more trails, versus actually adding new participants
- **Market area has a large effect on trends in trail use** – with use declines the least (or increases the most) for the local market, and declines the most (or increases the least) for the longer-distance tourist markets
- **Attractiveness and quality of experience of a given trail matters to potential users** – with four values rising to the top : 1) scenic quality, 2) quietness/peacefulness, 3) place for exercise, and 4) being away from motorized vehicles

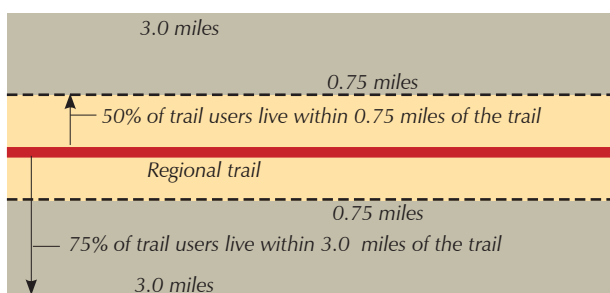
Findings from several other studies paint a similar picture and provide some additional insights. A study by the University of Minnesota had similar findings relative to desired user experience, with top reasons people use trails including viewing scenery, being close to nature, getting away from life demands, being physically active, and discovering new things.



As the research confirms, quality matters to trail users – with trails in a scenic and quite setting and away from traffic much preferred ...



... over ones in a ROW near traffic and with many crossings.



As the graphic illustrates, research findings by the Metropolitan Council reinforces the importance of providing high quality trail opportunities close to population centers.

At least in the Metro area, most trail users live nearby the trail they are using, reinforcing the importance of providing high quality trail experiences “right out the back door!” (Source: Metropolitan Council)

Park-Related/General Findings

Review of available park-related research findings proved enlightening as well, with the following considered the most pertinent findings.

As with trails, DNR park-related research provides some interesting and at times discouraging findings, including:

- **Nature-based recreation participation is showing signs of decline** – since the 1990s, the state is exhibiting declining participation on a per-capita basis; decline is broad based and national in scope, and relates to Minnesota State Parks, national parks, and state trails
- **Minnesota’s participation rate decline less negative** – as compared to all the state and national per-capita figures* are negative, the Minnesota figures tend to be less negative, declining at a per-capita basis of 10 to 12 percent
- **Visitation shift to older adults poses longer term concerns** – the age-class changes for Minnesota State Parks from 2001 to 2007 show visitation is shifting away from young adults and their children to older adults; median age of visitors has increased over 4 years, while the background population has increased just 1.4 years; an important implication of the decline in childhood visitation is the effect it may have on later-life visitation and participation

* The per-capita change figures are the most useful for revealing the underlying popularity of an activity, because they factor out the influence of population growth (or decline) on the change value.

Recreation Opportunities Work Group Report

As part of the Legacy Plan planning process, one of the work groups prepared a standalone report entitled *Recreation Opportunities Work Group Report for Parks and Trails Legacy Plan*. The purpose was to develop recommendations on priorities for new and expanded state and regional parks and trails by evaluating their current status and history. “New” opportunities are just that, and “expanded” opportunities include the purchase of inholdings and expansion of the ownership boundary of existing facilities.

For planning purposes, a regional center was defined as a place of 8,000 or more people in 2009. Distance bands of 10 and 30 miles were used to count park opportunities around each center. The results show that all centers have at least one (potential) park located within 30 miles, though seven centers in Greater Minnesota have no opportunities within 10 miles. The report also noted that several regional centers also have no state or regional paved trails within the same distance bands.

Some of the pertinent highlights of the report (which included findings from various studies) include:

- **Some two-thirds of all outdoor recreation occurs within a half-hour drive of home**
- State paved bicycle trail use in the Twin Cities (a surrogate for general regional paved bicycle trails) has over 90 percent of use originating within 25 miles of the trail
- Having quality opportunities near home is particularly important today because of concerns about declining participation rates in nature-based activities

Note that the report focuses on a limited set of criteria for defining regional parks and trails, so the plan recommendations have some limitations.

Nonetheless, the plan’s recommendations still remain reasonably pertinent, and include some consistent themes:

- Placing a priority on the densely settled and rapidly growing parts of the state for new parks that have the least park opportunities
- Placing a priority on regional centers that lack a near-home park
- Accelerating the acquisition of park in holdings, and adding lands to existing parks to enhance resource protection and recreational opportunities
- Using periodic inventories of park plans and grants to evaluate how the park system will likely develop on the ground
- Putting forth more effort on updating inventories of regional parks using consistent criteria to vet potential parks

Pertinent Influencing Factors from Legacy Planning Process

As part of the Legacy Plan planning process, regional workshops across the state and online surveys were undertaken, with the following nine themes having the most resonance with Minnesotans:

1. Minnesotans are truly passionate about nature and parks and trails
2. **Participants expect something big and lasting from the use of Legacy dollars**
3. In terms of an overarching vision, most participants focused on protecting natural resources and creating a next generation of stewards
4. Children and youth are seen as the pathway to increasing participation and environmental stewardship
5. Participants advocated for a balanced, pragmatic approach to using Legacy dollars
6. Connections are a top priority
7. Participants urged attention to a full range of recreational opportunities: hiking, biking, horseback riding, water trails, snowmobile and ATV trails
8. Participants supported a statewide approach, but one that recognizes that regional priorities and preferences differ
9. Participants expect the use of Legacy Funds to be optimized

SCORP Goal and Strategies

The 2008-2012 State Comprehensive Outdoor Recreation Plan (SCORP) is Minnesota’s outdoor recreation policy plan and gives outdoor recreation decision-makers and managers a focused set of priorities and suggested actions to guide decisions about outdoor recreation. The clearly stated goal of SCORP is to “increase participation in outdoor recreation by all Minnesotans and visitors.” Key strategies include:

- Acquire, protect, and restore Minnesota’s natural resource base, on which outdoor recreation depends; this includes obtaining prime outdoor recreation areas throughout the state prior to anticipated land use changes
- Develop and maintain a sustainable and resilient outdoor recreation infrastructure
- Promote increased outdoor recreation participation through targeted programming and outreach
- Evaluate and understand the outdoor recreation needs of Minnesotans and the ability of Minnesota’s natural resources to support those needs

Accommodating Regional Differences Across Greater Minnesota

As summarized in the Legacy Plan, one of the major themes that emerged from the public process is that citizens support a statewide approach to investing Legacy funds, *but one that recognizes that regional priorities and needs differ*. As defined in accompanying Legacy Plan reports, “regional differences stem from the significant size and complexity of Minnesota and the existing network of parks and trails of state and regional significance.” There are differences in the natural resource base, demographics, supply of recreation opportunities, age of infrastructure, demand for recreation opportunities, the role of tourism, and satisfaction of visitors. Investment of Legacy funds should reflect these nuances.

More specifically, recommendations for investment of Legacy and other funding sources call for:

- A balanced approach; flexibility
- Fairness and equity
- Recognizing differences and playing to the strengths of each outdoor recreation provider

Implicit in these recommendations is the need to recognize regional differences, and respond to them following a structured approach that retains a built-in capacity to respond to regional needs and collaborative opportunities.

A part of the Legacy planning process, DNR conducted public workshops and targeted meetings throughout the state to inform the plan recommendations. Participants in this process offered numerous high level examples of regional differences in Minnesota. While not necessarily representative of Minnesotans as a whole, the examples offer some baseline insight into potential regional differences, as the following summarizes.

Northern Minnesota Regional Perspective:

- Public land is abundant, and thus general land acquisition for parks is not a priority
- Strategic land acquisition for trail connections, acquiring permanent trail easements and maintaining, improving and upgrading existing facilities are high priorities

Southern Minnesota Regional Perspective:

- Public land is *not* as abundant, and land acquisition for parks and trails is a higher priority

Central Minnesota Regional Perspective:

- Expecting greatest population growth in the next 25 years
- Land acquisition prior to rapid development to preserve key natural resource and recreation opportunities is a high priority
- Focus on close to home opportunities with alternative transportation options and programming to attract new visitors are also high priorities

Although these only represent limited perspectives on regional differences, they do underscore the importance of accommodating regional differences in the evaluation and ranking of regional parks and trails in Greater Minnesota, and the subsequent allocation of funding to achieve the highest public good. To that end, the classifications and accompanying evaluation criteria for regional parks and trails defined in the next section allow for regional nuances to be accommodated across the state.

Note: These perspectives primarily serve to underscore that regional differences exist. The Commission’s outreach program will be used over time to better define these!

Limited History of Investments in Regional Parks and Trails in Greater Minnesota

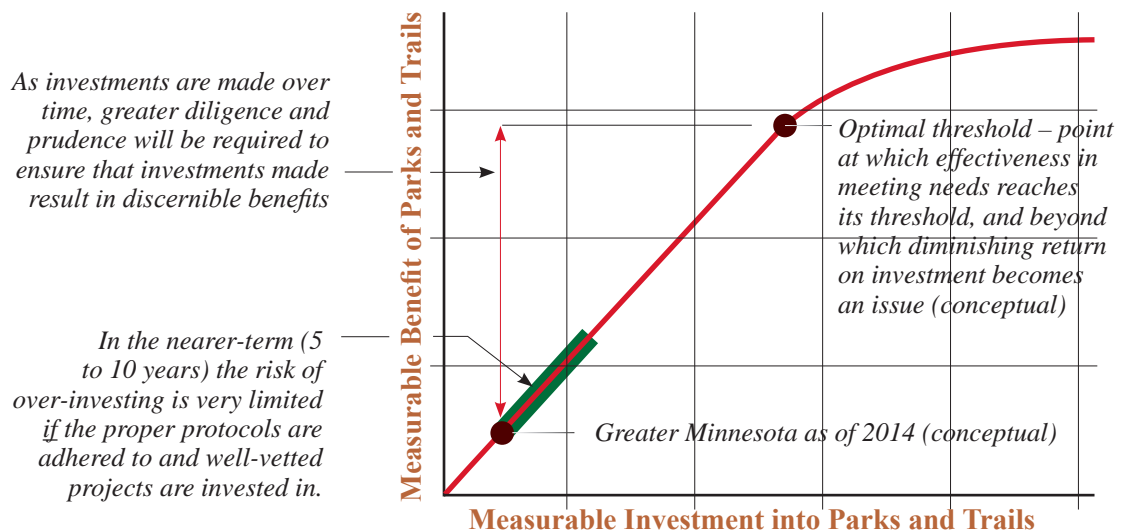
The availability of funding for regional parks and trails in Greater Minnesota over past decades has been both limited and inconsistent, due, at least in part, to the lack of a defined system. This is in contrast to state funding assistance for Twin Cities Metro Area regional parks that has existed since the Metropolitan Council was created in 1974. In addition to limited funding for acquisition and development, Greater Minnesota has never received state funding for operations and maintenance, which, conversely, has been available for the metro area for many years.

A lack of funding over the years leads to a simple reality: The infrastructure development in Greater Minnesota lags far behind the Metro regional system, and it has much catch up to do before the issue of redevelopment even becomes a concern.

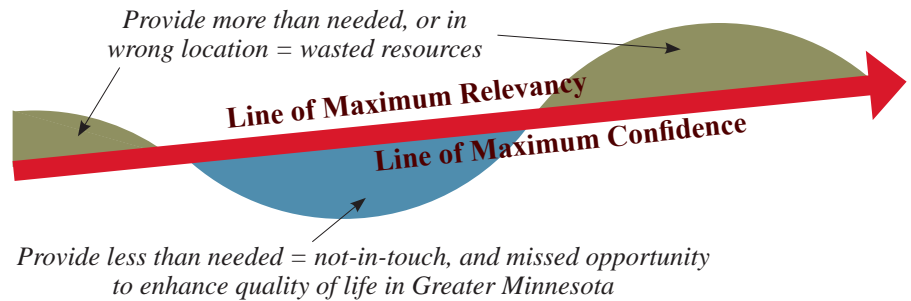
Reaching an Optimal Level of Service Will Take Many Years to Achieve in Greater Minnesota

Historically, park and trail research has primarily focused on measuring use (e.g., the number of visits to a given trail/system of trails), with only limited attempts to define demand (e.g., how many miles of trail are actually needed to meet local, regional, and state-wide needs). This poses some significant constraints on understanding the true demand for parks and trails across the state, much less trying to pick projects to invest in with a high level of confidence that they will prove to be of lasting value with favorable cost-benefit.

In the case of Greater Minnesota, even reaching – much less going beyond – an “optimal” level of regional parks and trails is not a major concern in the near-term (five to ten years) given the limited investments made over the years, coupled with the fact that service gaps are readily recognized as existing in various parts of the state. In this use, “optimal” level essentially relates to the point at which future investments would become less effective due to a saturation of a market area, as the following graphic illustrates.



As time goes on, this issue will become a more important concern to ensure that the investments made in regional parks and trails in Greater Minnesota are relevant to and valued by residents and visitors. The following graphic illustrates this point.



With more established systems, this is likely to be a more pressing issue to ensure that Legacy and other funding sources are prudently invested to the greatest public good. DNR is already taking this issue into consideration as it contemplates what “right-sizing” the state parks and trails system means – results of which will also inform Greater Minnesota’s understanding of the issue, and likely influence investment decisions in years to come.

As its system matures, Metro Regional Parks will also have to pay increasing attention to this issue in years to come. Here too, results of their studies will help inform Greater Minnesota’s understanding of the issue.

Key Conclusion

The findings in this section reinforce the Commission’s commitment to taking a very disciplined and strategic approach to creating a formal regional park and trail system in Greater Minnesota. It is in this manner that the Commission will assure Minnesotans that Legacy and other funding investments will result in high quality outcomes that will be truly valued by residents and visitors alike in Greater Minnesota.



Section 3 Regional Park and Trail Classifications and Evaluation Criteria

A Disciplined Approach to Building a Regional System in Greater Minnesota

The Commission fully recognizes that past grants along with the established state parks and trails have helped meet some regional needs. Nonetheless, **the lack of an overall regional system plan and consistent investment strategy over past decades has left some significant gaps in service.** As this plan is implemented, these gaps will become more apparent and true needs better defined. Realistically, the Commission will have to adjust to the fact that it will have considerable ground to make up to get to a desired level of service across Greater Minnesota that approaches that of the metro system.

Whatever its starting point, **the Commission is committed to wisely investing future allotments of Legacy and other funding sources to the betterment of the quality of life and economic vitality across Greater Minnesota.** The forthcoming strategy sets forth a set principles, themes, and criteria to ensure that projects supported by the Commission will result in outcomes that residents in Greater Minnesota and visitors alike will find relevant and valuable. The strategy purposefully sets forth a focused (i.e., limited) set of criteria to ensure that decisions are made based on the factors that matter most in selecting projects that will have lasting value.



Investing in facilities that will have lasting value is a core goal of the Commission. If done well, even simple attractions, such as this well-placed fishing dock, can add much value as part of an overall park master plan.

Main Principle:
Focusing on *Quality*
Outcomes that are
Relevant to Greater
Minnesota

The overarching principle of this plan is the Commission’s steadfast commitment to outcomes that are most relevant to residents and visitors in Greater Minnesota. **The emphasis here on “most relevant” is important in that over time society (people) tends to pay for what it most values and finds important to an areas quality of life.**

Whereas all parks and trails have value at some level, **it is clear that changing the trajectory of participation in outdoor activities requires wise investments in *qualitative* recreational outcomes** that are convenient and accessible to the population centers of Minnesota. This is especially the case with regional parks and trails, where the evidence is quite strong that convenience and easy access is intrinsically linked to frequency of use.

