

REGIONAL PARKS AND TRAILS LEGISLATIVE REPORT

Free and Reduced-Cost Equipment and Activities

February 2025



METROPOLITAN
COUNCIL

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The Metropolitan Council is the regional planning organization for the seven-county Twin Cities area. The Met Council operates the regional bus and rail system, collects and treats wastewater, coordinates regional water resources, plans and helps fund regional parks, and administers federal funds that provide housing opportunities for low- and moderate-income individuals and families. The 17-member Met Council board is appointed by and serves at the pleasure of the governor.

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About this report

In 2024, the Minnesota Legislature amended 2023 Session Laws, Regular Session, Chapter 40, Article 3, Sec. 4, by adding the following language in 2024 Minnesota Sessions Laws, Regular Session, Chapter 106, Article 3, Sec. 3:

“(e) Implementing agencies that charge a fee for activities or rental equipment, including but not limited to watercraft, skis, bicycles, golf clubs, and green fees, must report to the Metropolitan Council the opportunities to participate in the activities and rent equipment at free or reduced rates offered in their park and recreation programs. By February 1, 2025, the Metropolitan Council must provide a report to the legislative committees and divisions with jurisdiction over legacy funding on the information gathered under this paragraph.”

The following report provides an agency-by-agency summary of free and reduced-cost programs, as provided to the Metropolitan Council by each implementing agency per the statutory reference listed above. For more information about any of these programs, please contact the following Metropolitan Council staff person who will be able to direct questions to the appropriate contact in the regional park implementing agency:

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About the Regional Parks and Trails System

The Met Council is charged under state law with overseeing the acquisition and development of the regional parks and trails system in the metropolitan region. The Council works in partnership with 10 city, county, and special park districts who own and operate the regional parks and trails to create and maintain one of the region's greatest assets.

The Metropolitan Council plays an important role with regards to regional parks and trails in the metropolitan region. While the Met Council does not own or operate any regional parks and trails properties or facilities, it does support the system with coordinated regional planning, funding, system protection, research, information, marketing, and advocacy. As stated above, the implementing agencies independently own and operate their regional parks and trails. Some implementing agencies also own and operate local parks and trails, which are funded differently from the regional system.

State law directs the Met Council, in partnership with the 10 agencies, to determine which parks and trails in the region are included in the Regional Parks and Trails System, identifying areas that should be acquired, and determining land that is regionally significant and would provide a balanced system of outdoor recreation opportunities for the region. When a park or trail is added as part of the Regional Parks and Trails System, the Met Council supports it with coordinated regional planning, funding, system protection, research, information, marketing, and advocacy.

Regional parks and trails are funded with a combination of local funds from the 10 regional parks implementing agencies, user fees, regional funds from the Met Council, state funds, and federal funds.

The Regional Parks and Trails System currently includes:

- 46 regional parks
- 56 regional trails
- 12 park reserves
- 8 special recreation features
- 69.3 million visits in 2023
- 65,339 acres of land in a protected status

A map of the regional park implementing agency jurisdictions is included on page 12.

Free and Reduced-Cost Programs in Metro Regional Parks

Anoka County

Anoka County has hosted a series of free special events at Rice Creek Chain of Lakes Park Preserve and Coon Rapids Dam Regional Park:

- **Snow Day** offers free use of fat tire bikes, ice fishing equipment, and snowshoes, including programs on how to use the equipment.
- **Earth Day Event** offers free use of fat tire bikes, free refreshments, and other free activities

Kids Fishing Clinic provides instruction on how to use fishing equipment, teaching skills such as casting, lure selection, water safety, and rod safety. The clinic also provides free lunch for all participants.

- **The Fall Festival** offers pioneer games, nature activities, and apple cider.

Other **free activities** hosted year-round by Anoka County include the following:

- **Beach visits** provide free activities such as paddleboarding, kayaking, canoeing, and environmental educational activities such as pond studies, insect education, and crafts at Rice Creek Chain of Lakes and Lake George.
- **Learn to ride bicycling programs** teach youth how to ride bikes. Free fat tire bikes and helmets are provided to use at these events.
- **Naturalist Wildlife Track** is a free program where park naturalists host a lunch-and-learn each month at various parks, where they highlight a variety of different environmental education topics.

