

Chapter Three: System Plan

Introduction

Regional parks system legislation directs the Metropolitan Council to take the leading role in providing for a regional parks system that will complement the recreational open space opportunities provided in the area by the federal, state and local units of government. Consequently, the regional parks system, which is the focus of this plan, is just one part of a total park, recreation and open space system in the metropolitan region.

Minn. Statute 473.147 limits the Council's regional park system planning and capital improvement funding to lands acquired and managed by counties, cities and special park districts, which together with State facilities will reasonably meet the outdoor recreation needs of the people of the Metropolitan Area. Since the Regional Park System is by statute directed to provide lands for outdoor recreation, and must complement what the State provides, not all of the regionally important natural resource lands can be part of the Regional Park System. The land that is not proposed for the Regional Park System is not needed to reasonably meet outdoor recreation needs and other conservation strategies should be employed. Conserving lands that are not part of the Regional Park System can be accomplished via acquisition in fee title or conservation easements by other entities for State scientific and natural areas, State wildlife management areas, State aquatic management areas, State Parks, State Trails, and local conservation areas. Other land can be protected and remain in private ownership through conservation easements and environmentally sensitive design.

The regional system fills a niche that emphasizes high-quality natural resources, major special features, activities that tend to require large areas of land or water, and park lands that often extend into several political jurisdictions. The regional system plays an essential role in the recreational features of the area, but the facilities and opportunities provided by the other levels of government are equally important in meeting the demands of the population. The regional parks system alone cannot, and was never intended to, provide all of the metropolitan area's recreational open space facilities and services.

The recreational open space provided by the federal and state government in the area generally serve the same recreational demands as the regional system and, consequently, the federal and state facilities are accorded special status by the Council. Federal and state and agencies are encouraged to transmit master plans for recreational open space units within the area to the Council for its review.

To the extent these plans indicate that facilities will fulfill regional recreation open space objectives and are consistent with this policy plan, the Council recognizes these areas as providing experiences equivalent to those offered by the regional system. The Council will then provide these lands protection under the metropolitan significance review regulations and the Metropolitan Land Planning Act when applicable. This special status, however, does not mean that any regional funds will be granted to federal or state agencies for capital improvements or for operation and maintenance of their facilities.

Local recreational open space facilities provide for a very large number and variety of recreational activities that occur in the metropolitan area. Local facilities generally provide opportunities for activities that don't usually require large areas like those offered by the regional system. The local units of government provide facilities relatively close to where people live and are able to respond to the differing needs of small groups, like neighborhoods or communities. The local facilities tend to be population-based, while the regional system is primarily resource-based. While the local recreational open space

areas are not covered in this plan, the facilities and services they offer are taken into consideration when master plans of the regional system are prepared and reviewed.

Public recreational open space facilities do not meet all the demands for such recreation required by the area's residents. Private operations also make substantial contributions to the development of facilities and the provision of services. The most prominent facilities provided by the private sector are golf courses, riding facilities, marinas, day camps and downhill ski areas. There are also multiple recreational open space areas owned and operated by corporations, employees' associations, benevolent associations and nonprofit social agencies.

These private facilities reduce the burden on the public sector, provide additional opportunities and help to preserve thousands of acres of land in open space. They are complementary to the public sector.

Regional System Components

Not all recreation facilities warrant regional status. Table 2 provides a classification system for local and regional facilities. The regional parks system with its primary focus on high-quality natural resources and on providing facilities that require substantial areas of land and/or water are subdivided into four major components. These four components are regional parks, park reserves, regional trails and special recreation features.

Regional Parks

Areas selected for regional parks should contain a diversity of nature-based resources, either naturally occurring or human-built. The recreational quality of a regional park is measured by the presence or absence of outstanding resources and the ability to provide adequately for a wide range of natural resource-related recreational opportunities. Access to water bodies suitable for recreation – such as swimming, boating and fishing – is particularly important and most of the regional parks are focused on lakes, rivers or streams.

A regional park should be large enough to accommodate a variety of activities, preserve a pleasant natural aspect, and buffer activity areas from each other and from surrounding areas. This is interpreted as 200 to 500 acres of land. Occasionally, because of the quality of the resource, an exception may be made and a regional park may be as small as 100 acres. Experience has shown this to be the minimum size acceptable for the range and type of activities expected to be accommodated.