The importance of “qualitative” outcomes should not be underestimated in that enticing people to routinely engage in outdoor activities is competing against other ways one can spend their free time and money. Whereas this may seem (and is) intuitive, the documented leveling off (at best) or decline (at worst) in per capita participation rates suggests past efforts have not been fully successful. **This requires a fundamental rethinking of how park and trail projects are prioritized and delivered across the state – with the primary goal being to support projects that are most valued by Minnesotans.**

The protocol and associated criteria for designating regionally-significant parks and trails as defined in this and other sections are specifically developed around achieving these essential principles. **In real terms, this means that projects of highest merit will get funded first.** Of equal importance, the Commission will be cautious about the temptation to please all and spread funding out too thinly across the state, only to realize after the fact that this strategy rarely results in making a real difference in people’s lives. **As defined in the Legacy Plan, Minnesotans want to “achieve big, tangible outcomes that make a long-term difference.” This plan is structured around that very notion.**

Alignment with Parks
and Trails Legacy
Plan

As was intended by the Legislature, the Legacy Plan serves as a foundational document to this plan. The four strategic directions defined under that plan are central to guiding the use of Legacy funds over time. The four strategic directions as cited are:

- **Connect People and the Outdoors** – better develop Minnesota’s stewards of tomorrow through efforts to increase life-long participation in parks and trails
- **Acquire Land, Create Opportunities** – create new and expanded park and trail opportunities to satisfy current customers as well as to reach out to new ones
- **Take Care of What We Have** – provide safe, high-quality park and trail experiences by regular re-investment in park and trail infrastructure, and natural resource management
- **Coordinate Among Partners** – enhance coordination across the large and complex network of public, private, and non-profit partners that support Minnesota’s parks and trails to ensure seamless, enjoyable park and trail experiences for Minnesotans



As with this plan, the Legacy Plan emphasizes the importance of providing quality experiences. This is especially the case with non-traditional users, where understanding their needs and providing a quality experience at parks and trails is essential to turning non-users into frequent users.

Relative to Greater Minnesota, **the Legacy Plan specifically calls for defining a cohesive and well-considered “Greater Minnesota Parks and Trails Regional Network,”** including creating agreement on its interrelationship and coordination with state and the metro regional park and trail system.

One of the goals of this plan is to be in alignment with the strategic directions laid out in the Legacy, as the forthcoming criteria for determining the merit of a regional park or trail project reflect.

Establishing a Baseline for Potential Regionally-Significant Parks and Trails

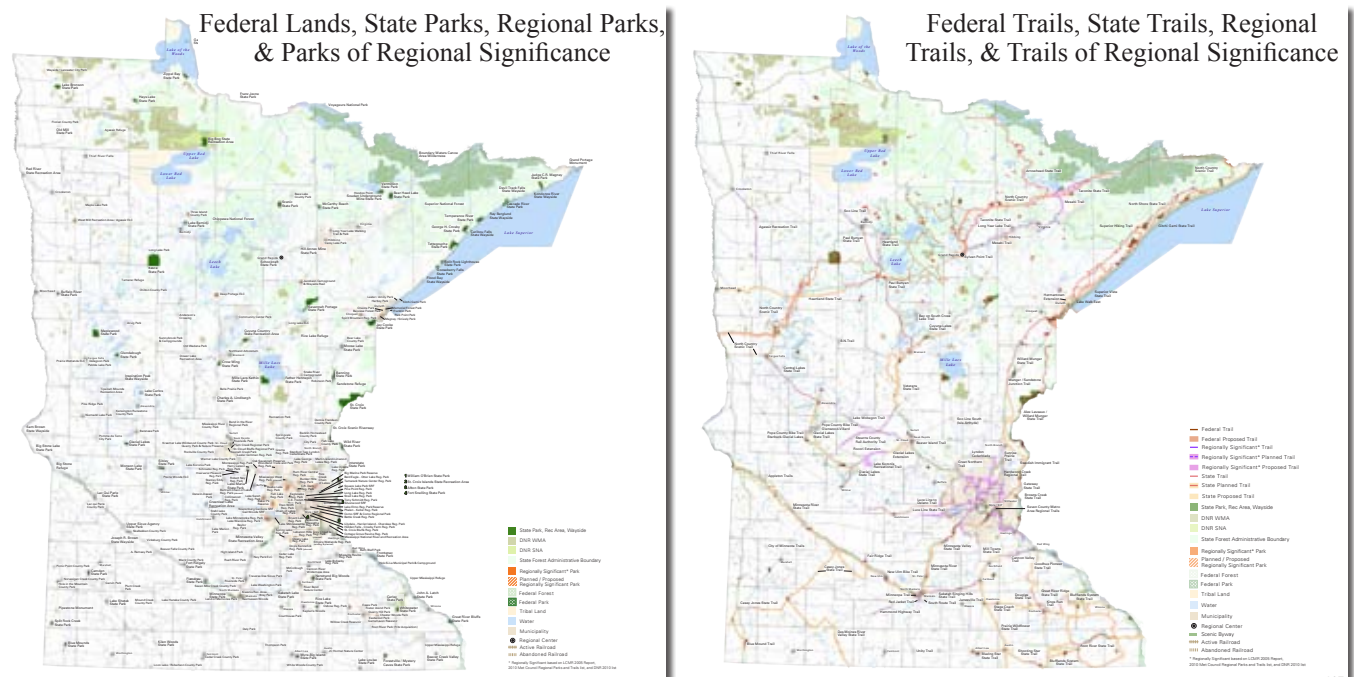
In the past, there have been a number of initial efforts made to identify and map regionally-significant parks and trails in Greater Minnesota to gain a baseline understanding of the level of service being offered. A 2004 *LCMR Parks Study Group Report* got to the heart of the issue by stating “with the exception of the *Central Minnesota Regional Parks and Trails Plan*, local units of government in Greater Minnesota have not created a “system” for coordinating development and management of regional parks,” and thereafter went on to recommend doing so.

A 2005 *LCMR Greater Minnesota Park Inventory and Regional Park Criteria Report* took the next step by undertaking a more formal survey to provide at least a base of information to assist in identifying regionally-significant parks outside of the metro area. The 2011 publication entitled *Minnesota’s Network of Parks and Trails: Framework and Summary Inventory* prepared by the University of Minnesota Center for Changing Landscape took this further by consolidating past studies and further inventorying existing, planned, and proposed regionally-significant, state and federal natural resource-based recreation areas in Minnesota. Taken together, at least a baseline understanding of potential regionally-significant parks and trails has started to emerge.

Importantly, **all of these inventories only represent a snapshot of the status of natural resource-based parks and trails in greater Minnesota. In spite of the best efforts of these past projects, in many cases the information gathered still paints an incomplete picture.** In part this is due to the use of a limited set of criteria in evaluating what is regionally significant. Perhaps to an even greater extent, it is due to the minimal physical data about parks or trails provided by respondents as to what really exists. Further, the lack of any systematic means of collecting visitor information also posed a constraint on evaluations.

The utility of this information is further hampered by the lack of ground truthing as to the extent and quality of the development that has occurred, and whether a given park or trail is actually aligned well with the Legacy Plan in meeting regional needs. There are also numerous latent opportunities that have yet to be identified, which could add to the list of potential regional parks and trails.

In other words, these past inventories do have value as a starting point for identifying *potential* regionally-significant parks and trails in greater Minnesota. To that end, the data sets associated with the 2005 *LCMR Greater Minnesota Park Inventory and Regional Park Criteria Report* and *Minnesota’s Network of Parks and Trails: Framework and Summary Inventory (2011)* are being used as the baseline for this purpose. As these reports and accompanying maps suggest, **considerable sorting and vetting remains necessary to determine which of these parks and trails will ultimately prove to be of high enough merit to be included in a formal regional system, and which are best to remain part of local, township, or county systems.**



Along with including this mapping and inventory information in the Commission’s own GIS system, it is also available for reference in *Minnesota’s Network of Parks and Trails: Framework and Summary Inventory publications and spreadsheets.*

In terms of raw numbers, the 2005 *LCMR Greater Minnesota Park Inventory and Regional Park Criteria Report* suggests that there are around 115 parks alone in Greater Minnesota that have the potential to be regionally-significant. Other studies suggest fewer potential parks meeting baseline criteria. Determining the exact mileage for regionally-significant trails in Greater Minnesota has also proved elusive due to the lack of clear definitions and consistent vetting.

All of this underscores the importance of the Commission being very disciplined in the protocol and criteria that are used in the future to gain assurance that parks and trails included in the regional system should actually be there. The protocols and criteria defined in this and subsequent sections are intended to achieve that end.

Emergence of a Physical System Plan for Greater Minnesota Regional Parks and Trails

The actual physical system plan for parks and trails in Greater Minnesota will emerge over time as the protocols and criteria are systematically applied and projects formally vetted. For that reason, the lack of a complete physical system plan in the nearer-term should not be construed as representing a lack of demand. Nor should it be construed to reflect the level of investment needed to fully develop the system over time. Instead, it should be viewed as the Commission doing due diligence in using a well-considered vetting process to determine which of the many potential regionally-significant parks and trails actually warrant being part of a formal regional system.

At least initially, requests to evaluate a given park or trail to determine its regionally-significance will most often come directly from cities, townships, and counties across Greater Minnesota. However, over the longer-term, the Commission will take an increasingly active role in identifying candidate parks and trails for regional consideration, as the following graphic illustrates.



The rationale behind the two-way street approach is that the Commission and its planning committees may be, at times, more aware of the criteria and in the best position to recognize a regional park or trail opportunity worthy of further evaluation.

Irrespective of initiator, **the overarching goal remains the same: Making sure that the parks and trails of highest merit in Greater Minnesota ultimately become part of the regional system.** As the system plan matures, the Commission’s role as a planning entity will become even more important, particularly in the area of defining gaps and imbalances in the system that will need to be addressed to ensure equity across Minnesota.

Ultimately, some number of the parks and trails already identified as potentially regionally-significant will make their way into the formal regional park system, and onto the map. It can also be expected that new or previously unidentified parks and trails will be introduced, vetted, and included in the system. The Commission will be assertive in the initial years of implementing this plan to define as much of the regional system in Greater Minnesota as possible – to both understand its overall magnitude and then place a priority on funding the top projects within each region.

Guiding Principles/ Themes for Regional Parks and Trails in Greater Minnesota

Although tailored for Greater Minnesota, the forthcoming principles/themes are in general alignment with those defined in the *Parks and Trails Legacy Plan*. Underlying all of these is the reality that even with Legacy and other funding sources, public resources for park and trail projects across Greater Minnesota will be limited, reinforcing the importance of selecting parks and trails of highest discernible public good.

Principle/Theme #1 – Support Merit-Based Projects Most Relevant to and Valued by Residents of, and Visitors to, Greater Minnesota

Places a priority on near-home park and trail projects in areas that are more densely settled, rapidly growing, and/or an established regional center. Also includes placing a priority on projects that will address emerging recreational needs and/or serve an under-served segment of the population. The underlying goal is to maintain confidence that top ranked projects are in alignment with what people really value.

Principle/Theme #2 – Support Projects Emphasizing High Quality Outdoor Experiences and Healthy Lifestyles

Places a priority on parks and trails in settings that will result in high quality, memorable experiences and will entice visitors to return time and again. For trails, this relates to placing a priority on “destination” type trails that are located in a safe, convenient, and scenic natural setting. For parks, this relates to developing facilities with a keen focus on quality outdoor recreation, education, health, cultural, scenic, and historic interpretation experiences.



Legacy Plan focuses on quality!

“Visitors who have a good experience in parks or on trails will return – and bring others with them. Parks and trails must provide quality experiences, and that means making wise use of resources.”

Principle/Theme #3 – Support Projects Emphasizing Near-Home Access and Connectivity

Places a priority on filling gaps in regional-level trail systems and connecting communities, parks and recreation areas, and/or significant destinations.

Principle/Theme #4 – Support Projects that Protect Threatened/Exceptional Areas of High Quality Natural Resources

Places a priority on selecting new park areas, in-holdings, and boundary adjustments where development pressures and/or risk of opportunity lost is highest and requires nearer-term action to protect a threatened or high quality natural area.

Principle/Theme #5 – Support Projects that Foster Economic Development in Greater Minnesota Cities, Townships, and Counties

Places a priority on parks and trails that foster economic growth due to increased access to high quality outdoor recreational opportunities that bring new residents and tourists to regions in Greater Minnesota.

Legacy Plan Definition for Regionally- Significant Parks and Trails in Greater Minnesota

The Legacy Plan provides a baseline definition for regionally-significant parks and trails as applicable to Greater Minnesota, as follows:

- Parks must have natural resource-based settings and activities, and *serve multiple communities***; other factors may include size, special features, and recreation opportunities not available elsewhere in the area
- Trails must be in desirable settings and offer high-quality opportunities and use by users in the region and beyond; other factors may include length, connections to other trails, and lack of other trails in the area

** In the Greater Minnesota context, “serving multiple communities” relates to meeting more than just a local need. This may take on various forms: a) serving two nearby cities; b) serving a city and township(s); c) serving a city, township(s), and county(s); and d) some combination thereof.

The Legacy Plan definition also recognizes the following:

- Unique role parks and trails of regional significance play in Minnesota’s outdoor recreation system, *for both their recreational benefits and their economic impacts*
- Importance of understanding regional differences across Minnesota
- “Regional significance” as an accepted category of parks and trails in Greater Minnesota as being distinct from local, state or federal significance

The following provides a broad overview of the general criteria associated with parks and trails of regional significance in Greater Minnesota as defined by the Legacy Plan.

Parks of Regional Significance

Parks of regional significance in Greater Minnesota *must* meet the following criteria:

- **Natural resource-based settings and range of activities offered:** The park should provide a natural setting and offer outdoor recreation facilities and activities that are primarily natural resource-based
- **Regional Use:** Evidence that the park serves at least a regional clientele; other related factors may include evidence that the facility currently or potentially may draw tourists and generate economic impact from outside the local area

Parks for regional significance in Greater Minnesota *must* also meet *at least one* of the following criteria:

- **Size:** The park should be significant in size; in southern Minnesota, a park of 100 acres is significant, and in northern Minnesota, the acreage is generally larger
- **Special features:** Unique or unusual landscape features, historically or culturally significant sites, or parks containing characteristics of regional or statewide significance
- **Scarcity of recreational resources:** The park provides public natural resource-based recreational opportunities that are not otherwise available within a reasonable distance

Trails of Regional Significance

Trails of regional significance in Greater Minnesota *must* meet the following criteria:

- **Regionally desirable setting:** The trail is located in a regionally desirable setting
- **High-quality opportunity and use:** The trail serves as a destination, providing high-quality recreational opportunities, attracts a regional clientele (multiple communities), potentially may draw tourists, and generates an economic impact from outside the local area

Trails of regional significance in Greater Minnesota *must* also address other criteria in their aggregate, including **adequate length, connections, and scarcity of trail resources**

Legacy Plan Definitions Applied to Determining Regionally-Significant Status for Parks and Trails in Greater Minnesota

As defined by the Legacy Plan, evidence that the park or trail serves “at least a regional clientele” and that it “may draw tourists and generate economic impact from outside the local area” is central to being considered regionally-significant. In Greater Minnesota, **the definition of regionally-significant is inherently nuanced given the variability of geographic circumstances and population concentrations encountered across the state.**

Depending on the part of the state being considered, the service area of a park or trail may encompass one or more local cities, townships, and/or counties of varying population density. Given this variability, achieving regionally-significant status in Greater Minnesota centers more on how well a park or trail meets the defined criteria as set forth in this section rather than whether or not it achieves a particular set minimal percentage of local versus non-local use.

Classifications and Evaluation Criteria for Regional Parks and Trails in Greater Minnesota

Notably, tracking visitation/use levels and the origin of visitors still has value as a means to measure use trends and the performance of parks and trails over time. But these measurements need to be considered within the context of a broader approach to judging performance and the public value of making investments in parks and trails in Greater Minnesota, as set forth in this document.

The definitions provided in the Legacy Plan as previously summarized provide a basis for more detailed and specific categories, or classifications, for parks and trails of regional significance in Greater Minnesota. **The intent is to refine the broader statements of the Legacy Plan into a limited set of classifications tailored to the varying needs and opportunities in Greater Minnesota.** The following provides an overview of the classification structure.



