

## INTRODUCTION

### The Twin Cities Regional Parks System Outdoor Recreation Now and for the Future

Every community, large and small, in the seven-county Twin Cities area has parks and open spaces, ranging from toddler play areas to athletic fields to picnic grounds to trails for bikers, walkers, runners, skaters and even skiers.

Many parks, trails and open spaces are used almost exclusively by the residents of the community in which they are located, but some are significant far beyond any one city or county's boundaries. More than five million people visit the Chain of Lakes in Minneapolis each year, for example, many of them from other communities. Every major trail draws users from throughout the metro area and beyond.

These parks, trails and open spaces are part of the Twin Cities Regional Parks System, supported by the Metropolitan Council in partnership with cities, counties and special park districts. The regional parks system was established in 1974, in response to state legislation. About 31,000 acres of existing parks were designated as "regional recreation open space." Together, those parks had about five million visits in 1975.

Over the past thirty –five years, the Council, using both regional and state funds, invested \$476 million to help local park agencies develop those first designated parks, as well as to acquire and develop new parks and trails for the growing metropolitan population. Today, the system includes:

- 54,181 acres open for public use
- 49 regional parks and park reserves
- Six special recreation features, such as the zoo and conservatory at Como Park
- 37 regional trails, with 231 miles currently open to the public
- 38.5 million visits each year
- Investment of more than \$476 million of State and Regional grants/appropriations for land acquisition and capital improvement projects
- \$119.5 million of State funds to partially finance operations and maintenance of the regional park system

These parks contain significant regional natural resources such as lakeshore, wetlands, hardwood forests, native prairies and groundwater recharging areas. If you were to visit one regional park, park reserve or special recreation feature each weekend—not even counting the trails, it would take you more than a year to get to them all. It's an amazing system, one that has few rivals anywhere in the world. It's evidence of the importance of natural spaces and outdoor recreation to Minnesotans, including those living in the metropolitan area.

Cities, counties and special park districts operate regional parks—the Chain of Lakes’ facilities, paths and activities remain the responsibility of the Minneapolis Park & Recreation Board, for example—but once a park becomes part of the regional system, the Metropolitan Council supports it with planning, funding and advocacy. The responsible local agency must develop a master plan for the park, and commit to maintaining the space as a park in the future. This partnership with local agencies is the strength of the regional parks system.

By 2030, the Twin Cities Regional Parks System plans to expand to nearly 70,000 acres—including seven new regional parks—and to quadruple the trail system from 231 miles today to 877 miles. New greenways corridors will link regional parks in Scott, Dakota and western Hennepin Counties. Two new regional parks in Carver County and a regional park in the northwest corner of Anoka County—a park that has been planned since 1974—will open. The Silverwood special recreation feature in St. Anthony, with art and environmental education in a natural setting, just opened in 2009. These planned—and recently opened—parks and trail connections will allow residents to have a variety of new park experiences, close to home.

Less than one percent of a household’s taxes go to support the regional parks system through local property taxes and state taxes. State funds pay 9.5 percent of the costs to operate and maintain the system. For the owner of a \$250,000 home in the seven-county metropolitan area, the estimated average cost of the regional parks system, including planned expansions, is about \$64 a year.

### Regional Parks Policy Plan

Managing the expansion of a regional parks system, that involves a number of different local entities, plus the Metropolitan Council, requires coordinated strategies and policies. The Regional Parks Policy Plan lays out the goals for the expansion of the system, and the strategies designed to meet these goals.

Much of the regional parks system is working well and doesn’t need significant changes. The Regional Parks Policy Plan focuses on:

- Existing conditions that can be improved.
- New challenges to individual parks or to the system as a whole.

The Regional Parks Policy Plan is intended to be the “go-to” document for local agencies in their management of regional parks within the system. The plan’s policies guide expansion and development goals of regional parks and trails, as well as lay out policies for appropriate use of parks and trails already within the system. Overall, the policy plan is focused on growth and expansion, but any changes in usage of existing parks and trails in the system must follow the policies laid out in the plan.

