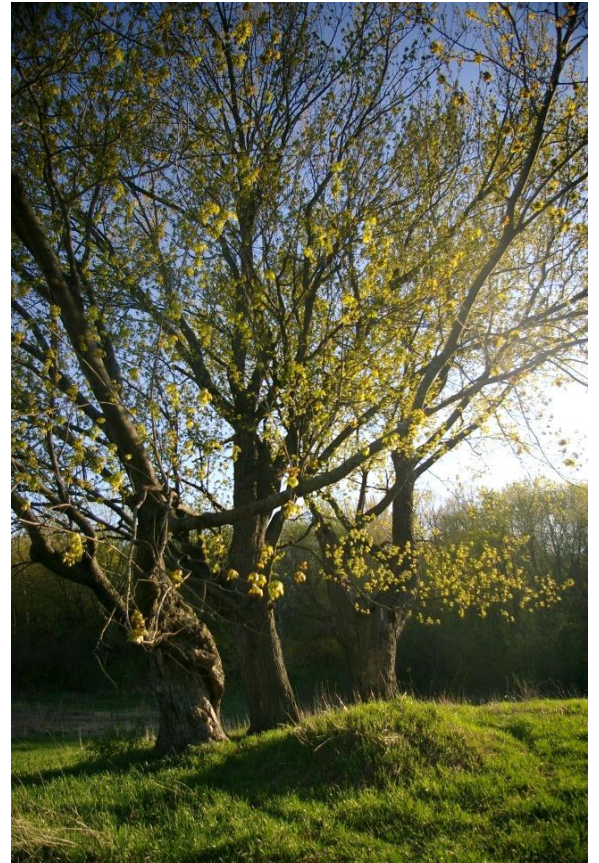


Dakota County Parks Visitor Services Plan

Adopted October 31, 2017



Dakota
COUNTY
forever wild
PARKS

Acknowledgments

This plan was prepared to guide the provision of visitor services in Dakota County Parks, under the direction of the Dakota County Board of Commissioners, and with the assistance of the Dakota County Planning Commission and many participants and stakeholders.

Dakota County Board of Commissioners:

Mike Slavik	District 1
Kathleen A. Gaylord	District 2
Thomas A. Egan	District 3
Joe Atkins	District 4
Liz Workman	District 5
Mary Liz Holberg	District 6
Chris Gerlach	District 7

Dakota County Planning Commission:

Michael Greco	District 1
Joh Ross	District 2
Lori Hansen	District 2
Jill Smith	District 3
Greg Oxley	District 3
Amy Hunting	District 4
Barry Graham	District 4
Ram Singh	District 5
Christopher Ross	District 5
Nate Reitz	District 6
James Guttman	District 6
Anthony Nelson	District 7

Project Consultants:

Jeffrey Bransford, PROS Consulting, Indianapolis, IN
Austin Hochstetler, PROS Consulting, Indianapolis, IN
Terry Minarik, Confluence, Minneapolis, MN
Victoria Amaris, Putting Change in Motion, Minneapolis, MN
Loudi Rivamonte, Putting Change in Motion, Minneapolis, MN
Ron Hick, Putting Change in Motion, Minneapolis, MN



Project Planning Team:

Beth Landahl, Dakota County Parks
Steve Sullivan, Dakota County Parks
Autumn Hubbell, Dakota County Parks
Taud Hoopingarner, Dakota County Operations Management
Kurt Chatfield, Dakota County Planning
Mary Jackson, Dakota County Planning
David Goodman, Dakota County Physical Development Administration
Erin Stwora, Dakota County Physical Development Administration

Draft Dakota County Parks Visitor Services Plan

Contents

Dakota County Parks Visitor Services Plan Executive Summary	i
I. Introduction	1
A. Purpose of this Plan.....	2
B. Dakota County Park System Overview	2
Park System Vision	3
C. Plan Scope and Definitions.....	4
D. Guiding Principles for this Plan	5
II. Park System Service Context	7
A. Research Findings.....	7
Demographics and Market Analysis	7
Community Interests and Needs	11
Current Service Levels	12
Similar Providers.....	13
B. Assessment/Research Synthesis	13
Public Interests and Key Opportunities.....	13
Opportunities by Service Area.....	14
III. Visitor Service Vision	17
A. Awareness and Outreach	18
B. Outdoor Education	19
C. Events	21
D. Equipment Rentals.....	22
E. Volunteerism	23
F. Facility Rentals	24
G. Food and Drink.....	25
H. Customer Service: Commitment to Quality	26
I. Community Engagement	26
J. Service Visions for Individual Parks and Greenways.....	27
IV. Implementation Plan.....	37
A. Implementation Priorities	37
B. Funding.....	37