Anoka County provides financial assistance for the Wargo Nature Center summer camp programs.

Additionally, Anoka County offers free vehicle entry into all regional parks on the first Tuesday of every month.



Carver County

Annual Discounted Recreation

Carver County provides a 50% program fee discount for organizations and groups who fall under one of several equity-based categories. These categories include senior groups, individuals with physical or cognitive disabilities, and low-income communities.

Carver County Parks programming includes:

- Adult recreation lessons
- Kids camp
- Kayak, canoe, and paddleboard rental
- Lawn game rental
- Cross country skiing equipment rental
- Snowshoes rental

Partnership

In addition to the above programs, Carver County hosts reduced-fee programming for adults with disabilities who sign up for short field trips. Partnering agencies include St. David's Center, Holland Life, and the STAR program.



Dakota County

Annual *Fiesta Latina, con o sin nieve*

This Spanish language event is free and open to the public. The event is planned in partnership with Cultural Liaisons from the South Saint Paul Public Schools and Inver Grove Heights Schools, Cultural Family Advocates from District 196, representatives from Comunidades Latinas Unidas en Servicio (CLUES), Esperanza United, HACER, Renacer, NAMI (National Alliance on Mental Illness), Huellas Latinas, Outdoor Latino Minnesota, Mujeres Viajeras de Minnesota, Corazon Caminante, and the YWCA.

The event provides opportunities to try winter outdoor activities, including:

- Kicksledding
- Snowshoeing
- Snow sculpture making
- Sledding
- Outdoor bonfires
- Story walk
- Medallion hunt



BIPOC 196 Ski Program

Cultural Family Advocates from District 196 initiated and led this program in partnership with Dakota County Parks and the Minnesota Youth Ski league. Weather permitting, this program offers:

- Five to six ski sessions for BIPOC students and families at Lebanon Hills Regional Park
- Instructor training and support
- Equipment and ski passes
- 15 pairs of youth skis and training access

Ongoing Free Park Outreach Programs

Dakota County partners with school staff, nonprofit organizations, and community groups to offer free park outreach programs.

Legacy funding supports a range of programs for:

- Cross country skiing
- Kicksledding
- Ice fishing
- Snowshoeing
- Sledding
- Winter nature walks
- Winter gear, such as snowpants, hats, gloves, and coats



Minneapolis Parks and Recreation Board (MPRB)

Winter Family Fun Day at Theodore Wirth Park
 Theodore Wirth Regional Park, the largest park in the Minneapolis park system, offers a free family fun day for families to have the opportunity to explore a wide variety of winter activities including:

- Skiing
- Snowshoeing
- Arts and crafts
- Vendor villages
- Giant puppets
- Giveaways
- Food
- Music and dancing

“Pay What You Can” Programs

Registration fees have been eliminated and made “Pay What You Can” for all youth programs, activities, and sports leagues at MPRB parks, recreation centers, and facilities located at 17 sites.

Additionally, the following parks offer donation-based Rec Plus School Age Childcare:

- Harrison Park
- Matthews Park
- Webber Park

The following summary provides the category and number of free youth programs offered at MPRB parks:

Nature & Environment	843
Sports & Athletics	1078
Food, Gardening, & Cooking	269
Hobbies & Games	624
Creative, Visual, & Performing Arts	462
Technology, Science, & Innovation	216
Social, Leisure, & Community	281
Youth Development & Mentoring	157
Health, Wellness, & Fitness	333
Outdoor Recreation	100
Life Skills & Career Development	60
Culture, Language, & Traditions	77
Water Recreation	60



Ramsey County

School Partnerships

- Saint Paul Public Schools (SPPS)
 - Ramsey County partners with SPPS to offer free ski passes to students on free and reduced lunch that participate on SPPS ski teams.
 - Over the last three years, every preschooler in the district has attended a field trip to Tamarack Nature Center for an experiential learning opportunity.
- Ramsey County partnered with Battle Creek Elementary School for a third consecutive year (92% of the school's population are BIPOC students):
 - 240 hours of fun winter programming
 - Introduced skiing to 80 children
- Harding High School and Johnson High School also participated twice in winter 2023.