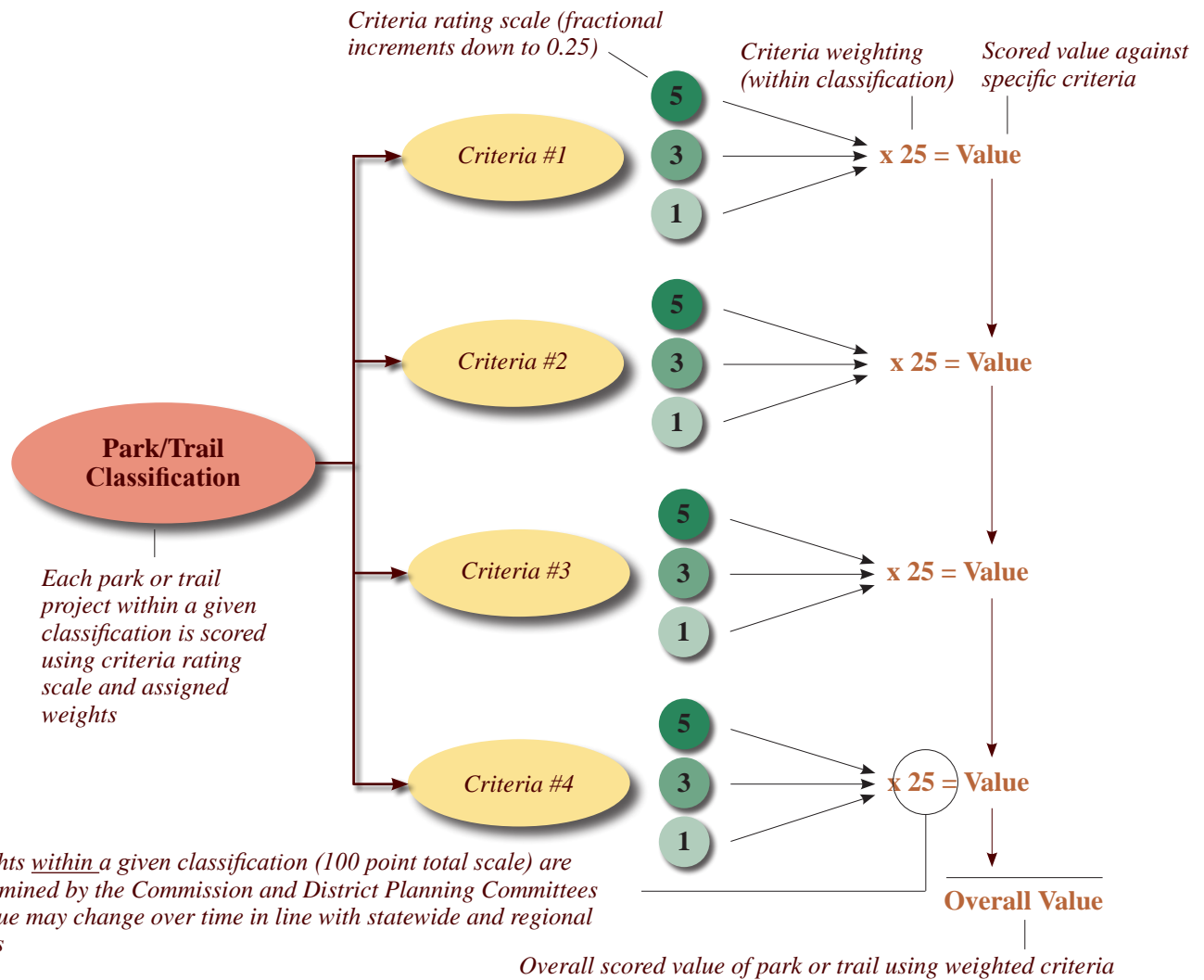
Note: There is no provision for “regional park reserves” in Greater Minnesota classification system (Metro Regional Parks does have this classification) since it is presumed that state park system will effectively address this role. The same holds true for motorized trails, in which it is presumed that the state trail system will prevail.

Note that these classifications are specific to the regional park and trail needs of Greater Minnesota. Although the classifications complement those used for state and metro regional parks and trails, the definitions and especially the evaluation criteria are shaped around what is most pertinent to the unique needs of Greater Minnesota.

Establishing a Consistent Approach to Criteria Rating and Weighting

Forthcoming are the definitions and evaluation criteria for the three classifications shown above. In each case, **the goal is to ensure that the evaluation criteria are broad enough to cover the predominant factors in decision making, yet limited enough to be manageable and keep the focus on what really matters in vetting and ranking projects.**

The evaluation criteria, which are specific to a given classification, focus on establishing the overall merit of a park or trail relative to key value indicators. A weighted scoring approach is then used to determine overall scores and, ultimately, ranking of the *relative* merit of one park or trail versus another. An evaluation spreadsheet is used that lists the criteria along with definitions, rating scale, and weighting of one criteria relative to each other. The following illustrates the overall evaluation, rating, and ranking process as related to a specific park or trail project.



Once rankings using the weighted criteria are established *within* each classification, weighted adjustments *between* classifications may also occur to determine overall priorities that the Commission will support at the regional level. (Adjustments between classifications is where regional differences are taken into consideration by the DPCs and Commission.)

Primary (First-tier) Evaluation Criteria Associated with Classifications – to Establish Merit of Park or Trail Project

The following establishes the primary (first-tier) evaluation criteria for each of the three classifications. Note that the criteria for the three classifications are *purposefully* the same across Greater Minnesota to ensure consistency in how park and trail projects are evaluated. As previously noted, any regional difference in needs and priorities are addressed through the weighting process between classifications at the regional level. This allows a given region to still emphasize (i.e., “weight”) the types of parks and trails that are most relevant while still maintaining consistency in baseline evaluation criteria.

Secondary (Second-tier) Evaluation Criteria Associated with Classifications – to Ensure Successful Implementation

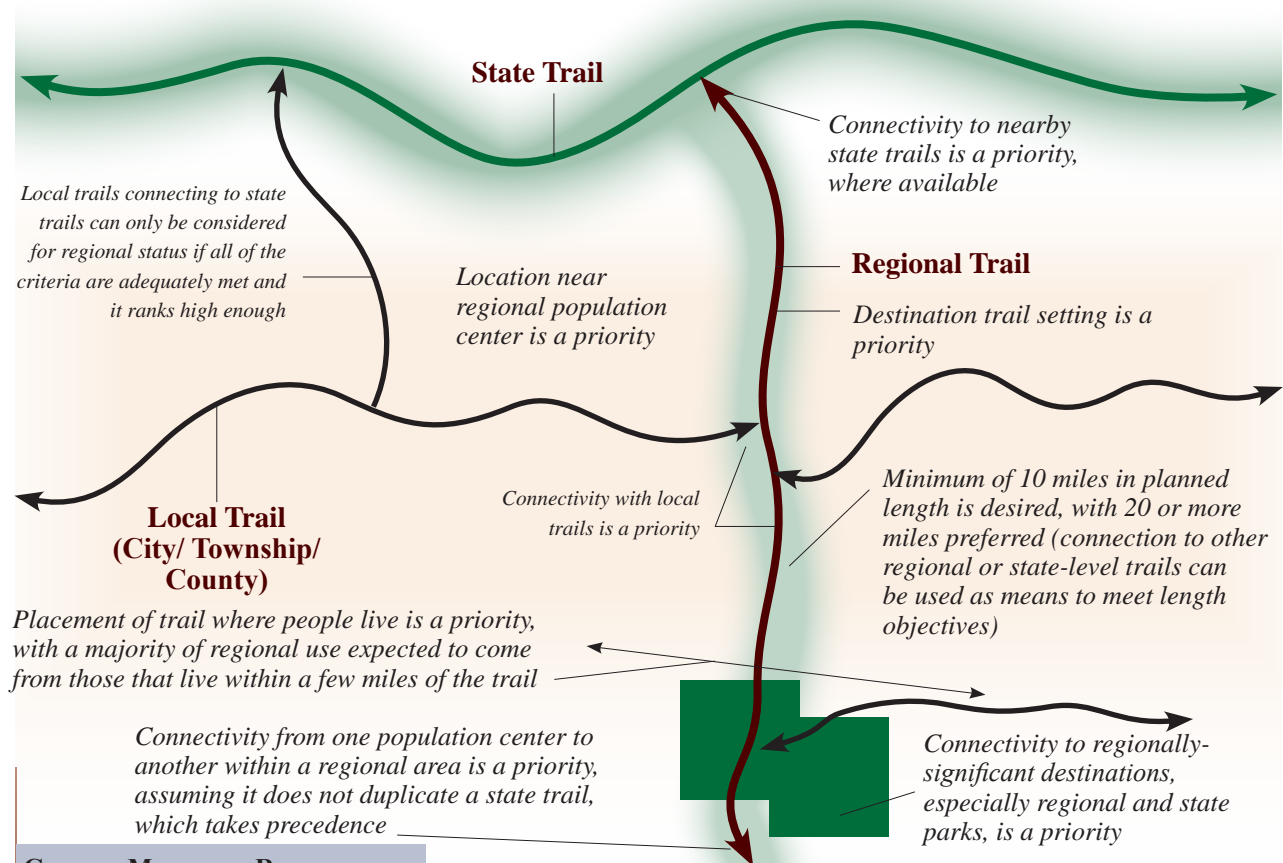
Once the merit of a project is established, a **second tier of evaluation criteria is applied to further evaluate project-specific grant requests and help establish actual funding priorities.** This will ensure that potential recipients of grants for projects of merit also understand the various requirements that go along with receiving funding that are essential to ensuring project success and performance accountability.

Although second tier criteria are non-scored per se, they factor into deciding the viability and timing of funding a project. However, first tier criteria remain the primary means by which the merit of a project is evaluated and ranked.

Regional Trail Classification (Non-Motorized)

The primary emphasis is on providing high quality recreational trail experiences that are readily accessible from an already populated or rapidly growing regional center or tourist destination. Must serve a regional population. Priority is given to “destination trails,” which are typically located within a greenway, open space, park, parkway, or designated trail corridor separated from vehicular traffic. In addition to emphasizing recreational value, trails that enhance connectivity/continuity within and between regional centers and regional or state-level parks and trails are of higher priority. Local trail connections to the regional trail will also be emphasized to expand its value to local communities. The following conceptually illustrates the interrelationship of local, regional, and state trails.

Note: This focuses on linear non-motorized trails. The Special Recreational Feature Regional Park Classification is used for other types of trails.



Criteria #1 – Provides a High-Quality “Destination” Trail Experience

Overview: Places a priority on trails located in a highly scenic setting and exhibiting interesting natural, cultural, and/or historic features. Trail serves as a destination unto itself, attracting regional users and (potentially) drawing tourists from outside the regional area. Provides convenient access, continuity (i.e., limited interruptions to flow), secure parking, and access to support services. Trail must be wide enough (minimum of 10 feet) and designed to provide a high quality and safe recreational experience. Rating scale relates primarily to the quality of experience, as judged by overall appeal.

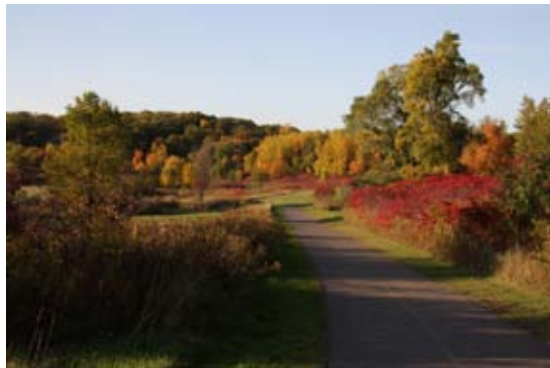
Rating Scale:

User impression: “This is just great. I love this trail! Very scenic. My friends have to come here.”

5

- Located in a highly scenic and/or natural setting within a defined greenway, open space, park, parkway, or designated trail corridor that is extensively visually separated from vehicular traffic
- Serves as a destination unto itself
- Minimal disruption to travel, such as roadway crossings
- Rail-to-trail corridor appropriate if the corridor exhibits scenic quality with minimal disruptions to travel

Scenic qualities in an appealing setting with minimal disruptions required to be considered a high value destination trail.



As the photos highlight, achieving a “5” rating requires being in an obviously appealing scenic setting that highlights the major landscape features of that region.



User impression: “This is really nice, and I’ll make this part of my normal ride.”

3

- Still offers scenic/visually qualities within an appealing natural setting for the majority of its length, but may at times skirt along an adjacent roadway corridor due to land constraints; if the latter is the case, the roadway corridor must offer its own scenic qualities to retain this rating
- Enough separation between trail and roadway is maintained to ensure the trail experience is still pleasant and not unduly compromised by visual impacts and noise associated with traffic; roads with lower traffic volumes preferred

- Still limited disruption to travel, such as roadway crossings
- Rail-to-trail corridor that is not as exclusively separated from an adjacent roadway corridor is acceptable if it still offers scenic qualities in keeping with the intent of this criteria.



An appealing setting is still required, but may not be always be a contiguous greenway/open space per se. This may include trail corridors with some visual detractors (left) and those with some segments nearer to a road (right) – although good separation and scenic qualities are still important.

User impression: “Its gets me to where I want to go, in a pleasant kind of way.”

1

- Still must have some overall visual appeal and scenic qualities to attract users
- Often in a roadway right-of-way, which must be wide enough to allow for reasonable separation between the trail and road
- Still exhibits limited disruption to travel, but roadway crossings may be more frequent due to setting
- Provides more of a linking trail experience, but still has enough appeal to entice users to come back

If within a more limited roadway corridor, an appealing setting is still required, otherwise the trail offers limited discernible value relative to this criteria.



Note that since the quality of the trail experience is often closely linked to how often a trail users will return, it is important to be diligent about this particular rating scale.

Criteria #2 – Well-located (i.e., Convenience of Access/Adequate Length) to Serve Regional Population and/or Tourist Destination

Overview: Places a priority on trails located close to a populated, rapidly growing, and/or an established regional center or tourist destination. Minimum of 10 miles in planned length is desired, with 20 or more miles preferred. Connection to other regional or state-level trails can be used to meet length objectives. Rating scale relates primarily to the location of the trail relative to population being served.

Rating Scale:

User impression: “This is great, I can get on the trail right down the street, and go forever!”

5

- Much of the corridor located in close proximity to regional population center being served, with a high concentration of the population residing within *three* miles of the trail corridor or its primary trailheads/key access points
- More than 10 miles of standalone trail length, *plus* connection to other regional or state-level trails to get over 20 miles of continuous trail

User impression: “It’s close enough, and a nice overall length to keep me coming back regularly.”

3

- Still located in close proximity to regional population center being served, with a high concentration of the population residing within *five* miles of the trail corridor/key access points
- More than 5 miles of standalone trail length, *if* connected to other regional or state-level trails to get over 10 miles of continuous trail; if not connected to other trails, a minimum of 10 miles of length is required

User impression: “I like the trail, but it is not as convenient to get to as I’d like.”

1

- Still serves a defined regional population center, with a high concentration of the population residing within *ten* miles of the trail corridor/key access points
- At least 5 miles of standalone trail length

Criteria #3 – Enhances Connectivity to Regional Destinations

Overview: Places a priority on making connections within a region, with an emphasis on completing missing links in established systems and enhancing use of the trail for commuting. Rating scale emphasizes the robustness of connections (more the better).

Rating Scale:

User impression: “Wow, I can get everywhere from the trail!”

5

- Must achieve some level of *all three* of these:
- Connects to/complements state trails and/or other regional trails
 - Connects to multiple local, regional, and state parks, recreation facilities, and natural resource areas
 - Connects to multiple public interest destinations (schools, work locations, tourist areas, business districts, etc.)

User impression: “This is nice, gets me to the park, and a couple of other places I like to go.”