Funding Philosophy	37
C. Key Performance Indictors	39
D. Policy Recommendations	41
Cost Recovery Policy.....	41
Sponsorships and Partnerships	42
V. Planning and Public Engagement Overview	45
A. Assessment:.....	45
B. Concept Development and Testing:	47
C. Draft Plan:.....	48
Appendix A: 2015 Parks Visitor Services Survey Summary	51
I. Public Information and Marketing	51
II. Events	53
III. Food and Drink	54
IV. Volunteerism	54
V. Outdoor Education	55
VI. Facility Rentals.....	57
VII. Equipment Rentals	58
Appendix B. Report on Community Dialogues	59
Introduction.....	64
Compilation of Data from Dialogue Sessions:	66
Recommendations and Conclusion	75
Appendix C: Benchmarking with Metro County Regional Parks	81
Appendix D: Similar Provider Study.....	85

Dakota County Parks Visitor Services Plan Executive Summary

Chapter I: Plan Purpose

The Dakota County Parks Visitor Services Plan was developed to guide provision of services that increase public awareness of parks and their benefits, and enrich the park experience by engaging, inspiring, and supporting park visitors through:

- Awareness and Outreach
- Events
- Volunteerism
- Outdoor Education
- Equipment Rentals
- Facility Rentals

Visitor services can extend an invitation and welcome more people to their park system.

Parks Visitor Services Plan Purpose: The intent of this Plan was to evaluate and improve park visitor service operations by:

1. Gaining greater clarity on public expectations for parks visitor services
2. Developing a balanced and inclusive vision for services
3. Creating a responsive service delivery plan

Parks Visitor Services Plan Goals: The following major goals emerged from this process:

- Encourage and support healthy people and healthy communities
- Inspire greater environmental awareness and understanding
- Provide services and opportunities that are relevant and accessible to more people
- Make the best use of investments in the park system
- Provide services in cost effective, responsive manner



Dakota County Parks Mission and Park Benefits

Dakota County Parks Mission:

*To enrich lives by providing high quality recreation and education opportunities
in harmony with natural resource preservation and stewardship*

With this focus on natural systems, Dakota County's parks provide a wide range of benefits.

Individual benefits:

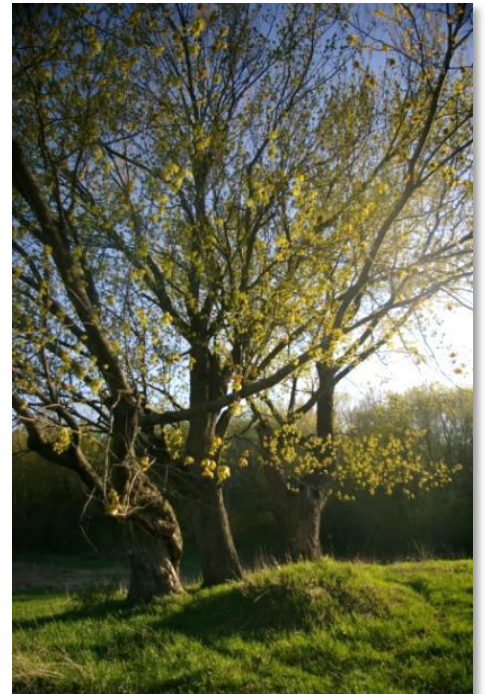
- Immersion in a natural setting
- Improved health through outdoor activity
- Opportunities for relaxation
- Social gathering and interaction
- Opportunities to learn about and be inspired by the natural world, natural history, and local history
- Opportunities to contribute through volunteerism

Broader benefits:

- Ensuring all people have access to the benefits of parks services
- Increased awareness of our natural resource legacy and a broadened interest in its protection and stewardship
- Enhancing communities as good places to live and providing opportunities for people to be physically active in their communities
- Increasing community economic value and ability to attract and support growth

Environmental benefits:

- Protecting biological diversity and providing habitat for native species
- Stormwater purification, storage, and infiltration
- Engaging individuals and communities in conservation practices



Visitor Services Benefits: This Plan evaluated the following visitor services and ways to increase the range of visitor benefits.