## EXECUTIVE SUMMARY

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## Regional Parks System Growth Planning for 2030

Summary: Population in the Twin Cities metropolitan area is expected to grow by nearly a third by 2030. This growth makes preserving land for outdoor recreation and natural spaces more difficult. The Metropolitan Council’s 2030 Regional Development Framework and metropolitan system plans coordinate planning and development for the region, including for the regional park system. Local governments coordinate their planning through the comprehensive planning process, following the policies of the 2030 Regional Development Framework.

During the last three decades, the Twin Cities metropolitan area grew by nearly 800,000 people. By the year 2030, the Metropolitan Council forecasts that the region will add another 966,000 people and 471,000 households—or nearly a third of the current population.

Such robust growth is a sign of the region’s economic health and vitality. With this growth come new jobs, greater ethnic diversity, expanded economic opportunities and increased tax revenues. Accommodating growth is not always easy, however, as the increasing public concern about traffic congestion attests. Although there is still open space and available land in some parts of the regions, the additional population and the systems that will serve it—including roads and transportation—will make expanding or even preserving space for parks and trails more challenging.

Table 1: Metropolitan Area Growth, 1970–2030

|            | 1970      | 2000      | 2030      | 1970–<br>2000<br>Increase | 2000–<br>2030<br>Projected<br>Increase |
|------------|-----------|-----------|-----------|---------------------------|--|
| Households | 573,634   | 1,021,454 | 1,492,000 | 448,000                   | 471,000                                |
| Population | 1,874,612 | 2,642,056 | 3,608,000 | 767,000                   | 966,000                                |
| Jobs       | 779,000   | 1,563,245 | 2,126,000 | 784,000                   | 563,000                                |

The metropolitan area has made a substantial investment in conserving green spaces by establishing regional parks, park reserves and trails. Since its creation in 1974, over \$467 million of State and Metropolitan Council grants have been invested in acquiring and improving parkland for the Twin Cities Regional Parks System. Regional parks, encompassing 54,181 acres, draw more than 38.5 million visits a year. Federal, state and local governments own and manage parks, natural areas and wildlife refuges that provide

additional habitat and recreational activities. Local communities have invested millions of dollars in community and neighborhood parks and recreation areas.

Protecting remaining natural resource lands in the metropolitan area builds on these past investments and offers an excellent opportunity for further investment in the regional park and open space system as the region grows by one million more people in the next 30 years.

The Metropolitan Council and the Minnesota Department of Natural Resources have charted highly important natural resources in the seven-county area as part of a region-wide Natural Resource Inventory and Assessment. This inventory and assessment—a geographic database and series of maps—records valuable information about land and water resources that perform significant ecological functions, contain important habitat for animals that are sensitive to habitat fragmentation and destruction, and provides opportunities for people to experience nature and the region’s historical landscapes.

The inventory and assessment builds on existing information, such as Minnesota County Biological Survey data, to provide a comprehensive look at natural resources. It’s an information tool that the Metropolitan Council and local governments can use to accommodate growth while protecting the environment by implementing effective land protection and restoration tools.

The inventory and assessment shows that roughly 100,000 (between 75,000 and 120,000) acres of regionally significant natural lands remain unprotected in the metro area, compared to 280,000 acres of total natural lands and 1.9 million acres of land overall. Identifying these remaining natural lands provides a great opportunity to prioritize and coordinate conservation action.

By law (Minn. Statute 473.147), the Twin Cities Regional Parks System can only include areas that are acquired and managed by counties, cities and special park districts. The regional parks complements what the state provides for outdoor recreation needs in the Metropolitan area. This means that not all regionally important natural resource lands can be part of the regional parks system.

## 2030 Regional Development Framework

The Metropolitan Council’s 2030 Regional Development Framework, adopted in January 2004, provides a plan for how the Council and its regional partners can address the challenges of growth. The 2030 Regional Development Framework and accompanying metropolitan system plans—including this Regional Parks Policy Plan—are intended to help ensure the coordinated, orderly and economical development of the seven-county Twin Cities metropolitan area—consisting of Anoka, Carver, Dakota, Hennepin, Ramsey, Scott and Washington counties (Minn. Stat. 473.851).

These plans seek to carefully integrate regional land-use, transportation, housing and natural resource policies—to achieve regional goals in each area and avoid working at cross-purposes. The forecasts are used in planning and capital improvement programs to

assess regional needs, land-use patterns and infrastructure investments that will be needed to serve growth in a timely, efficient and cost-effective way.