- 3** | Must achieve some level of *at least two* of these:
- Connects to/complements state trails and/or other regional trails
 - Connects to multiple local, regional, and state parks, recreation facilities, and natural resource areas
 - Connects to multiple public interest destinations (schools, work locations, tourist areas, business districts, etc.)

User impression: “I like the trail, but I wish it connected to more places.”

- 1** | Must achieve some level of *at least one* of these:
- Connects to/complements state trails and/or other regional trails
 - Connects to multiple local, regional, and state parks, recreation facilities, and natural resource areas
 - Connects to multiple public interest destinations (schools, work locations, tourist areas, business districts, etc.)

Criteria #4 – Fills a Gap in Recreational Opportunity within a Region

Overview: Places a priority on regions that are lacking in regional-level trails. If, for example, trail proposals associated with various regional service areas were equally rated relative to criteria #1, #2, and #3, this criteria would allow those with the least amount of access to score higher – thus helping ensure that all regions will have at least baseline access to regional trails.

Rating Scale:

User impression: “Finally, a real trail to use that’s close to home!”

- 5** | • No regional or state-level trail opportunities exist in or near an established, densely settled, and/or rapidly growing regional center

User impression: “This is a nice addition that let’s me get around better, and to more places.”

- 3** | • Some other regional or state-level trails are available in the region, but are inadequate to fully meet the need and fill the gap in service

User impression: “Boy, we really have lots of trails around here.”

- 1** | • Overall access to regional trails would be enhanced, but there are other regional trails and local options available to help meet local needs

All other criteria being equal, this criteria helps ensure that all regions will have a least baseline access to regional trails.



Natural Resource-Based Regional Park Classification

The primary emphasis under this classification is providing high quality outdoor recreational opportunities in a natural and scenic setting. Preserving a unique natural resource not otherwise available in the region is also an important consideration. Recreational features must be in keeping with the natural setting and includes, but not limited to:

- Camping – cross-section of camper types, including camper cabins
- Picnicking and picnic shelters
- Walking trails (paved)
- Hiking trails (natural)
- Biking trails (paved)
- Mountain biking trails (natural)
- Cross-country skiing trails
- Horseback riding trails (natural)
- Swimming (natural and man-made if befitting of the setting)
- Lake access for power boats
- Canoeing facilities
- Fishing piers
- Visitor center
- Nature center/interpretation trails
- Play areas, with an outdoor theme
- Outdoor amphitheater, if befitting of the setting)
- Dog parks
- Archery/shooting ranges (select locations)
- Climbing (natural/man-made)
- Zip lines

Support facilities must relate to supporting a recreational feature and include items such as:

- Restrooms/sanitation buildings
- Landscaping
- Roads and parking areas
- General complementary site amenities

A related measure is the range of these activities accommodated within the park, with having a broad range of recreational opportunities preferred in order to attract a wide range of user groups and populations. Note that with the focus being on nature-based recreation, outdoor athletic facilities, indoor arenas/pools, etc. are not emphasized and considered local park facilities.

Although the acreage requirements are flexible, the land area must be large enough to accommodate the proposed facilities/amenities without diminishing the natural character and sense of place of the park setting. Buffering activity areas from each other and from surrounding areas is also important.



This three-season structure is an example of how expanding on a common picnic shelter theme can bring in new user groups and expand seasons.

Typically, this means a land area of 100 acres is needed since anything smaller limits the site's potential to accommodate a cross-section of recreational opportunities while still preserving open space. Optimally, parks should be over 200 acres to provide enough space for facilities.

Although providing a common set of offerings remains important, *introducing new, unique, or innovative facilities and amenities is also emphasized to explore new ways to expand participation in outdoor recreation* – either by building upon an existing success or fostering new or innovative projects that support changing trends and fills a *definable* gap in service.

Criteria #1 – Provides a High-Quality Outdoor Recreation Experience

Overview: Places a priority on providing facilities/amenities that are relevant to existing/common user groups and also serve to broaden the appeal of outdoor recreation to new or expanded populations. Park serves as a destination unto itself, attracting regional users and (potentially) drawing tourists from outside the regional area. Premium is placed on quality of experience to encourage visitors to return time and again. Provided facilities/amenities must be consistent with, or expand upon, previous listing of desirable/appropriate facilities.

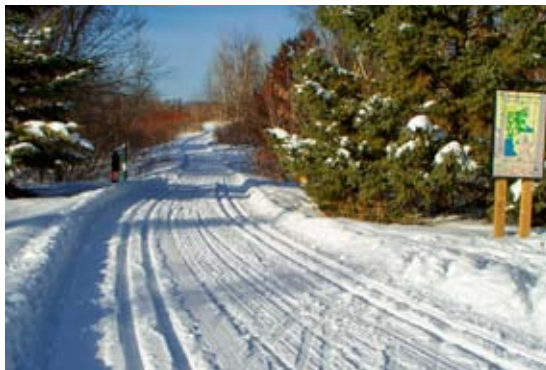
Rating Scale:

5

- Located in a highly scenic and natural setting that innately appeals to visitors; “standout” features are present that make the park an appealing destination unto itself
- Provides a very robust cross-section of recreational facilities/features (consistent with the listing) that will attract a wide-range of user groups and populations
- Well-designed facilities (relative to the most current design standards) that meet the contemporary needs of targeted user groups; examples: natural-surface trails that are purpose-built for a specific use, such as hiking or mountain biking, or campgrounds that accommodate a broad range of camper types – tents to RVs – with modern support facilities
- Overall uniqueness is a “cut above” other regional parks, in terms of sense of place coupled with having many high quality recreational opportunities to choose from

User impression: “This is a great park! – with so much to do. I really like the new kind of mountain bike trails – real flowy. The campground has very private sites – makes you feel that you’re really camping in the woods – yet with electric. Clean showers too. Also like just sitting by the big cliff, looking at the lake. Can’t wait to get back.”

Premium is placed on providing high quality facilities in unique/appealing settings that have an innate recreational appeal.



User impression: “This is really nice. I’ll have to get here more often, especially with the kids. Nice to be outdoors, walking in the woods.”

3

- Still located in a scenic and natural setting, with a nice but not unique character; still has a general appeal that will innately draw visitors
- Still provides a solid cross-section of recreational facilities/features (consistent with the listing) that will attract a range of user groups and populations, but some facilities will be scaled back or not as robust due to site limitations and other constraints
- Facilities still well-designed to meet the needs of targeted user groups, but level of exclusivity is less; example: natural-surface trails that serve multiple uses, such as hiking, mountain biking, and/or cross-country skiing
- Overall sense of place is consistent with expectations for a regional park, but not necessarily anything that stands out as being especially unique or a “cut above” other regional parks

Although each of these facilities have some appeal and serve a need, neither of them are unique or a “cut above.”



User impression: “Its an OK place to go for a few hours once in a while to get away from it all!”

1

- Located in a scenic and natural setting, but nothing really out of the ordinary for the region
- Provides enough different types of recreational facilities/features to attract defined user groups and populations, but not as extensively as other regional-level parks due to site limitations and other constraints
- Facilities still well-designed, but generally of a smaller scale and/or limited miles of trails to meet the needs of targeted user groups
- Overall sense of place is consistent with expectations for a regional park, but nothing really special either

Criteria #2 – Preserves a Regionally-Significant and Diverse Natural or Historic Landscape

Overview: Places a priority on preserving regionally-important landscapes with unique land features that add value and character to the site. Emphasis is also placed on land parcels with water features (lakes, rivers, and streams) and/or historically/culturally-significant lands. Lands exhibiting ecologically rare plant communities and high quality wildlife habitat are a priority. Continuity and connectivity with natural landscapes and habitats extending beyond the park into a larger open space context, especially those that may be protected by other means, is also an important added value to be strived for.

Man-made features, such as restored quarry sites and naturally-shaped ponds, may also be desirable if unique and aligned with an outdoor recreation theme. Lands must be suitable for and large enough to accommodate desired recreational uses.

Rating Scale:

User impression: “This place is so cool! It’s just fun to walk around and see this landscape.”

5

A majority of these features must be present, with both the “signature” and secondary features providing a truly inspiring/unique and high quality regional park setting:

- Regionally-important natural landscape with unique land features that add value and character to the site – i.e., interesting landforms, geology, rock outcroppings, etc.
- Water features (lakes, rivers, and streams)
- Ecologically rare plant communities
- High quality wildlife habitat
- Historically/culturally-significant lands
- Extensive continuity and connectivity of natural lands that extend beyond the park itself into a larger open space context
- Man-made features – i.e., restored quarry sites and naturally-shaped ponds – if unique and in-keeping with an outdoor recreation theme
- Enough acres to accommodate desired recreational uses while preserving sense of place and protecting the natural features

Man-made features are recognized as being unique site attributes, and may not apply to many sites.



As the photos highlight, the regional significance of the landscape must be readily apparent.



User impression: “This is a great place to be in nature and see some wildlife and wildflowers.”

3

A quality “signature” feature must be present, along with some additional secondary features to create a compelling park setting that is representative of the regional landscape:

- Regionally-important natural landscape with a signature feature that makes it stand out as a worthy park setting
- Water features (lakes, rivers, and streams)
- Ecologically rare plant communities and/or high quality wildlife habitat on at least some of the site, with the opportunity to reasonably restore additional acreage that may have been degraded due to past land uses
- Historically/culturally-significant features
- Some continuity and connectivity of natural lands that extend beyond the park itself into a larger open space context
- Man-made features – i.e., restored quarry sites and naturally-shaped ponds – if unique and in-keeping with an outdoor recreation theme
- Enough acres to accommodate desired recreational uses while preserving sense of place and protecting the natural features

User impression: “I like sitting by the pond watching the ducks after hiking through the woods.”

1

Although no “signature” feature may be present, the parcel exhibits a regionally-important natural landscape that makes it an appealing site for the proposed recreational uses.

Criteria #3 – Well-located and Connected to Serve a Regional Population and/or Tourist Destination

Overview: Places priority on parks in or close to a densely settled, rapidly growing, and/or an established regional center or *well-established* tourist destination. By vehicle, optimal travel distance is less than 10 miles by *driving distance*. (Using radius approach is of limited value in many cases since natural (e.g., rivers, lakes) and built (e.g., roadways systems) land features greatly affect the ease of access.) Connectivity to the park via local, regional, or state-level trails also factors into the rating under this criteria.

Rating Scale:

5

- Park is located right in a densely settled, rapidly growing, and/or an established regional center or *well-established* tourist destination – with most residents in the area not having to travel very far (within 5 to 10 miles – driving distance) to get there
- Park is *readily* accessible by some combination of local, regional, or state trail from nearby neighborhoods and communities

User impression: “Its great to be able to get on my bike and ride over to the park in a couple of minutes. And getting there by car is a snap. It’s so convenient, so I go there a lot.”

3

- Park is located in or close to densely settled, rapidly growing, and/or an established regional center or *well-established* tourist destination – although residents in the area may have to travel a bit further (10 to 15 miles driving distance) to get there
- Park is still accessible by local, regional, or state trails from nearby neighborhoods and communities, and some areas further away from the park might have to drive or bike on some roads

User impression: “Since its such a nice park, I’m willing to travel a bit further and still use it quite a few times each year.”

User impression: I like the park, but it is not as convenient to get to as I'd like."

- 1 • Park is located near a densely settled, rapidly growing, and/or an established regional center or *well-established* tourist destination – but many residents in the area have to travel further (15 or more miles driving distance) to get there
- Park has limited access by local, regional, or state trails from nearby neighborhoods and communities, and bikers will need to use some combination of trails and roads to get there

Criteria #4 – Fills a Gap in Recreational Opportunity within the Region

Overview: Places a priority on areas in which a high quality outdoor recreational opportunity of a similar nature is not otherwise available within the region and/or within a reasonable distance. Fills a discernible and critical gap in an area with a recreation opportunity shortage. Complements (and does not duplicate) recreational opportunities otherwise available in the region, especially those provided by nearby state parks.

Rating Scale:

User impression: "It's about time we got a regional park to go to close to home!"

- 5 • No regional or state-level parks offering regional-type recreational facilities exist near enough to the location of this park to meet the regional need, and a clear gap in service exists

User impression: "This is great, now we can go to the regional park one day and the state park the next to do something new."

- 3 • Recreational facilities being proposed complement those provided at other regional and state-level parks in the region to more fully address a gap in service

User impression: It's nice to have even more to do in the area."

- 1 • Overall access to regional facilities would be enhanced, but there are other regional or state-level options available to help meet regional needs

Special Recreational Feature Regional Park Classification

Overview: This classification relates to new, unique, or innovative “special feature” outdoor recreational facilities of regional significance.

A natural and scenic setting remains important to qualifying as a regional park, but serving a regional recreational need is more of a factor in determining merit. Examples include, but are not limited to, developing:

- A public lakefront area for public access and recreation where the land area may be less than 100 acres
- A standalone but needed regional recreational facility, like a public campground, where it complements other public regional or state-level park and recreation facilities that are nearby but lack that facility
- A specialized recreational facility that has regional-significance even as a standalone facility – such as a mountain bike trail system, shooting/archery range, outdoor amphitheater, conservatory, climbing wall, or unique outdoor learning facility

Note: Special-use/purpose-built natural-surfaced trails can be considered under this classification!

In general, the listing of recreational features defined under *Natural Resource-Based Regional Park* classification remain valid here as well. However, this classification purposefully offers more flexibility to explore unique ideas and find new ways to expand participation in outdoor recreation – by either building upon a past success and fostering new or

innovative projects that support changing trends and fills a *definable* gap in service. Note that features still must be consistent with an outdoor theme in a natural setting, and still excludes facilities common at the local level, such as athletic complexes, neighborhood parks, and so forth.

Importantly, a high level of evaluation is required under this classification to confirm the viability of the proposed project and/or recreational use(s) – including working with partnering agencies (DNR, Metro Regional Parks, University of Minnesota, Explore Minnesota Tourism, etc.) that can add insights into the viability of a project and how it may complement what other providers might be offering. Special recreational features often require a unique managing or programming effort on the part of the implementing agency, which will also need to be addressed in the master plan.

Smaller-Scale/Single-Purpose Special Recreational Features

The diversity of recreational facility needs in Greater Minnesota is expected to be quite broad, and in some cases regional needs will best be met by smaller-scale or single-purpose facilities. In these instances, extra scrutiny will be warranted to ensure that proposals are in fact regionally-significant and consistent with the core principles defined in this plan, and being scored against the established criteria. Nonetheless, one of the stated purposes of this classification is to find “diamond in the rough” opportunities that take advantage of unique opportunities.

Criteria #1 – Provides a Special High-Quality Outdoor Recreation Experience

Overview: Places a priority on providing facilities/amenities that are relevant to existing/common user groups and also serve to broaden the appeal of outdoor recreation to new or expanded populations. Park serves as a destination unto itself, attracting regional users and (potentially) drawing tourists from outside the regional area. Premium is placed on quality of experience to encourage visitors to return time and again. Although facilities/amenities must be of regional significance, this classification purposefully emphasizes innovation and new ways of engaging residents and tourists to participate in outdoor activities.

Rating Scale:

User impression: “This is a great place to hang out! I really like how I can walk right from the park to get a coffee, and then come back and grab a canoe, kayak, or bike for an hour or two of fun. And the zip line is really fun.”

5

- Even though smaller in acreage (than a natural resource-based regional park), still located in a scenic/natural setting that innately appeals to visitors; a “standout” feature is present that makes the park an appealing place to recreate
- Provides a very select and even unique set of recreational facilities/features well-suited to the site that will attract targeted user group(s) and population(s)
- Well-designed facilities (relative to the most current design standards) that meet the contemporary needs of targeted user groups
- Overall uniqueness is high, with new or innovative “special feature” outdoor recreational facilities of regional significance being the basis for the park

An uncommon feature, such as this derrick (left), can help set the stage for a unique park experience, as is the case with a zoo exhibit (right).



User impression: “It’s great that this swimming beach and picnic area are here, especially for the kids.”