VISITOR SERVICE	VISITOR BENEFITS
AWARENESS AND OUTREACH	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Builds public awareness of parks and their benefits • Increases park visitation
OUTDOOR EDUCATION: <i>opportunities to learn through programs and self-guided interpretation</i>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Increases awareness of and appreciation for natural world • Builds self-confidence in outdoor recreation abilities • Can introduce new visitors to parks • Can support County efforts and reach under-represented audiences
EVENTS: <i>music, performances, nature events, cultural events, movies, recreation events, seasonal events</i>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • New visitors are attracted to Dakota County Parks and welcomed • Increased awareness of parks, nature, culture, recreation, healthy activity • Adds to the sense of community
EQUIPMENT RENTALS: <i>recreational watercraft, winter gear, bicycles, adaptive gear</i>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Introduce visitors to new ways to enjoy the outdoors • Provide opportunity to “try before you buy” • Support planned visits and spontaneous decisions
VOLUNTEERISM: <i>natural resource stewardship, citizen science, clean-ups, events, education, administration, and trail patrol</i>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Engages people who want to support parks with meaningful work • Increases understanding of natural resources • Builds community around parks and introduces new visitors • Important work gets done
FACILITY RENTALS: <i>shelters, cabins, camping, indoor gathering spaces, and small retreat centers</i>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Provide a year-round natural setting for family and group events • Support extended visits in natural setting • Can introduce new visitors to parks • Provide a facility resource for the community and County
FOOD AND DRINK: <i>vending, concessions, food trucks, restaurant, or café</i>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Offers a service people want in parks, allows a longer stay, enhances visit • Opportunity for social interaction • Enhances events and other activities

Chapter II: What we learned and heard:

- People appreciate parks
- Dakota County Parks are unique
- People want more to do in parks, especially under-represented residents
- Social and cultural activities enliven parks, create new users
- Parks should prepare for an aging and diversifying population
- Awareness and time are the biggest barriers to parks use, and building awareness is key to increasing visitation and advocacy of the park system



Chapter III: The Vision for Visitor Services:

Dakota County Parks Visitor Services offer affordable and relevant services that enrich the park experience, draw new visitors, and promote good stewardship of parks natural and financial resources.

For each service area, Chapter III provides a vision and range of initiatives to address priority needs, serve public interests, and build on past investments in the system.

Awareness and Outreach Vision:

Build awareness of Dakota County Parks across all communities: current and new users, and under-represented groups.

Focus: Awareness and Outreach Plan and implementation

Outdoor Education Vision:

Enhance education to serve more people at more of the system.

Focus: School and youth group partnerships, self-guided interpretation, and new program opportunities

Events Vision:

Add events to the system, celebrating unique aspects of each park and the communities they serve.

Focus: Events at more parks

Volunteerism Vision:

Engage more people who want to contribute to parks.

Focus: New opportunities in natural resources stewardship, citizen science, trail patrol, clean-ups, education

Facility Rental Vision:

Evaluate/optimize facility rentals for services, groups, and public use.

Focus: Improved service, process, policies and fees

Equipment Rental Vision:

Support recreation at more venues, building on unique park assets.

Focus: Bicycle rentals for greenways, watercraft rentals for large waterbodies, adaptive gear for people with disabilities



Services to Build on Each Park Unit's Unique Qualities

A unique service vision was developed for each park unit, based on its natural and cultural resources, recreational use patterns, current plans, and existing infrastructure.



Chapter IV: Implementation

Implementation reflects priorities for the new services, initially focusing on the awareness/outreach effort and improving service in the facility rental and reservation area, which provides a foundation for other service enhancements. Implementation will proceed through annual work planning and budget processes, subject to County Board approval.

The following table summarizes the Parks Visitor Services Plan impact over time by comparing existing service levels to the outcomes targeted by the initiatives. Visitation and participation impacts are estimated and presented as targets.