Community Partnerships

Community partnerships offered 260 free ski passes and ski rentals to:

- BIPOC Outdoors Facebook group
 - 50 free ski rental coupons
- Hmong American Partnership
 - 50 free ski rental coupons
- Voyager Outward Bound
 - 60 free day passes
- Latinas on the Move and Endurance United
 - 75+ ski rental and day passes
- St. Paul Rec Check
 - 25 ski rental and day passes
- Tamarack Nature Center offers a scholarship program for day camps as a partnership with Saint Paul Public Schools.

Skiing and Kicksledding “Try it” Days

Free learn to ski and kicksled programs were held each Thursday evening in January and February.

Future Partnerships

Working with Comunidades Latinas Unidas en Servicio (CLUES) and Hmong American Partnership to coordinate future events (past partnership efforts experienced weather and scheduling issues).

Ramsey County's new Cultural Liaison position will be expressly focused on building relationships with diverse populations to continue to grow Black, Indigenous and people of color (BIPOC) participation in these types of events.



City of Saint Paul

BIPOC Outdoors

BIPOC Outdoors programming connects Black, Indigenous, and people of color in the Twin Cities to recreational activities in our local and regional parks. The majority of the programs are centered around BIPOC joy. BIPOC Outdoors:

- Teaches participants the skills needed to do a variety of outdoor activities on their own.
- Provides free equipment to use at events.
- Offers a Loaner Program for fishing rods and waders to previous attendees who want to revisit on their own, as well as camping kitchen supplies.

In 2024, the City of Saint Paul organized 39 free programs at regional parks or at regional trails. These include:

- 18 BIPOC walk, jog, and run sessions along the Mississippi River Boulevard; reflective gear and lights for participants were available for loan and to keep.
- Three nature training courses for youth workers in regional parks, to learn how to guide groups.
- Three Family Fishing events at Lake Phalen, where all equipment and instruction are provided to participants at no cost.
- Four partnership youth-focused events.
- One large special event, Phalen Freeze Fest, that included fire building, birding, and crafts.
- 10 BIPOC-led and BIPOC-centered classes with a focus on water quality and stewardship. These classes included free instruction and materials. Fishing poles were given away to folks who attended a previous fishing workshop.

Future Opportunities

BIPOC Outdoors is working on developing a BIPOC Outdoors volunteer program. This program will:

- Train BIPOC folks to become outdoor leaders.
- Manage a gear lending library.
- Further collaborate with the Met Council.



Three Rivers Park District*

Recreation Pass Plus Program

The Three Rivers Park District Recreation Pass Plus program provides opportunities for families experiencing financial difficulty to enjoy the Three Rivers Park system in ways that might not otherwise be possible. Those who live in Hennepin or Scott Counties and are enrolled in a social service program can apply.

Through the program, participants receive:

- Unlimited free equipment rentals
- Free annual recreation passes
- A 60% discount on program fees
- A 60% discount on produce and other items at Gale Woods Farms.

Military Pass Program

The Military Pass Program provides free equipment rentals and recreation passes, as well as discounts on programs and events, summer camps, and Gale Woods Farm products to active military personnel, disabled veterans, or Purple Heart recipients and their families.

In 2024, program participation includes:

- 5,134 active Recreation Pass Plus Members
- 144 active Military Pass Members.

Scholarship Program

Three Rivers Park District offers First Tee scholarships for youth ages 8-17 who are underrepresented in golf.

Partial scholarships are available for youth to take lessons and participate in downhill skiing and snowboarding at Hyland Hills Ski Area in Bloomington through the First Tracks program.

Camping 101

Camping 101 allows participants to camp for free at Baker Campground at Baker Park Reserve. This weekend program includes free site rental, free camping equipment to use, activities, and on-site staff to assist with cooking. Camping 101 aims to make camping accessible to community members historically underrepresented in the Three Rivers Park District due to financial and cultural barriers.

**The above Three Rivers Park District summary includes free and reduced-cost programs provided by Scott County and the City of Bloomington through their shared partnership agreements.*



Washington County

Introductory Programs and Equipment Rental

Washington County offers introductory programs and sampler events that introduce participants to recreational opportunities and provides free equipment.