3

- Still located in a scenic and natural setting, with a nice but not unique character; still has a general appeal that will attract visitors
- Provides a select set of recreational facilities/features well-suited to the site that will attract a particular targeted user group(s) and population(s), but would not be considered a unique type of facility; although overall uniqueness may not be as clearly discernible, it still stands out as being a regionally-significant special recreational feature
- Facilities still well-designed to meet the needs of targeted user groups, but more modest in scale and capacity

User impression: It’s an OK place to go for a few hours once in a while to get away from it all!

1

- Located in a scenic setting, but nothing really out of the ordinary or special for the region
- Provides enough of a special recreational feature focus to attract defined user groups and populations, but is somewhat limited due to site limitations and other constraints
- Facilities still well-designed, but generally smaller-scale facilities to meet the basic needs of targeted user groups

Criteria #2 – Provides a Natural and Scenic Setting Offering a Compelling Sense of Place

Overview: Although at a smaller scale than *Natural-Resource-Based Regional Parks*, priority is still placed on providing a natural and scenic setting offering a compelling sense of place and uniqueness. Access to water (lakes, rivers, and streams) and/or historically/culturally-significant features is also emphasized. Lands must be suitable for and large enough to accommodate desired recreational uses without undue impacts to the land resource.

Rating Scale:

5

- Exhibits a regionally-important natural anchor feature that establishes the essential character of the site – i.e., interesting landforms, geology, water feature, etc.
- Exhibits man-made features – i.e., restored quarry sites and naturally-shaped ponds – if unique and in-keeping with an outdoor recreation theme
- Enough acres to accommodate desired recreational uses while preserving sense of place and protecting the natural features

User impression: This is a great view of the lake from the top of this cliff!

- 3 • Still exhibits a regionally-important natural landscape, but may not have a strong anchor feature per se that is unique
- Enough acres to accommodate desired recreational uses while preserving sense of place and protecting the natural features
- 1 • Although no “signature” feature may be present, the site still exhibits a natural landscape that makes it an appealing site for the proposed recreational uses

Criteria #3 – Well-located to Serve a Regional Need and/or Tourist Destination

Overview: Places priority on special recreational features being located in or close to a densely settled, rapidly growing, and/or an established regional center or *well-established* tourist destination. By vehicle, optimal travel distance is less than 10 miles by *driving distance*. (Using radius is of limited value in many cases since natural (e.g., rivers, lakes) and built (e.g., roadways systems) land features greatly affect the ease of access.) Connectivity to the park via local, regional, or state-level trails also factors into the rating under this criteria.

Rating Scale:

User impression: “Its great to be able to get on my bike and ride over to the park in a couple of minutes. And getting there by car is a snap. It’s so convenient, so I go there a lot.”

- 5 • Park is located right in a densely settled, rapidly growing, and/or an established regional center or *well-established* tourist destination – with most residents in the area not having to travel very far (within 5 to 10 miles driving distance) to get there
- Park is *readily* accessible by some combination of local, regional, or state trail from nearby neighborhoods and communities

User impression: “Since its such a nice park, I’m willing to travel a bit further and still use it quite a few times each year.”

- 3 • Park is located in or close to densely settled, rapidly growing, and/or an established regional center or *well-established* tourist destination – although residents in the area may have to travel a bit further (10 to 15 miles driving distance) to get there
- Park is still accessible by local, regional, or state trails from nearby neighborhoods and communities, and some areas further away from the park might have to drive or bike on some roads

User impression: I like the park, but it is not as convenient to get to as I’d like.”

- 1 • Park is located near a densely settled, rapidly growing, and/or an established regional center or *well-established* tourist destination – but most residents in the area have to travel further (15 or more miles driving distance) to get there
- Park has limited access by local, regional, or state trails from nearby neighborhoods and communities, and bikers will need to use some combination of trails and roads to get there

Criteria #4 – Fills a Gap in Recreational Opportunity within the Region

Overview: Places a priority on areas in which a high quality outdoor recreational opportunity of a similar nature is not otherwise available within the region and/or within a reasonable distance. Fills a discernible and critical gap in an area with a recreation opportunity shortage. Complements (and does not duplicate) recreational opportunities otherwise available in the region.

Rating Scale:

- 5 • No regional or state-level parks offering regional-type recreational facilities exist near enough to the location or offer the type of facilities provided, and a clear gap in service exists
- 3 • Recreational facilities being proposed complement those provided at other regional and state-level parks in the region to fully address a gap in service
- 1 • Overall access to regional facilities would be enhanced, but there are other regional or state-level options available to help meet regional needs

User impression: “Although a smaller park, this place was really needed.”

User impression: “This is great, now we can go to the beach park one day, and then head over to the big park by the river the next.”

User impression: It’s nice to have even more to do in the area.”

Relationship Between Greater Minnesota, Minnesota DNR, Metro Regional, and Local Park and Trail Classifications

Definitions from Legacy Plan, which should be referred to for more information, as well as the system plans for DNR and Metro Regional Parks.

As defined in Section 1, a seamless working relationship between the Commission, DNR, Metro Regional Parks, and local providers is a clear expectation of Minnesotans’ and essential to the effective use of all public funding sources. **The Commission is committed to working with these partners to ensure overall system plans are complementary and focus on meeting priority needs across Greater Minnesota.** Whereas Section 1 considered this at the agency level, the following outlines some important assumptions about agency roles at the physical planning level – which in some cases significantly effects Greater Minnesota’s classifications and approach to system planning. The following provides a brief overview of the major classifications associated with DNR, Metro Regional Parks, and local systems – along with assumptions as related to the system plan for Greater Minnesota. Note that these definitions may change over time as each agency updates their own system plans.

State Park System – Minnesota DNR

State Parks: Exemplify the natural characteristics of the major landscape regions of the state, as defined by accepted classifications, in an essentially unspoiled or restored condition; in a condition that will permit restoration in the foreseeable future; or contains essentially unspoiled natural resources of sufficient extent and importance to meaningfully contribute to the broad illustration of the state’s natural phenomena. Park contains natural resources, sufficiently diverse and interesting to attract people from throughout the state.



Splitrock Lighthouse State Park is a classic and very popular state park in Minnesota with a statewide appeal.

State Recreation Areas: Area contains natural or artificial resources which provide outstanding outdoor recreational opportunities that will attract visitors at a statewide level. Contains resources which permit intensive recreational use by large numbers of people.

Planning Assumptions: The Commission is committed to ensuring that regional parks in Greater Minnesota complement the established state park and recreation area classifications, as the previously defined criteria reflect.

The Commission will work closely with DNR as options are considered for “marginally performing” state parks and trails, an issue directly addressed in the Legacy Plan. As defined in that plan, a park or trail may become “marginal” when visits are low or otherwise not meeting the purpose for which it was intended. Options cited in the Legacy Plan include:

1. Cluster state and regional parks and trails with other larger, nearby parks and trails to be managed either by staff at these facilities or by seasonal managers
2. Close parks or trails temporarily, while preserving the units for future use.
3. Transfer to local government management, especially parks or trails that serve mostly a local (or regional) population and do not otherwise meet the criteria for state parks or trails
4. Transfer or merge a state park or trail with another state recreation unit designation
5. Sell or lease a portion or all of a park or trail.

In addition to the above, another possibility for under-performing state parks or recreation areas is a shared responsibility between DNR and the nearby regional park entity. In select circumstances, this could serve as a means to preserve a resource area for state conservation purposes while also providing some regional recreational opportunities that might not otherwise be available in the area. Obviously, this type of approach would entail many considerations at a system and detail planning level. But it does highlight that the Commission remains open to land use arrangements that effectively and efficiently serve the interests of the public and involved agencies.

Also, as previously noted, there is no provision for regional park reserves in Greater Minnesota classification system since it is presumed that the state park system will effectively address this role. The Commission will work with DNR to ensure that preserving natural resource areas in Greater Minnesota is adequately addressed and meeting the goals of the Legacy



Plan. Cuyuna Country State Recreation Area is an example of a state facility that offers high quality specialized outdoor recreational opportunities, including the very popular mountain biking trails.

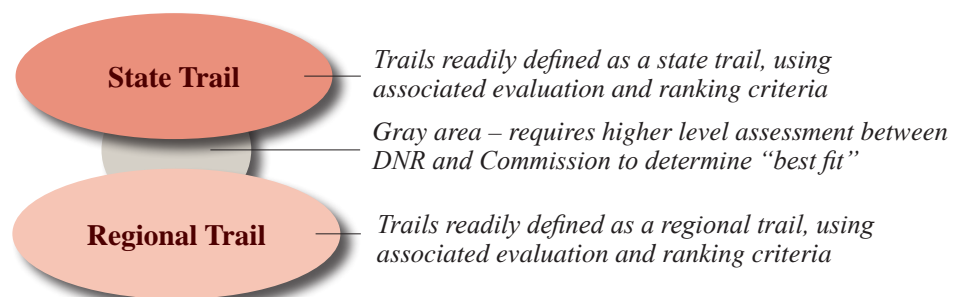
State Non-Motorized Trail System – Minnesota DNR

Permits travel in an appropriate manner along a route which provides at least one of the following recreational opportunities:

- Travel along a route which connects areas or points of natural, scientific, cultural, and historic interest
- Travel through an area which possesses outstanding scenic beauty
- Travel over a route designed to enhance and utilize the unique qualities of a particular manner of travel in harmony with the natural environment
- Travel along a route which is historically significant as a route of migration, commerce, or communication
- Travel between units of the state outdoor recreation system or the national trail system

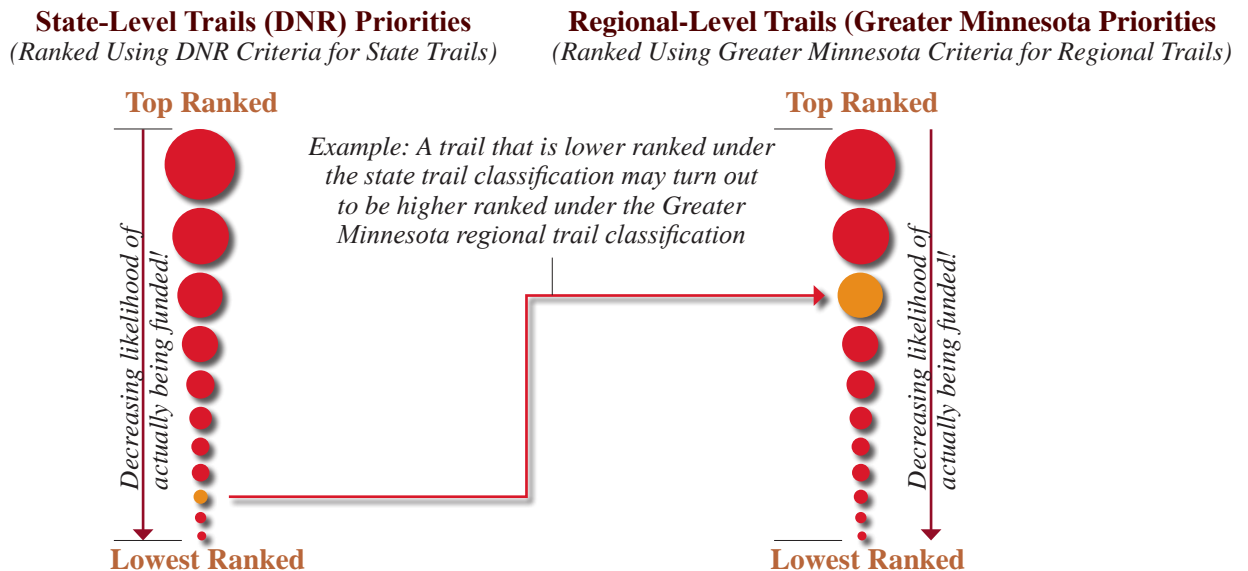
Planning Assumptions: The distinction between state and regional trails in Greater Minnesota is important, with the presumption being that the state system will have a strong “destination trail” orientation that appeals to a statewide audience and tourists. Quality of experience and interconnections with Minnesota landscape features, key parks, and destinations of statewide significance and appeal are key points of focus. With this orientation, it is assumed that the state trail system will be more limited than might have been envisioned before the Commission was in place to take responsibility for regional-level trails in Greater Minnesota. Now that is the case, the Commission will work closely with DNR to ensure that a) trails are properly classified in Greater Minnesota and b) any gaps in service will be addressed in either the state or regional trail system plans.

From a practical planning standpoint, the regional trail system will most often respond to the state trail system since the latter is reasonably accepted as the higher-level system given its focus on meeting statewide needs. Outcomes from DNR’s statewide planning efforts will help define where the state system ends and the regional system begins. Irrespective of who takes the lead, one of the challenges that can be anticipated is addressing trails that fall into the “gray zone” between systems, as the following graphic illustrates.



Going forward, with the Commission taking on the planning responsibility for determining the merit of proposed regional trails, the number of trails that fall into the gray area is likely to be relatively limited with good coordination with DNR.

The more pressing issue is determining which, if any, of the trails in Greater Minnesota that are currently classified as “state” trails are actually more appropriately classified as regional. Given the backlog of unfunded state trails, this is no small issue in that some of these trails may be so far down the priority list that there is little likelihood of them being funded anytime soon, if at all. Whereas relative to statewide significance, a low priority may indeed be justified for these trails (using DNR’s criteria), their regional significance might be considerably different (using the Commission’s criteria), and perhaps more important. The following graphic highlights this issue.



The classification of a trail – state versus regional – will significantly affect its ranking relative to established criteria for each of the classifications. This is important in that a misclassified trail that does not rank high at the state level may be of much greater value (and higher ranked) at the regional level, potentially resulting in a missed opportunity to service a legitimate regional need.

To ensure that both state and regional trails are properly classified and ranked according to merit, the Commission will work with DNR to evaluate currently-approved state trail master plans using the appropriate criteria to determine which system they best fit in and rank the highest.

State and Regional Motorized Trail System – Minnesota DNR

State and regional motorized trails criteria are not based on any state statute per se, with the publication *Trail Planning, Design, and Development Guidelines*, MN DNR (2006) used as the baseline guideline. With snowmobile trails, snow quality is of primary importance, as is a scenic setting. Note that snowmobiles are not considered to be ORVs, and are permitted on some regional and state trails (and parks) when local ordinances and the park implementing agencies have authorized such use. Local units of government in the rural areas of the region most often work with DNR and snowmobile clubs to provide rights of way for snowmobile trail linkages.



As these photos illustrate, ORV trails require specialized design to be sustainable, and a long-term commitment to maintenance. For this reason, DNR is, by expertise and statute, best suited to oversee the development of these facilities in Greater Minnesota, working cooperatively with the Commission as appropriate to ensure regional needs are met.

Off-road vehicles (ORVs) are defined as all-terrain vehicles (ATVs), off-road motorcycles (ORMs) and four wheel-drive vehicles being used off designated roads. In the last decade or so, the number of ORVs has increased significantly, creating growing demand for ORV recreation facilities across the state. Unfortunately, ORV use has been shown to have negative impacts on the experiences of those taking part in outdoor recreation without motorized vehicles when both activities occur in the same area. ORV use can also cause environmental damage such as soil erosion, inappropriate use in wetland areas and stream crossings, noise and air pollution. For these reasons, Metro Regional Parks finds ORVs – other than snowmobiles – as being inappropriate in regional parks, park reserves and regional trails because of their adverse impact on existing recreational activities and the natural environment.

With ORV trails, a natural setting is an important element of the experience, with highly technical areas a secondary attraction. Natural, hilly areas typically make for the best trail locations. Developing trails in areas already influenced by human activity, or otherwise disturbed or degraded, is common practice. Avoiding areas of noted ecological value is a priority consideration.

Commission Planning Assumptions: Following Metro Regional Parks lead on this issue, the Commission acknowledges that the DNR has statutory authority (under Minnesota Statute 84.03) to provide for regulated use of ORVs through its management of legislatively-dedicated accounts that contain license receipts and a portion of Minnesota gas tax revenues from the use of these vehicles.