Visitor Service Initiative Summary and Targeted Outcomes:

Service Area	Current Service Level	Current Expense, Revenue, & FTE	Proposed Service Level Additions	Increased FTE	External Funding	Net Revenue or (County Cost)	Activity Increase Target (by 2022)	New User Target (by 2022)
Awareness and Outreach	County media, Limited advertising, news items	E: \$67,687 R: \$0 FTE: 0.1	Targeted Awareness-Outreach Plan and Approach	0	\$100,000	\$0	5% visit increase in 5 years (>50,000)	6,000
Events	4-5 per year, 3,000 participants	E: \$32,019 R: \$18,907 FTE: 0.2	1-2 new events	0.85 Temp	\$26,430	\$TBD	3,000 more participants	1,000
Volunteer	4,900 hours: Event, Stewardship, Trail, Clean-up	E: \$19,652 R: \$0 FTE: 0.2	50% growth in hours New: education, citizen science, targeted trail patrol	0.15 Perm	\$11,250	\$0	2,000 more volunteer hours	500
Outdoor Education	291 programs 6,200 people; 33 field trips 2,740 kids	E:\$198,500 R: \$49,658 FTE: 3.3	Outreach-partner for school, groups, Limited programs at more parks	0.85 Perm	\$63,750	\$0	1,000 more participants 2,500 more field trip students	1,000
Facility Rentals	78,000 guests; 1,251 events; 56,500 camp days	E: \$542,288 R:\$905,276	Evaluate and enhance customer service	0		\$TBD	10% increase in rentals, 8,000 more guests	500
Equip. Rentals	Lebanon: 8,446 watercraft 3,872 winter 12,338 total	E: \$91,000 R: \$88,439	Rentals at Byllesby and Major Greenways	0.50 Temp	\$14,000	\$TBD	50% increase in rentals, 6,000 more rentals	1,000
Food and Drink	Vending, camp stores, events		No change	0		\$TBD		
Current Needs Requested in 2018 Budget	Existing demand for reservations, customer support, public contact		New Guest Services position	1.0	County levy from fee-based revenues	\$0		
New Opportunity for Limited Term Position	None		Special Limited Term Outreach position	1.0	\$75,000	\$0		
Est. Total				2.0 Perm. 2.35 Temp.	\$290,430	\$0	72,500 more participants/visits	10,000 new users

Key Performance Indicators

To evaluate how well the Visitor Services are performing and to assist with the implementation of this plan, Key Performance Indicators (KPIs) tailored to each program area are recommended to evaluate *what* is accomplished, *how well* it was done, and if park visitors are *satisfied*. A full list is provided in Chapter IV. The recommended KPIs include measures of:

- Service reach among visitors and residents
- Financial efficiency and equity
- Social equity
- Service effectiveness
- Service quality

Dakota County Parks Visitor Services Plan

I. Introduction

Dakota County Parks is a regional park implementing agency in the southern part of the Twin Cities Metropolitan region of Minnesota. Dakota County's parks are nature-based, with an emphasis on natural resource protection and recreation that relies on high quality natural resources. The mission of Dakota County Parks is:

*To enrich lives by providing high quality recreation and education opportunities
in harmony with natural resource preservation and stewardship*

Within this focus on natural systems, Dakota County's parks provide a wide range of opportunities and benefits.

Individual benefits can include:

- Immersion in a natural setting
- Improved health through outdoor activity
- Opportunities for relaxation
- Social gathering and interaction
- Opportunities to learn and be inspired by the nature and history
- Opportunities to learn a new outdoor recreation skill
- Opportunities to contribute through volunteerism

From the public parks tradition, **broader benefits** can include:

- Equity in serving everyone as a shared public resource
- Increased awareness of our natural resource legacy and interest its protection and stewardship
- Enhancing communities as good places to live
- Increasing community economic value and ability to attract and support growth

Environmental benefits provided by Dakota County's Parks include

- Protecting biological diversity and habitat for native species
- Stormwater purification, storage, and infiltration
- Engaging individuals and communities in conservation practices

The idea that parks should offer opportunities to all residents is as timely now as it was when the public parks movement began. It is important to recognize that the County's increasingly diverse demographic groups can have different needs and expectations for park visitor services.