The 2030 Regional Development Framework is organized around four policies that help set the parameters for planning carried out at the municipal and, in some cases, county levels:

- Work with local communities to accommodate growth in a flexible, connected and efficient manner. Supporting land-use patterns that efficiently connect housing, jobs, retail centers and civic uses. Encouraging growth and reinvestment in centers with convenient access to transportation corridors. Ensuring an adequate supply of developable land for future growth.
- Plan and invest in multi-modal transportation choices, based on the full range of costs and benefits, to slow the growth of congestion and serve the region's economic needs. Improving the highway system, removing bottlenecks and adding capacity. Making more efficient use of the highway system by encouraging flexible work hours, telecommuting, ridesharing and other traffic management efforts. Expanding the bus system and developing a network of transitways, based on a thorough cost-benefit analysis.
- Encourage expanded choices in housing location and types, and improved access to jobs and opportunities: Allowing market forces to respond to changing market needs, including increased demand for townhomes and condominiums as baby-boomers grow older. Preserving the existing housing stock to help maintain a full range of housing choices and ensure existing local and regional infrastructure is fully utilized. Supporting the production of lifecycle and affordable housing with better links to jobs, services and amenities.
- Work with local and regional partners to reclaim, conserve, protect and enhance the region's vital natural resources: Encouraging the integration of natural-resource conservation into all land-planning decisions. Seeking to protect important natural resources and adding areas to the regional parks system. Working to protect the region's water resources.

## Planning Areas

[insert planning area map here]

The 2030 Regional Development Framework identifies an urban area and a rural area, each of which occupies approximately half of the region. Regional natural resource areas, including terrestrial and wetland areas, can help local governments plan development that respects the integrity of natural areas and incorporates environmental features into development projects. Conserving and restoring natural resources of regional or local importance contributes to a healthy natural environment and enhances our quality of life. Connecting regional and local features by natural-resource corridors helps sustain wildlife and plant habitat and shapes how development looks on the ground.

The urban area is divided into two specific geographic planning areas: the Developing Communities and the Developed Communities. The rural area is divided into four specific geographic planning areas: Rural Centers/Rural Growth Centers, the Diversified Rural Communities, the Rural Residential Areas and the Agricultural Areas. Approximately 91-95 percent of new growth is forecast to be located in the urban area—in land-use patterns that make efficient use of regional infrastructure—with the rest in the rural area, particularly in small towns designated as Rural Growth Centers.

One of the primary differences among these planning areas is the density at which they develop. The Council has established benchmarks indicating the overall densities for planned development patterns in each of the geographic planning areas. The Council negotiates a share of the regional forecasts with each community based on its geographic planning area designation(s), development trends, expected densities, available land, local interests and Council policies.

The cumulative results of the community-negotiated distribution of the forecasts among planning areas becomes the basis for determining the required land supply and for the Council's plans for investments in regional systems such as highways and wastewater service. Decisions relating to transportation, sewers, housing, natural resources and other land uses cannot be made in isolation. Regional parks, transportation and sewers help shape growth patterns; housing location and types affect mobility options and travel patterns.

Unplanned growth can put a strain on natural areas—both regionally significant natural areas and locally designated natural areas, groundwater quality and other resources. The 2030 Regional Development Framework and the metropolitan system plans seek to carefully integrate growth, transportation, housing, and natural resource policies—to achieve regional goals in each area and avoid working at cross-purposes.

Developed Communities are cities where more than 85 percent of the land is developed, infrastructure is well established and efforts must go toward keeping it in good repair. These communities have the greatest opportunities to adapt or replace obsolete buildings, improve community amenities, and remodel or replace infrastructure, restore natural areas to increase their economic competitiveness and enhance their quality of life.

Developing Communities are the cities where the most substantial amount of new growth—about 60 percent of new households and 40 percent of new jobs—will occur. The amount of infill and rehabilitation and the way in which new areas are developed directly influence when and how much additional land in Developing Communities will need urban services—services that will call for substantial new regional and local investments.