As is the case with Metro Regional Parks, the Commission will work collaboratively with DNR on siting and managing off-road vehicle use areas in Greater Minnesota to address the need while not adversely affecting adjoining land uses, especially those of high natural resource value. Although the Commission may participate in defining this need and in finding siting opportunities for ORV uses, it is presumed that the lead responsibility for planning and development will remain with DNR under the authority it is granted in the noted statute. Under its role, it is also presumed that DNR will take the lead in defining this classification, along with any accompanying protocol and criteria to be used for evaluating and determining the merit of any projects fostered in Greater Minnesota.

Metro Regional Park and Trail System – Metro Regional Parks

Park Reserves: Are expected to provide for a diversity of outdoor recreational activities. The major feature that distinguishes the park reserve from a regional park is that the reserve is also intended to provide, protect and manage representative areas of the original major landscape types in the metropolitan area to permit appreciation and enjoyment of the natural resources that influenced the region's development.

Regional Parks: Provides settings with high quality natural resources and offer outdoor recreation facilities and activities that are primarily natural resource based. Examples include camping, picnicking, hiking, swimming, boating, canoeing, fishing, and nature study. A related measure is the range of these activities accommodated within the park (e.g., a park with a beach, campground and boat launch facilities is more likely to attract a regional clientele than a park with only one of these facilities).

Special Features Regional Parks: Focus is on unique or unusual landscape features, historically significant sites, or parks containing characteristics of regional or statewide significance.

Regional Non-Motorized Trails: The trail is located in a regionally desirable setting. Criteria include attractive, unusual, and/or representative landscapes, important destinations, or high quality natural areas. Distinction is also made between destination and linking trails, with the former emphasizing the trail as a destination unto itself, and the latter more focused on connections between regional amenities.

Planning Assumptions: As is the case with state parks, the Commission is committed to ensuring that regional parks and trails in Greater Minnesota complement those provided by Metro Regional Parks at the interface between systems. The Commission will work with Metro Regional Parks (presumably park directors in adjoining counties) to coordinate planning and funding strategies.

Also, as previously noted relative the state park system, there is no provision for regional park reserves in Greater Minnesota classification system since it is presumed that state park system will effectively address this role. However, on the edge between metro and Greater Minnesota regional systems, the Commission will work with Metro Regional Parks ensure that preserving natural resource areas are adequately addressed and meeting the goals of the Legacy Plan.

Local Park and Trails Systems

As previously defined, the Commission will work to coordinate regional and local-level park and trail system planning across Greater Minnesota to ensure consistency between planning outcomes and funding priorities.

Section 4 Protocol for Designating Regional Parks and Trails

Overview

The protocol for evaluating the regional-significance of a park or trail follows a step-by-step process. The forthcoming protocol takes a project from initial review through formal ranking and, ultimately, funding allocations. The process is structured to ensure consistency in evaluations and avoid conflicts of interest.

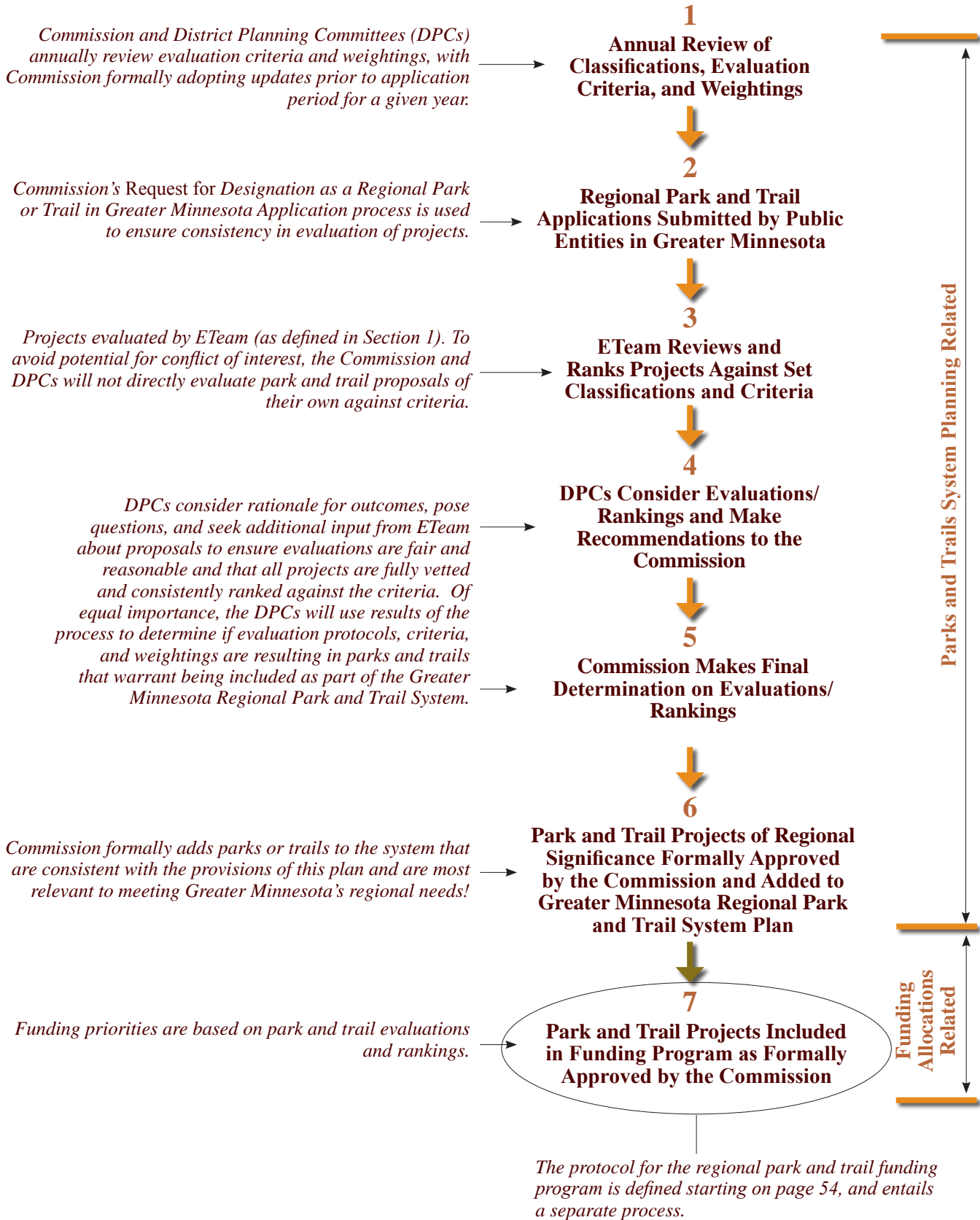
The goal is to require enough due diligence in the vetting process to ensure that the best park and trail prospects for regional designation emerge, while at the same time making sure that it does not become too onerous for cities, townships, and counties in Greater Minnesota to participate.



Whether striving for a simple or unique experience, the goal of the vetting process is to ensure the best regional park and trail prospects are discovered.

Protocol for Formalizing Regional Park and Trail Designation

The flow chart on the next page outlines the major steps in the evaluation process to achieve regional park or trail designation as it relates to the actions of the Commission and District Planning Committees.



As outlined, **the Commission’s and DPCs’ primary role is to evaluate overall results of the vetting process and determine if the protocol/criteria being used are resulting in quality outcomes.** This is in contrast to members being directly involved in the actual vetting of individual parks and trails – which, as defined, is the role of the ETeam. This is an important distinction in that avoiding potential conflicts of interest between members and the parks and trails being evaluated is central to maintaining the credibility of the vetting process. It is only in this manner that the Commission can be assured that the parks and trails of highest merit are the ones that actually get recognized as being regionally-significant.

Application Process/Evaluation Protocol for Park and Trail Projects Seeking Regional Designation

The detailed protocol and requirements for submitting projects is fully defined in the Commission’s *Request for Designation as a Regional Park or Trail in Greater Minnesota Application*. This gets into the specific and detailed requirements beyond the primary (first-tier) evaluation criteria as defined in this section. These “second-tier” evaluation criteria focus on discerning factors related to feasibility, commitment of partners, etc. that are important for a project to be successful. Although second tier criteria are non-scored per se, they will factor into deciding the viability and timing of funding a project. However, first tier criteria remain the primary means by which the merit of a project is evaluated and ranked. Also note that since the application form and instructions will be routinely updated, its provisions will take precedence over those defined here.

Although there are many previously defined potential regional parks and trails, the application process gives all cities, townships, and counties in Greater Minnesota an equal opportunity to submit projects for evaluation and ranking. Irrespective of the initiator, *all requests are required to follow the same application process and will be evaluated following the same process and set of criteria established for each park or trail classification to determine a project’s merit and ultimate ranking.*

Steps in the Evaluation Process

The evaluation process entails three steps, as the following graphic illustrates.



Each of these steps have specific requirements, as the following defines.

Step 1: Initial Screening/Baseline Evaluation for Regional-Significance

Overview: The purpose of this step is to determine if a given park, trail, or recreational facility unit meets the basic requirements for consideration as being of regionally significance. The goal is to give entities in Greater Minnesota an opportunity to determine the viability of a project before seeking a more complete (and involved) evaluation and formal ranking. This step includes an initial or baseline evaluation of the information provided by the applicant against the defined criteria to determine the potential merit of the project and where it might rank on a tiered basis (high, medium, low). The result of the evaluation allows proposers to determine if a project will likely reach at least a minimal threshold to be considered regionally significant.

Requirements:

- Submittal of the Commission’s *Request for Designation as a Regional Park or Trail in Greater Minnesota Application* is required for all projects.
- Proposers should provide as much information as possible, but under this step are not required to provide an approved/adopted Unit Master Plan and fully executed agreements or commitments from proposing agency(s)
- Completed inventory using the Commission’s web-based GIS inventory tool (as defined under *Information Management System* in Section 5)

Outcome: Commission makes an initial determination of regional significance, including providing an initial ranking of high, medium, or low so that proposer has a sense of the general merit of the project. For low ranking projects, the Commission informs proposer that the park or trail unit is not likely to reach regionally-significant status, and include the rationale for making that determination.

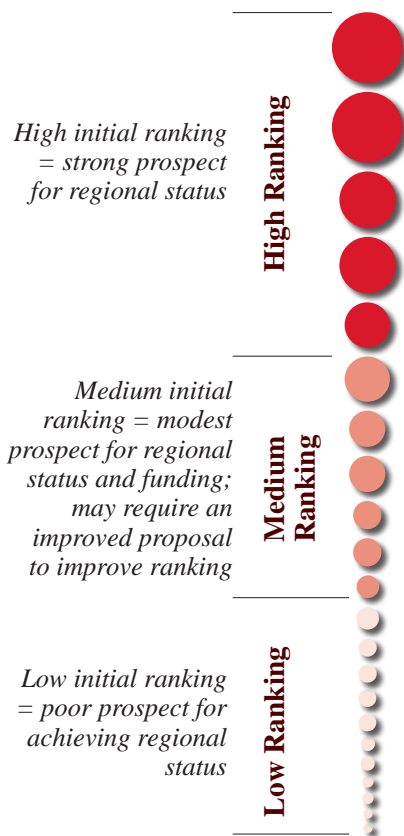
For high and medium ranking projects, the Commission informs proposer that the park and trail unit will likely have merit as being regionally significant, and include the rationale for making that determination. Also included is a point by point listing of pros and cons of the project, along with a listing of missing information that is needed under Step 2.

Step 2: Detailed Evaluation/Formal Recognition as Regional Park/Trail

Overview: The purpose of this step is to formally evaluate a given park or trail that received at least a high or medium ranking under Step 1. For this to occur, proposers must meet all of the detailed information requirements defined in the application – the most important of which is providing an approved/adopted master plan and a statement as to the initiator’s commitment to fulfill obligations/role as the implementing agency.

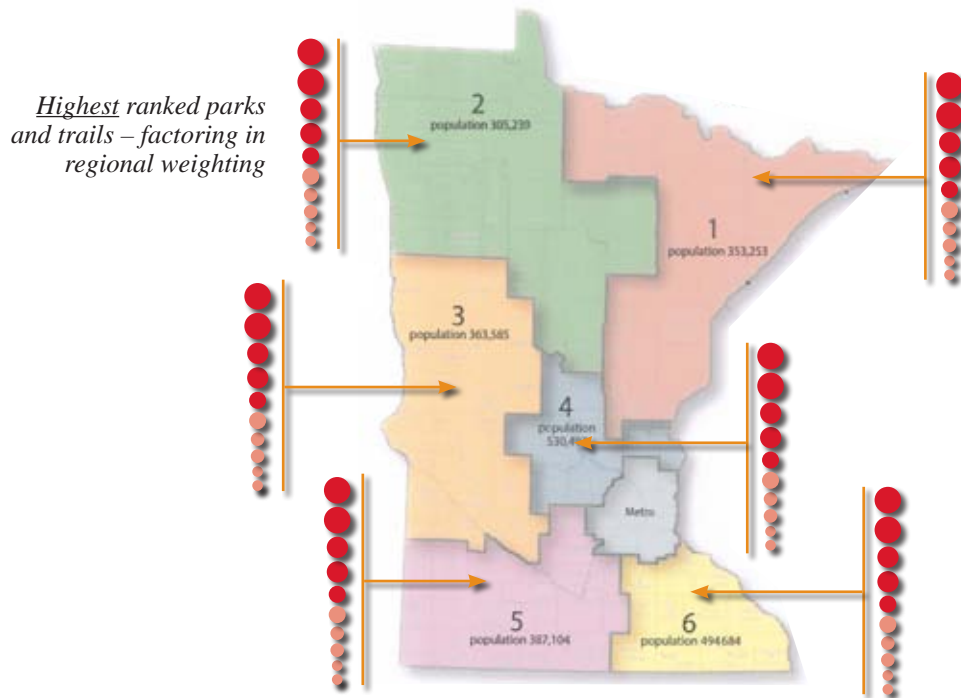
Requirements:

- Submittal of the Commission’s *Request for Designation as a Regional Park or Trail in Greater Minnesota Application* is required for all projects.
- Approved/adopted regional park or trail master plan meeting all of the requirements as defined in this section and the application form
- Statement as to the initiator’s commitment to fulfill obligations/role as the implementing agency



Note: Thresholds between high, medium, and low are set by the Commission each year, with input from the District Planning Committees.

Outcome: After review of the provided information, the Commission evaluates and formally includes high ranked projects as part of the *Greater Minnesota Regional Park and Trail System*, as the following illustrates.



As illustrated, the highest ranked parks and trails within each region will be formally added to the *Greater Minnesota Regional Park and Trail System Plan* once fully vetted and approved by the Commission.

Identifies top ranked parks and trails and provides basis for 1, 5, and 10-year funding allocations!

Greater Minnesota 10-Year Regional Park and Trail System Plan

Greater Minnesota Long-Range Regional Park and Trail System Plan

Provides basis for long-range planning!

Enccompasses all vetted parks of regional significance

As was the case with initial screenings, the Commission establishes the ranking and scoring threshold that are used to determine which parks and trails will become funding priorities and part of *Greater Minnesota 10-Year Regional Park and Trail System Plan*. This is determined by balancing the potential size and scale of the system against funding level projections over a 1, 5, and 10 year period. This time frame corresponds with the funding program defined in the next step to ensure that the ambition of the plan stays within the Commission’s capacity to fund it over time.

The intent is for the 10-year plan to be reasonably robust while still being realistic in terms of its implementability. *Importantly*, with funding-relative-to-need expected to be limited, the ranking threshold will likely be set quite high. Some parks and trails that would legitimately add value to the regional system will not be included in the 10-year plan due to limited funding.