The implementation potential is also important in selecting a candidate for regional park status. Implementation potential is measured by the reasonable availability of the site, by the opportunity to acquire and protect key resources, by the support of the host community and other local groups and by the interest of the regional park implementing agency that will own and operate the park.

Park Reserves

Park reserves, like regional parks, 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.

The park reserves are substantially larger than the parks because they are to contain a diversity of natural resources with adequate space for protection and management of natural resources and for the pursuit of compatible outdoor activities. Experience has shown that an optimum size exceeds 2,000 acres, while the

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minimum is about 1,000 acres. To establish and maintain an uncompromised sense of nature and protect high quality natural resources, at least 80 percent of each park reserve should be managed as wild lands that protect the ecological functions of the native landscape. This would permit up to 20 percent of a park reserve to be developed for compatible recreational activities.

The eight regional landscape types that have been used in selecting areas for park reserves are (1) sand plains, (2) St. Croix ground moraine, (3) Des Moines ground moraine, (4) terminal moraine, (5) lightly glaciated area, (6) Mississippi River Valley, (7) Minnesota River Valley and (8) St. Croix River Valley.

For park reserves, as for regional parks, the concept of implementation potential is also an important factor in the designation of new candidate areas. The implementation potential criteria mentioned earlier, under “Regional Parks,” are also applicable to the park reserves.

Trails

Trail corridors are intended to provide for recreational travel along linear pathways throughout the metropolitan area. They are selected to follow natural or linear features that traverse areas of scenic appeal and/or historical, architectural and developmental interest while assuring that the trail treadway will have no adverse effect on the natural resource base. The regional trails are selected to pass through, or provide access to, elements in the regional parks system. The parks and park reserves perform the important function of providing places for parking, comfort facilities, safe water supplies, etc. Trails also are selected for their ability to intersect with local trail networks, with the regional trails functioning much like regional highways that interconnect with more local arterials and collector streets.

Experience has indicated that people tend to prefer trails that are relatively close to where they live. In the metropolitan area, a 1998-99 Council survey on users of regional trails found a strong local-use pattern. More than 75 percent of trail visitors surveyed lived within 3 miles of the trails they used. However, trail users are traveling from one city or county to another. It is this inter-jurisdictional trail length that makes these trails regionally significant.

Special Recreation Features

The special recreation features, which are called for in state legislation, are defined as regional parks system opportunities not generally found in the parks, the park reserves or the trail corridors. Special recreational features often require a unique managing or programming effort on the part of the regional park implementing agency.

As of 2004, there were six special recreation features in the system: the Como Park Zoo and Marjorie McNeely Conservatory at Como Park, both managed as a part of Como Park; Square Lake in Washington County; the Noerenberg gardens on the northwest side of Lake Minnetonka; Gales Woods on the shore of Whaletail Lake in Minnetrista; and Silverwood, on the shore of Silver Lake in the City of St. Anthony. Before the Council designates a new special recreation feature, it is essential that a comprehensive feasibility study be performed, including an assessment of need, financing, resource suitability and management. This is to make sure any new, special recreation feature is complementary to the rest of the regional parks system and will not be a financial burden to the system.

Table 2: Classification System for Local and Regional Facilities

Component	Use	Service Area	Size	Site Attributes	Site Location
Local Facilities					
Mini-Park	Specialized facilities that serve a concentrated or limited population or specific group such as tots or senior citizens; may be in locations such as apartment complexes, townhouse developments or commercial centers.	Less than ¼ mile radius	< 1 acre		
Neighborhood Park/Playground	Area for intense recreational activities such as field games, court games, crafts, apparatus area, skating, neighborhood centers.	¼ to ½ mile radius to serve a population of 4,000 – 5,000 (one neighborhood)	< 25 acres	Physiography suited for intense development.	Proximity to elementary schools.
Community Playfield	Area for intense recreational facilities such as athletic fields and swimming pools; could include neighborhood use.	3 – 5 neighborhoods or one community	25 – 50 acres	Physiography suited for intense development.	Proximity to secondary schools and other public facilities.
Community Park	Area of natural or ornamental quality for outdoor recreation such as walking, viewing, sitting, picnicking; could have some field and court games.	3 – 5 neighborhoods or one community	25 – 100 acres	Affords natural features with varied physiographic interest.	Proximity to community facilities and resources.
County Park	Area of natural or ornamental quality for outdoor recreation such as walking, viewing, sitting, picnicking; could have some field and court games.	County	25 – 100 acres	Affords natural features with varied physiographic interest.	Proximity to community facilities and resources and/or where resource occurs.
Conservancy Lands	Area of natural quality such as watercourses and wetlands that are preserved for environmental or aesthetic benefits to the community and/or because of the negative environmental or economic effects of development in them.	Municipality, township, county	Variable, based on extent of resources	Natural resources that merit preservation and that would be negatively affected by development.	Where resource occurs.