The flexibility to stage growth locally also offers Developing Communities the opportunity to incorporate natural resources into their local plans. They can build on the regional Natural Resource Inventory and Assessment and updates as new information becomes available, by identifying additional locally important resources. Then staging plans can incorporate these regional and local resources, developing local infrastructure (wastewater systems, roads, parkways, parks and open space, and airports) in a way that conserves natural resources and avoids or protects sensitive natural areas.

Roughly half of the 3,000 square miles in the seven-county Twin Cities area are rural or agricultural. That includes cultivated farmland, nurseries, tree farms, orchards and vineyards, scattered individual home sites or clusters of houses, hobby farms, small towns, gravel mines, woodlands and many of the region's remaining important natural resources. About 5-8 percent of new growth is forecast for the rural and agricultural area.

The regional parks and open space system represents a major, well-established conservation effort for land and water resources. The area's growing population will need additional large-scale park and open space lands in the future. Natural areas that could be added to the regional parks system and plans for their acquisition must be made before the opportunity is lost.

As local communities update their comprehensive plans, they can identify locally important natural areas for protection. Together, the region, the regional park implementing agencies, local communities, nonprofit organizations and the private sector can preserve natural areas through acquisition, conservation easements, and conservation-sensitive development practices and conservation strategies.

#### Comprehensive Planning Process

The 2030 Regional Development Framework was prepared under the authority of state statutes, which direct the Council to:

. . . prepare and adopt . . . a comprehensive development guide for the metropolitan area. It shall consist of a compilation of policy statements, goals, standards, programs, and maps prescribing guides for the orderly and economical development, public and private, of the metropolitan area. The comprehensive development guide shall recognize and encompass physical, social, or economic needs of the metropolitan area and those future developments which will have an impact on the entire area including but not limited to such matters as land use, parks and open space land needs, the necessity for and location of airports, highways, transit facilities, public hospitals, libraries, schools, and other public buildings. . . . (Minn. Stat. 473.145)

The 2030 Regional Development Framework is the initial "chapter" and the unifying theme of the Council's Metropolitan Development Guide. The 2030 Regional Development Framework is the umbrella statement of regional policies, goals and strategies that will inform the Council's metropolitan system plans for transportation, airports, wastewater service and regional parks, as well as other comprehensive development guide chapter policies adopted by the Council.

Under state law, each city and township in the seven-country metropolitan area is required at least every 10 years to review and, if necessary, amend its local comprehensive plan to ensure that the local plan—and local fiscal devices and official controls—are consistent with the Council's metropolitan system plans (Minn. Stat. 473.864). The next round of updated local plans will be due in 2008.

Following the adoption of this Regional Parks Policy Plan and the issuance of system statements as required under the Metropolitan Land Planning Act (MLPA), local communities have three years to update their local comprehensive plan. These plans are

reviewed by the Council for conformance with metropolitan system plans, consistency with Council policies and compatibility with adjacent and affected governmental units.

Conformance: A local comprehensive plan generally will conform to the metropolitan system plans if the local plan:

1. Accurately incorporates and integrates the components of the metropolitan system plans as required by Minn. Stat. 473.851 to 473.871.
2. Integrates public facilities plan components described in Minn. Stat. 473.859, subd. 3:
  - Integrates development policies and compatible land uses to accommodate forecasted growth at appropriate densities and to maximize the efficiency and effectiveness of the regional system.

Consistency: A local comprehensive plan generally will be consistent with Council policies and statutory requirements if the local plan:

1. Addresses community role strategies contained in the Framework, including conservation strategies to protect regional important natural resource areas and wildlife corridors.
2. Addresses the linkage of local land uses to local and regional park and open space systems.
3. Includes an implementation plan that describes public programs, fiscal devices and other specific actions for sequencing and staging to implement the comprehensive plan and ensure conformance with regional system plans, described in Minn. Stat. 473.859, subd. 4.
4. Addresses official controls:
  - Includes a capital improvement program (sewers, parks, transportation, water supply and open space) that accommodates planned growth and development.

Compatibility: A local comprehensive plan is compatible with adjacent and affected governmental units, based on comments or concerns, or lack thereof, from these entities. In order to be determined compatible, a community must adequately document that it has addressed the concern(s) of all adjacent and affected governmental units.