To ensure that the broader picture of a fully built-out system is not lost, all vetted parks and trails determined to be regionally-significant will be included in a long-range system plan. This will be used to define the overall potential for the regional system in Greater Minnesota, along with helping define the magnitude of investment needed to fully realize it. Note, however, that the vetting process will take years to complete. As such, nearer-term listings and maps depicting the system should not be construed as being complete and representing the full extent of regionally-significant parks and trails that may exist in Greater Minnesota. Realistically, following the protocols defined in this plan to determine the optimal extent of the system will take some years to complete and fully understand.

Step 3: Formal Listing in Funding Program

Overview: Under this step, the Commission works with the proposers of the highest ranked projects within each of the districts to include them in a formal *Greater Minnesota Regional Parks and Trails Funding Program*.

Requirements:

- Initiators of approved park and trail projects that are ranked high are required to work with the Commission to define options on project phasing, cost sharing, etc., as needed.

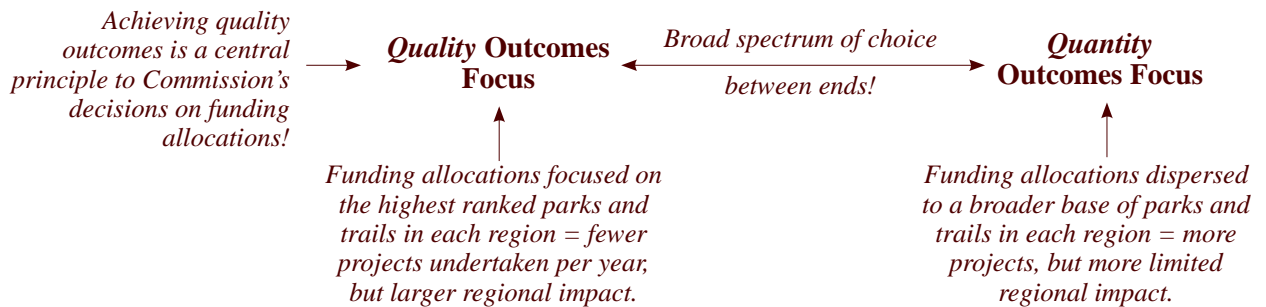
Outcome: An adopted *Greater Minnesota Regional Parks and Trail Funding Program*.

Protocol for Regional Parks and Trails Funding Program

As noted above under Step 3, the highest ranked projects are included in the formal *Greater Minnesota Regional Parks and Trails Funding Program*. The program will set forth a 1 year, 5 year, and 10 year listing of projects to be funded, in order of priority along with funding requirements and phasing options. The following outlines the steps in developing the funding program.



The *Funding Allocation Framework* (step 1) relates to the Commission determining each year the best strategy for distributing available funding to achieve the highest public good. As defined in Section 2, focusing on quality outcomes is one of the central principles underpinning this strategic plan. As the following graphic illustrates, this requires the Commission to make a clear statement about what is most advantageous – quality or quantity, or some combination thereof – to serve the best interests of Greater Minnesota and consistent with the spirit of the Legacy Amendment and the provisions of this plan.



Funding Allocation/Phasing Guidelines

Even with a merit-based approach, some larger projects may require phasing to complete due to funding limitations. As a general guideline, funding allocations adhere to the following:

- **Consistency with merit rankings** – initial funding list is consistent with the regional and statewide rankings associated with parks and trails previously vetted and included as part of the regional system plan
- **Funding allocations must achieve quality outcomes** – cost estimates and phasing plans for projects are reviewed in order of ranking, with a determination being made as to the minimum funding needed for the project to result in a discernible public good and make enough of an impact to be of lasting value to the region; in general, the goal is to fully fund projects to achieve the highest possible result; however, it may be determined that phasing is required due to other priorities within the region, or across the state
- **Avoid risk of opportunity lost** – in general, for equally-ranked projects, funding for land acquisition takes precedence over development to avoid missing an opportunity; this may also hold true when land acquisition of lower ranked – but still top-tier – parks and trails needs to take precedence over higher ranked development projects when the risk of opportunity lost is deemed to be very high

Note that the ETeam is responsible for making an initial recommendation on phasing and funding priorities based on rankings, phasing options defined in park and trail master plans, and best judgements based on an understanding of system needs and priorities. All of this is taken into consideration as the DPCs make their recommendations to the Commission for review and approval.

District Considerations Affecting Funding Allocations

As defined, merit-based rankings are used as the basis for establishing funding priorities across Greater Minnesota. Depending on the weights given to individual criteria, it can be expected that highly ranked parks and trails are, by design, in regions with higher concentrations of the population.

Whereas parks and trails of highest merit will in fact be priorities, the Commission will strive to ensure that no district is left out since balance, fairness, and equity are also important considerations and in keeping with the spirit of this plan. Further, well-reasoned investments in regional centers with less population are important to future vitality, quality of life, and growth. To accommodate this, the Commission, in concert with the DPCs and ETeam, will determine the percentage of the overall funding package each year that is allocated to projects of highest merit across all of Greater Minnesota and those of highest merit within a given district.

Feasibility-Related Considerations Affecting Funding Priorities and Allocations

As part of the 2012 legislative action, the local match and project cap requirements associated with Legacy funding for Greater Minnesota regional parks and trails were eliminated. This is important to ensuring that allocations of Legacy funds is less restrictive and go to projects of highest merit irrespective of location and costs.

Nonetheless, **even though the Commission is committed to investing in the highest-ranked projects, pragmatic factors important to the success of a project will also factor into final funding decisions.** As previously defined, these “second tier” criteria include discerning factors related to feasibility, level of commitment of proposers, regional support, proof of long-term sustainability, etc. – all of which are considered essential for even highly ranked projects to be successfully implemented. Although second tier criteria will not effect the merit score per se, they will influence whether a project is a “go/no-go,” “knocked-out,” or otherwise delayed for funding consideration due to questions about feasibility and long-term sustainability.

With respect to level of commitment of proposers, **the Commission will also take into consideration the extent to which local funding is provided in support of a project.** The spirit of this provision is to provide some level of additional incentive for local cities, townships, and counties in Greater Minnesota to add both direct value to the project and strengthen local commitment to its success. (Note that the 2012 legislation removing the local match and project cap included a provision that calls for “additional consideration shall be given to applicants who provide a non-state cash match” to any funding allocations that they request and receive.)

Since second tier criteria and incentive approaches are subject to change over time, the *Request for Designation as a Regional Park or Trail in Greater Minnesota Application* will be used to further define these considerations and how they will be used to evaluate projects for funding priority.

Master Plan Requirements

All master plans require public involvement to define values and needs.

As defined under *Step 2 – Detailed Evaluation and Formal Recognition as Regional Park or Trail*, **a master plan is required for all projects that fall under any of the listed classifications.** These master plans are vital to defining the specifics of acquisition, development and operation of regional park and trail facilities and one of the primary means by which the Commission can gain assurance that proposals are well-thought out and vetted.

The master plan process is seen as the best means for cities, townships, and counties in Greater Minnesota to understand their own needs and the merit of the project in meeting regional-level needs. Further, the process is seen as the best means to ensure that the initiator understands its own obligations and responsibilities as the local implementing agency, especially as it relates to ongoing operations, maintenance, and overall sustainability.

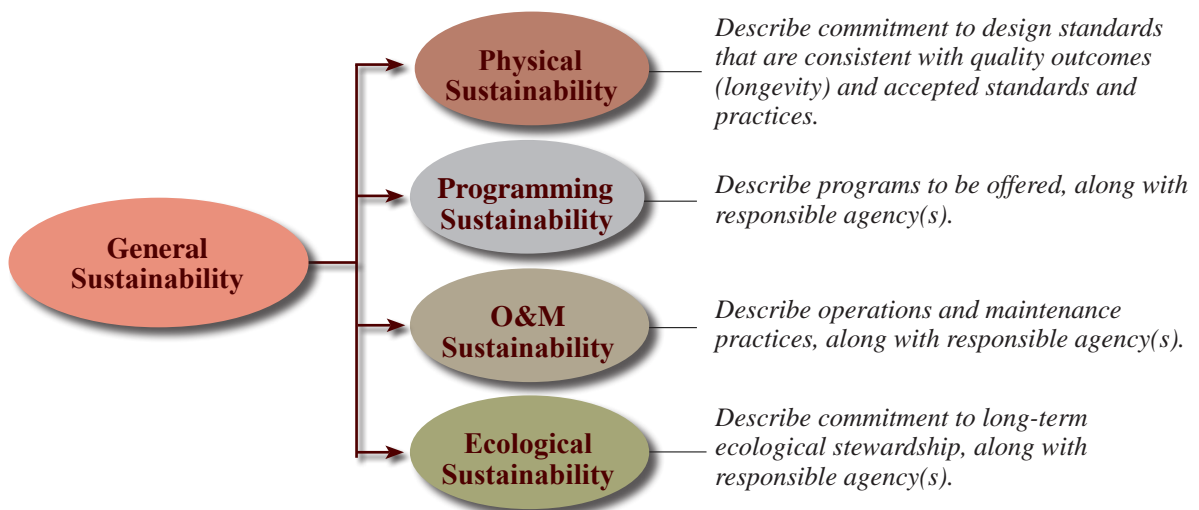
Note that any plans that are inconsistent or incomplete relative to the stated requirements will be returned with comments to the implementing agency, which must be revised and resubmitted for the plan to be eligible for formal evaluation.

Master Plan Minimal Requirements – General

At a minimum, the master plan content must include:

- **Introduction/overview** – general overview of the project, including which classification it falls under
- **Proposer/implementing agency(s)** – clearly defines implementing agency(s), including any regional partnerships that may have come together to support the project, such as cities, townships, and counties within a given region; where operations, management, maintenance, programming, etc. is a shared responsibility, details of that partnership must be provided, including any joint power or other forms of agreement spelling out the relationships
- **Setting/regional context** – describe the location of the site, whether it is part of a city, township, or county system plan; also define proximity to, and interface with, other regional and state-level parks and trails, including how the park or trail would complement (and not duplicate) facilities provided at those sites
- **Site information** – such as boundaries for existing and proposed parcels; with the latter, estimated acquisition costs, list of parcels, schedule for their acquisition, natural and other resources, site suitability, any special assessments, and other conditions affecting acquisition
- **Vision, trends, and public values** – including a vision statement, demographic trends influencing demand, recreational trends/demand information, public health values, economic development/tourism opportunities; *local citizen participation in the process is required*, and must include a summary of findings from general public outreach and interest group input; define any areas of conflict, and how that is resolved; include statement as to how the park or trail conforms to/addresses the evaluation criteria established for its classification
- **Development master plan** – describe proposed features/development program, and support with site maps, aerial images, site photos, graphics, and written text; address accessibility and other measures designed to ensure that the facility can be used by members of special population groups

- **Ecological (natural/land resources) stewardship plan** – include (as available) inventory of key resources using GIS-based Minnesota Land Cover Classification System (DNR), Minnesota County Biological Survey, Natural Heritage Information System, and/or other systems that can effectively map natural, cultural, and historic features; describe natural/land resources, wetlands, and surface water protection strategy; provide information on how vegetation will be managed
- **Research plan** – focusing on meeting requirements defined under the *Protocol for Visitor Counts and Site Intercept Surveys* in Section 6, which sets forth the protocol for collecting visitation information on an ongoing basis
- **Implementation, management, and sustainability plan** – describes all aspects of the implementation strategy and priorities, along with addressing factors associated with broad-based sustainability, as the following graphic highlights



For each of the listed categories, the master plan must include an approach statement plus any associated cost estimates and related information. Cost estimates for acquisition, development, natural resource stewardship must be included. An operations and management plan must include rules, regulations or ordinances affecting the site, estimated operations and maintenance costs and sources of revenue to operate and maintain recreation facilities.

Master Plan Requirements – Smaller Projects

On occasion, smaller-scale projects may warrant some flexibility on the extent to which the various elements of a master plan will be required to be addressed. The initiator must formally request this as part of *Step 1: Initial Screening/Baseline Evaluation for Regional-Significance* submittals. The Commission will make a determination on any flexibility on meeting master plan requirements.

Note that even though the requirements for smaller-scale projects may be more limited, *all* projects are required to complete a master plan to ensure reasonable consistency in the evaluation process and ability to fully vet a project.

Section 5 Statewide Information Management System Plan

Overview

This section sets forth an overall strategy for developing a web-based *Information Management System* (IMS) for Greater Minnesota. **The goal is to take a comprehensive approach to managing information for a variety of end uses** – ranging from evaluating proposals for regionally-significant parks and trails to public communication about the location of parks, trails, and recreational facilities.

Consistency with Legacy Plan’s Focus on Information Management and Access

One of the key aspects of the Legacy Plan is the emphasis it places on effective coordination and communication among outdoor recreation providers to ensure that Legacy and other funds are wisely used. **Of particular importance is the emphasis placed on developing a web-based system that provides information to park and trail users**, as well being a primary tool for defining park and trail shortages and addressing them through interagency planning.

One of the key benchmarks cited in the Legacy Plan for determining progress toward this end is the number of park and trail providers participating in the coordinated park and trail website. **The Commission’s goal is to have all counties, cities, and townships in Greater Minnesota using the same system for mutual benefit.**

This plan puts this into action by setting forth the overall framework for a statewide IMS, and then moving forward on implementing applications that address specific priority needs. Over time, the Commission will incrementally expand the capabilities of the system to achieve its fullest potential – which takes it from being primarily a tool for planning to becoming a day-to-day tool for the general public to get information and maps for parks and trails across Minnesota.

With the latter, providing users with the ability to plan trips, create customized maps, use print-on-demand services, and interface with their smartphones is a goal, as is defined in the Legacy Plan. The system could also be used as a means to keep the public informed on all aspects of how Legacy and other funding sources are being allocated across the state, and the means by which those decisions are being made.

Compatibility with Existing GIS-Based Systems

A key goal and baseline principle in developing a GIS-based IMS in Greater Minnesota is ensuring that it is compatible with current or future GIS data bases and system applications that are commonly in use in Minnesota, or otherwise developed by public agencies.

Of particular importance with this system is making sure that the web-based applications are relatively easy to use by non-technical persons, and that they can be easily expanded upon. This includes both on the input end (adding data/information) and output end (retrieving information through various web applications) for any number of end uses.

Foundation for a Statewide IMS

Although the system is being developed to serve its own needs, **the Commission will make the IMS fully available to all other public agencies and affiliated non-profit entities that want to either directly link to the system or use it as their own platform.** Potential partners include DNR and Metro Regional Parks, where full cross-availability and compatibility between IMS and GIS systems is a priority. Other potential public partners include Mn/DOT, University of Minnesota, Parks and Trails Council of Minnesota, Explore Minnesota, League of Minnesota Cities, Association of Minnesota Counties, and others.

To foster system compatibility, the Commission will keep potential partners informed as the system evolves and new components are added. This will both ensure compatibility and take advantage of system upgrades and applications that others may be concurrently making. Ultimately, the Commission envisions a fully integrated and seamless system encompassing local, regional, and state park and trail systems across the state, and will work with other partners to achieve this goal.