Table 2: Classification System for Local and Regional Facilities (Continued)

Component	Use	Service Area	Size	Site Attributes	Site Location
Local Facilities (continued)					
Local linear parks, trails, corridors and parkways.	Area developed for on or more varying modes of recreational travel such as hiking, biking, snowmobiling, horseback riding, cross-country skiing, canoeing and driving.	A neighborhood or several neighborhoods in a city or township.	Contained within one city or township. Width and length minimums vary by locality.	On or off-road trails that may or may not traverse scenic areas while assuring the trail treadway has no adverse effect on the natural resource base.	Where needed to link neighborhoods to components of the local or regional recreation system and/or community facilities such as schools, libraries, commercial areas and to link to adjacent municipalities.
County linear parks, trails, corridors and parkways.	Area developed for one or more varying modes of recreational travel such as hiking, biking, snowmobiling, horseback riding, cross-country skiing, canoeing and driving.	Several cities and/or townships in a county.	Traverses one or more municipality. Width and length minimums vary by county.	On or off-road trails that may or may not traverse scenic areas while assuring the trail treadway has no adverse effect on the natural resource base.	Often found adjacent to major roadways within the county. Other locations were needed to link cities to components of the local or regional recreation system and/or community facilities such as schools, libraries, commercial areas and to link to adjacent counties.

Table 2: Classification System for Local and Regional Facilities (Continued)

Component	Use	Service Area	Size	Site Attributes	Site Location
Regional Facilities					
Regional Park	Area of natural or ornamental quality for nature-oriented outdoor recreation such as picnicking, boating, fishing, swimming, camping and trail uses.	3 – 5 communities	200 – 500 acres (100 acre minimum)	Complete natural setting contiguous to water bodies or watercourses where possible.	Where natural resource occurs – particularly water.
Regional Park Reserve	Area of natural quality for nature-oriented outdoor recreation such as viewing and studying nature, wildlife habitat, conservation, swimming, picnicking, hiking, boating, camping and trail uses.	County, multi-county area.	1000 + acres; sufficient area to encompass the resource envisioned for preservation.	Diversity of unique resources, such as topography, lakes, streams, marshes, flora, fauna.	Where resource occurs.
Regional destination trail	Area developed for one or more varying modes of non-motorized recreational travel such as hiking, biking, horseback riding, cross-country skiing, and canoeing.	The entire metropolitan region.	Sufficient corridor width to protect natural resources and can safely accommodate trail use. Sufficient length to be a destination itself, or to serve as a link between regional parks system units.	When feasible, off-road trails that utilize human-made and/or natural linear resources such as utility corridors, railroad and highway rights of way, stream / river valleys, or at the edges of forest or prairie. On-road trails are acceptable when off-road trails are not feasible.	Preferably adjacent to high quality natural areas. The trail treadway should be placed where it has no adverse impact on the natural resource base.
Regional linking trail	Area developed for one or more varying modes of non-motorized recreational travel such as hiking, biking, horseback riding, cross-country skiing, and canoeing.	The entire metropolitan region.	Sufficient corridor width to protect natural resources and can safely accommodate trail use. Sufficient length to link regional parks system units.	When feasible, off-road trails that utilize human-made and/or natural linear resources such as utility corridors, railroad and highway rights of way, stream / river valleys, or at the edges of forest or prairie. On-road trails are acceptable when off-road trails are not feasible.	Linkages between components of the regional parks system. When feasible, linking trails should attempt to connect to population, economic and social centers along its route. The trail treadway should be placed where it has no adverse impact on the natural resource base.

Table 2: Classification System for Local and Regional Facilities (Continued)

Component	Use	Service Area	Size	Site Attributes	Site Location
Local or Regional					
Special Features	Area that preserves, maintains and provides specialized or single-purpose recreational activities such as golf course, nature center, marina, zoo, conservatory, arboretum, display gardens, arena, gun club, downhill ski area, and sites of historic or archeological significance.	Local – (municipalities, townships) Regional – (metropolitan area).	Specific standard applicable to desired feature.	Appropriate to particular special feature.	Where most advantageous for the special feature and the overall park system.