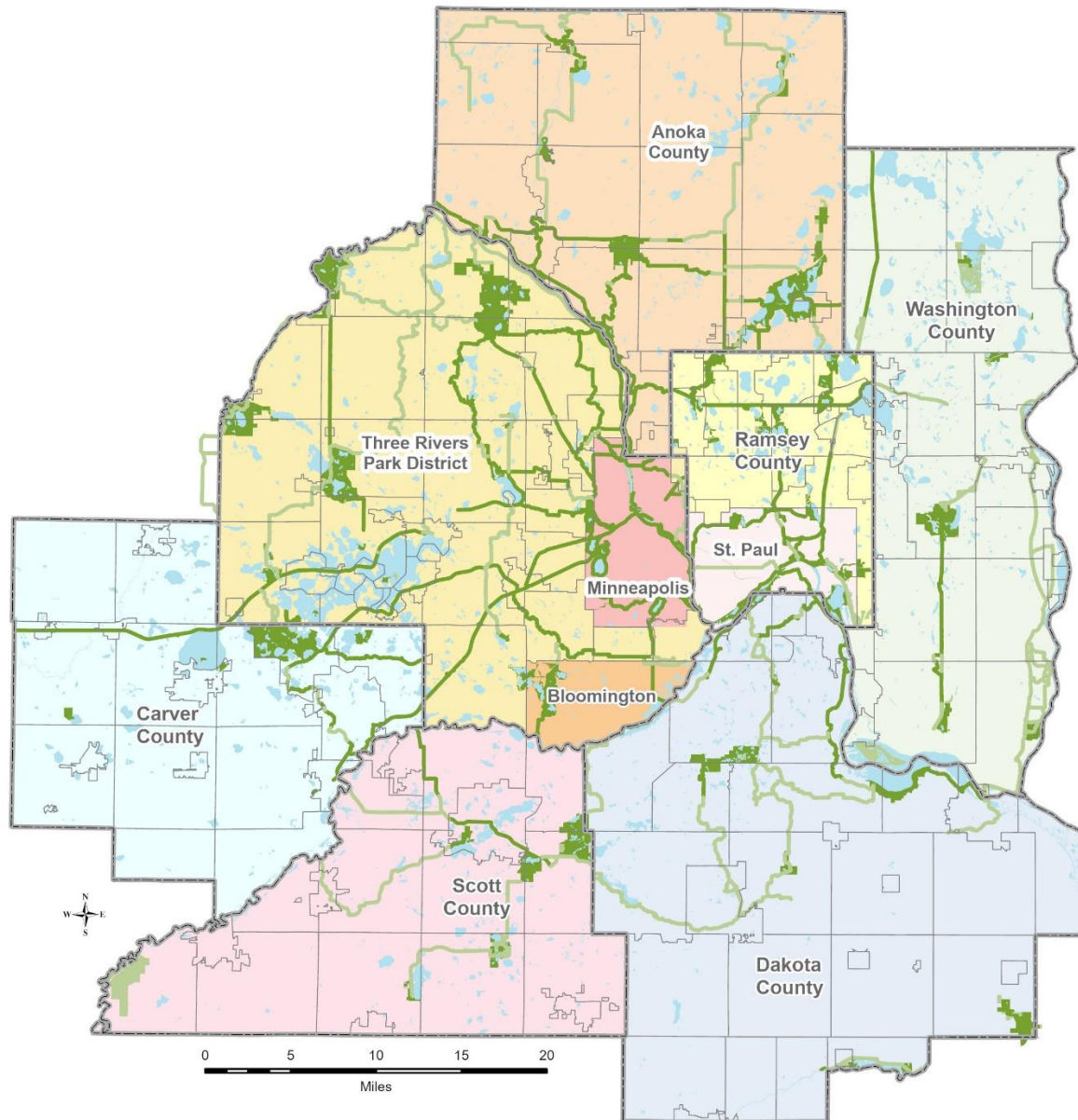
This program ensures participants become familiar with how to use the equipment properly and safely. Some winter programs include free sled rental and equipment, such as fishing rods and outdoor wheelchairs. Equipment is available to check out for free at several park offices and visitor centers.

Summer Day Camp Assistance

For the 2024 summer day camp season, Washington County Parks piloted a new income-based fee assistance program. This program provided qualifying households a 20% discount on the normal program fees for day camp. The pilot used Legacy funds to help offset the price for 14 children to access this summer programming. The pilot is currently under review for continuation and possible expansion.



Regional Park Implementing Agencies





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