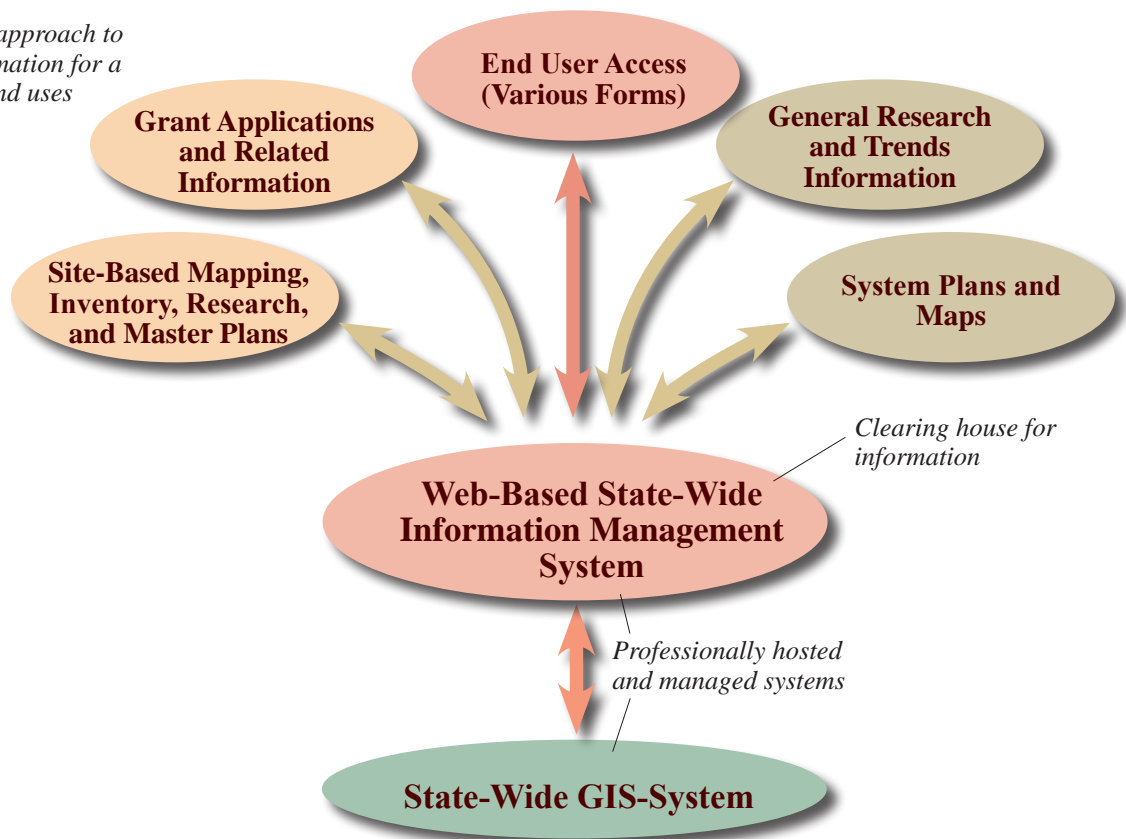
Key Aspects/ Components of the Information Management System

Development of the IMS centers on providing the right information at the right time to support decision making and user access to accurate information. This is especially important in Greater Minnesota, where decision making will occur in various locations and time frames across the state. Given the decentralized nature of Greater Minnesota, the need for accurate, comprehensive, and easily accessible information is of paramount importance in guiding decisions.

Ultimately, the extent of the system will be determined through the development process and practical application. As a starting point, the following illustrates a number of components that the Commission considers important and will focus on, as resources allow.

Key Components of the Information Management System

Comprehensive approach to managing information for a variety of end uses



The following defines each of these components in greater detail.

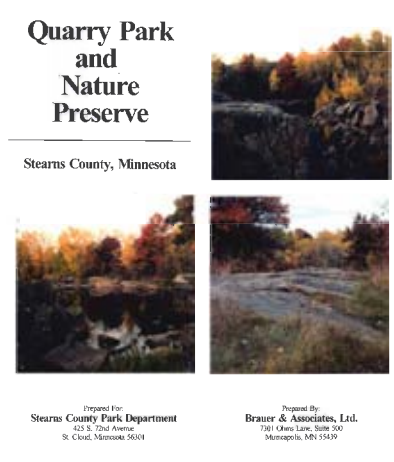
Initial focus of IMS development! → **Site-Based Mapping, Inventory, Research, and Master Plans**

Accurate and readily-accessible information about individual parks and trails is central to understanding the quality and quantity of the infrastructure that exists in Greater Minnesota, and then using that information to determine where improvements are most needed.

On the inventory side, the goal is to significantly improve the level of detail and accuracy of information over previous attempts at inventorying regionally-significant parks and trails. For example, in addition to recording detailed information about site features, the IMS will accommodate downloading or linking pictures, videos, detailed maps, and other forms of information to paint a more complete picture of the site and its level of development.

Being able to upload photos of site amenities is one of the features of the GIS-based site inventory system and related web application.





The system will be designed to upload adopted master plans.

The system will also provide a pathway for linking master plans for individual parks and trails, which will be useful in comparing what already exists on the ground against planned improvements.

Site-based research relates to linking visitor information gathered for each park or trail directly to the site through an IMS portal. Providing this direct link allows for instant access to use trends and other visitor research that would be useful to understanding how use changes over time as features are added or improved.

Grant Applications and Related Information

Using the IMS to directly link a grant application with a given park or trail will ensure that all information is tied together under one system. This will make it much easier for grant reviewers, planning committees, and ETeam to understand the full context of what is being proposed and how a project would improve what is already on the ground.

The ultimate goal is to have the application a web-based form that is filled out online. This will allow for a more robust approach to creating useful links between the application and other information already in or added to the system. Full integration of the grant application into the web application will ensure that grant reviews can be both more thorough in their evaluation while being efficient at the same time.

General Research and Trends Information

The goal with this component is to aggregate all research and trends information pertinent to decision making in one easy to access web portal. This will allow, for example, visitation trends associated with one park or trail to be readily compared to others of a similar nature to determine the types of improvements that are proving to be of most value to users. Research will also be used as a means to determine the extent to which proposed improvements to a park or trail are in alignment with trends and defined needs.

Greater Minnesota System Plans, Maps, and Related

This component will illustrate all of the regional parks and trails in Greater Minnesota in map form, which will be accompanied by various planning documents and matrices that describe the system. At full implementation, the goal is to include all local, township, county, state, and federal managed lands in the system. This will ensure that improvements to regional parks and trails take into consideration what is being offered in other nearby parks and trails administered by other public providers.

End User Access (Various Forms)

Initially, the focus will be on developing and using the system for planning purposes, with the inventory and mapping application being the most important to get up and running. In the long term, the goal is to make the system fully accessible for the Commission's internal purposes as well as directly available to the public for everything from participating in the public process to planning a family outing in a park.

Section 6 Research, Measurement, and Public Outreach Plan

Overview

As defined in Section 1, past research related to parks and trails in Minnesota has primarily focused on measuring use. Although this remains important, the Legacy Plan emphasizes developing a more comprehensive approach to research and performance measurement to gain greater assurance that investments are well-targeted and of lasting value. This section provides a framework for the Commission to address this issue, along with a framework for general public outreach and engagement.

Framework for Research and Measurement

The Commission is committed to taking a comprehensive approach to research and performance measurement to define outdoor recreation trends and public needs/demands across Greater Minnesota. This is especially important in Greater Minnesota, where targeted research has been limited or not robust-enough to be of much use. In general, how well the park and trail infrastructure in Greater Minnesota (and across the state in general) actually performs is not well-documented or understood.

The following illustrates the key aspects of the comprehensive research and measurement program that the Commission will pursue in partnership with DNR and Metro Regional Parks.



The following provides an overview of each these components.

Participation/Use Measurement

Tracking participation and measuring the use of parks and trails will start with undertaking routine visitor counts and tracking visitor origins using established protocols that the Commission will develop. Initially, the goal is to measure change over time in use levels associated with a given park or trail, and subsequently the Greater Minnesota regional system as whole. As resources allow, the goal is to undertake more and more targeted research that measures participation and use characteristics down to the individual facility level to determine performance and value. The objective here is to use research to help define the type of facilities that are actually being used, what it is about them that keeps people coming back, and do regional differences matter.



These two photos highlight the importance of performance measurement. Both of these are “designated” mountain bike trails. But the top one is an old forest road that does not perform to the same level as the bottom one, which is purpose-built using appropriate design standards.

Performance Measurement (of Physical Infrastructure)

Closely tied to the above, this area of research focuses on evaluating the performance of individual facilities and the system as whole relative to a defined level of design quality and/or desired level of service standard. This entails using a consistent approach tailored for use in evaluating regional park, trail, and recreation facilities across Greater Minnesota.

The goal with this research is to measure performance as objectively as possible using a rating system. This includes: a) establishing optimal design standards for facilities; b) evaluating actual performance against those standards; and c) defining the gap in performance using those measurements. The same type of rating system can be used to assess overall park or trail design and maintenance performance.

At the individual park or trail level, this research will help define where improvements need to be made to enhance performance. At the system level, this research will help define where future investments are most warranted to improve service within a region and across Greater Minnesota.

Outdoor Recreation Trends/Demand Research

This research component is more general in nature and focuses on getting into a routine of studying recreation trends and changes in demand using various approaches and forms of research. **The goal here is to take a more forward-looking approach to research to better understand the changing nature of demand, and what it will take to keep people engaged in outdoor recreational pursuits.**

Economic Impact Studies

Developing regional parks and trails in Greater Minnesota are often part of a larger regional economic picture in a couple of ways:

- Maintaining/enhancing quality of life in Greater Minnesota – using regional parks and trails as part of making an area an appealing place to live
- Fostering economic development – using regional parks and trails as part of an overall strategy to entice more visitors and tourists to an area

In concert with other forms of research, **economic impact-type studies will help complete the picture of the true value of adding new or enhancing existing regional parks and trails in various parts of the state.**

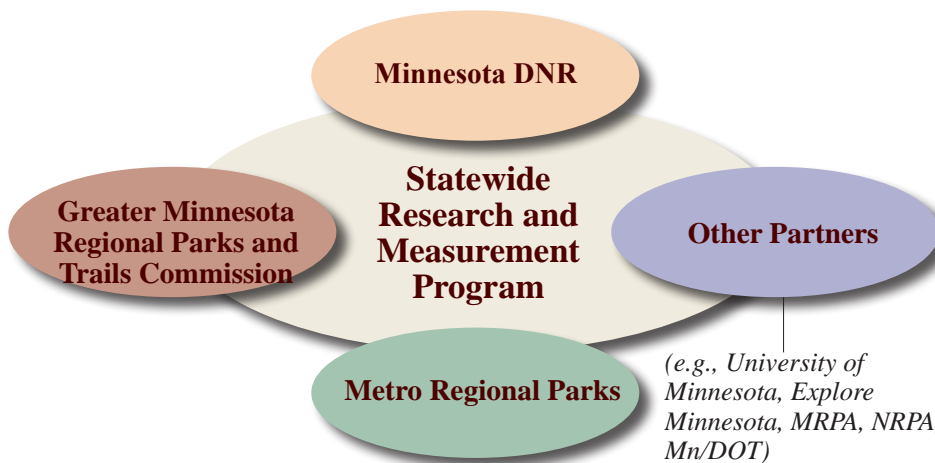
Although a state facility, DNR’s development of the mountain bike trails at the Cuyuna Country State Recreation Area is good example of where development of a high quality facility is clearly having a positive economic impact on the area. Being able to formally measure that over time would provide valuable information about cost-benefits and in shaping future investment decisions.

Statewide Approach to Research and Measurement

As the Legacy Plan suggests, **the onus is on all implementing entities to increase the diligence toward research and measurement to better understand trends and demands to ensure that all investments are well targeted.** Although building such a program will take time, the Commission is committed to partnering with DNR, Metro Regional Parks, and others

to take on this endeavor. To that end, all research methodologies, analysis, and findings resulting from Commission efforts will be made available to all interested parties through a convenient website portal.

Over time, the Commission will work with its partners to develop and implement a cohesive statewide approach to research and measurement to ensure consistency in methodologies, focus on key needs, and take advantage of economies of scale.



Framework for Public Outreach: Potential Stakeholders

As defined in Section 4, site-specific master plans for parks and trails are required to include a public outreach component to help define the demand for one type of facility versus another, and to justify the merit of the project in meeting regional needs. In a broader context, **undertaking general research will require various forms of public engagement to solicit information for planning purposes.**

The following lists potential stakeholder groups to provide a starting point for designing a public process for site-specific master plans or research initiatives. Although not exhaustive, the listing underscores the importance (and expectation) that due diligence with public outreach is required to gain assurance that public input is used to shape outcomes. This is especially the case with master plans, where the goal is to include facilities that resonate with, and will be used by, the regional population.

Potential Stakeholder Groups in Greater Minnesota

Residents/Citizens

Relates to residents/citizens at-large that would not be covered under one of the other groupings. Potential stakeholder groups include, but are not limited to:

- Public at-large
- Interested citizens
- Representatives of small towns/businesses affected by funding decisions
- Minority/emerging/ under-served populations
- School-age populations/young families
- Self-described non-users

Public and Private Organizations/Advocacy Groups

Relates to public and private organizations/advocacy groups to gain insights on trends and perspectives on issues of site-specific or regional importance. Tapping into any research that these groups have amassed may also be pertinent. Potential stakeholder groups include, but are not limited to:

- Parks and Trails Council of Minnesota
- Formal and Informal Advocacy Groups; examples:
 - Minnesota Recreational Trail Users Association
 - Bicycle Alliance of Minnesota
 - Local ATV or mountain bike club
 - Minnesota Parks and Recreation Association
- Private industry/retailers, examples:
 - Bicycle Dealers Association
 - Professional Association of Outdoor Retailers
 - Manufactures of Outdoor Recreational Equipment
- Tourism-related associations, lodging providers, and Chambers of Commerce
- University of Minnesota
- Health care providers/advocacy groups (i.e., Blue Cross/Blue Shield)
- Friends groups and specialized advocacy groups, examples:
 - Minnesota Trust for Public Land
 - Outdoor Recreational Writers
 - Wilderness Inquiry

Public Agencies

Relates to public agencies to gain insights on trends and perspectives on issues of site-specific or regional importance. Tapping into any research that these groups have amassed may also be pertinent. Potential stakeholder groups include, but are not limited to:

- DNR – various divisions
- Metro Regional Parks (staff and implementing agencies)
- Minnesota County Parks Association
- Minnesota School Districts

Framework for Public Outreach: Engagement Tools

The following provides an overview of the more common processes and techniques available for public outreach. As with the listing of potential stakeholders, this is provided to reinforce the importance of thinking broadly about how to get people involved in public process to ensure that public demands and values are understood and used to shape outcomes.

Common and emerging tools include:

- **Brainstorming session** – undertaken with key project partners early on in the process to uncover ideas and define key planning concerns and goals
- **Town meetings/open houses/listening sessions** – in convenient locations so that interested citizens can give input related to their areas of interest or concern

- **Focus groups** – to gain input from select stakeholder groups, hard-to-reach populations (e.g., minority groups, youth), and those currently disenfranchised or not otherwise involved in other public meetings or interviews
- **Structured interviews** – to aid in facilitating input from defined groups and individual stakeholders in a non-threatening setting
- **Community leader workshop(s)** – used to engage select individuals that have a sense for the “pulse” of the community and issues being faced
- **Mailed questionnaire** – enables a targeted group to provide input, with the limitation being that participation is self-selected and thus not as statistically reliable as a phone survey; questionnaires are typically sent out using established mailing lists or provided at a location frequented by a targeted group
- **Targeted web-based (i.e., SurveyMonkey) surveys** – used to gain input from select stakeholders, with the limitation being access to the internet is required; nonetheless, this can be an economical and convenient way for a larger population to participate
- **Phone survey** – provides a statistically reliable method and representative sample of citizens’ perspectives on issues; this can be used to effectively “drill down” on issues beyond what was garnered from the other listed tools
- **Speaker forums, seminars, summits** – select individuals present and facilitate discussions with select audiences to broaden public exposure of the project and gain new insights into planning issues
- **Community events, project e-newsletters, project updates on local websites** – provides additional avenues to obtain input and provide information as the project progresses
- **Social media** – the use of Facebook, Twitter, and other emerging forms of social media is an increasingly useful avenue to gain input from stakeholders and, of equal importance, provide information that can be readily dispersed to a wide audience; one limiting factor is that many of these are self-selecting, and the sheer volume of information making it difficult at times to connect with people

End of document.



In the end, it's all about getting people outdoors to enjoy nature and experience simple pleasures.

GREATER MINNESOTA REGIONAL PARKS AND TRAILS STRATEGIC PLAN

Planning Consultant:
Schoenbauer Consulting, LLC
5054 Drew Avenue South
Minneapolis, MN 55410 / 612.578.1975
www.schoenbauerconsulting.com