A. Purpose of this Plan

Dakota County acquired its first parkland in 1967 and in its 50th year of operation, can be considered a young and still growing system. Currently, the Dakota County Park system, at over 5,000 acres, includes some of the best of the best land in Dakota County. The park system consists of three regional parks, two park reserves, one county park, two conservation areas, and a growing greenway system. In 2016, Dakota County Parks hosted nearly 1.3 million visits.

At the same time, use of Dakota County's Parks overall is less than expected for a county of its size, and a variety of research studies show that many residents are unaware of what the system has to offer. This plan sets forth goals to improve services for current park visitors, and to welcome and serve new visitors.

The Dakota County Parks Visitor Services Plan (VSP) was developed to:

1. Gain greater clarity on public expectations for parks visitor services
2. Develop a balanced and inclusive vision for park visitor services
3. Create a responsive service delivery plan

Unlike park master plans, which typically lay out a vision for park development and facilities, the VSP is not focused on facility infrastructure. As an operational plan, this project sought to find the right level for park service operations to make the visitor experience more rewarding and reinforce the connection of residents to their parks. This plan builds on the investments the County has made in acquiring, developing, and managing its maturing park system.

B. Dakota County Park System Overview

Located in the southeast corner of the seven-county Minneapolis-St. Paul area, the Dakota County Park System serves the state's third most populous county. With more than 5,000 acres and a fast-growing network of greenways, Dakota County Parks is a nature-based system that exists to help meet the needs of over 400,000 county residents. The Dakota County Park System includes:

- | | |
|-------------------------------|--|
| Lake Byllesby Regional Park | Minnesota River - Big Rivers Regional Greenway |
| Lebanon Hills Regional Park | Mississippi River Regional Trail |
| Miesville Ravine Park Reserve | River to River Greenway |
| Spring Lake Park Reserve | A growing network of Regional Greenways |
| Thompson County Park | Two park conservation areas |
| Whitetail Woods Regional Park | |

Dakota County Parks, Lakes, Trails and Greenways Vision, 2030

What's New?

GREAT PLACES: Destination Parks

- * New Whitetail Woods Regional Park in Empire Township
- * More things to do in parks
 - Winter activity area
 - Gathering and celebration areas
 - Swimming and water play areas
- * More popular "park basics"
 - Enhanced picnicking
 - Biking and accessible trail loops

CONNECTED PLACES: Greenway Trails

- * "Bring parks to people" -- Linear parks connect parks, schools, lake trails, playgrounds, libraries, and the Minnesota and Mississippi Rivers
- * Walking, biking, and in-line skating
- * Public agencies work together to create 200 miles of greenways using mostly publicly-owned land

PROTECTED PLACES: Green Infrastructure

- * Enhance and protect park resources
- * Protect stream corridors in public/private partnerships
- * Protect natural areas and open space in public/private partnerships

DAKOTA COUNTY PARK SYSTEM and COLLABORATIVE OPEN SPACE PROTECTION

- Dakota County Parks
- Dakota County Park Conservation Areas
- Federal, State, and Other Regional Open Space
- Existing and Planned Regional Greenways
- Stream Conservation Corridors and Greenways



Park System Vision

Dakota County's 2008 Park System Plan set forth a vision of "Great Places, Connected Places, Protected Places."

Great Places: Improve recreation opportunities within Dakota County Parks

- Fill basic recreation gaps including accessible trails, biking, and picnicking; and add signature activities that build on the unique resources within the County system
- Improve awareness of the park system and prepare an operation plan to improve service delivery

Connected Places: "Bring parks to people" with collaborative city and County greenways

- Connect parks, schools, athletic fields, libraries, lakes, scenic areas, and neighborhoods
- Provide for the most popular trail activities – walking and biking
- Protect natural areas, habitat, stream corridors, and water quality within and along greenways

Protected Places: Protect Dakota County's unique natural assets

- Develop strategic natural resource stewardship approaches within parks
- Explore opportunities to protect high quality natural areas throughout the County

C. Plan Scope and Definitions

This plan addresses the following service areas:

Awareness and Outreach: build awareness of and interest in the park system, promote recreational features and program services, and provide timely information on parks news.

Outdoor education: learning about nature, recreation skills, and culture through public programs, private group programs, and self-guided interpretation.

Events: gatherings and celebrations for current and new users to enjoy parks. In a nature based park system like Dakota County's, events could include the following adapted to the natural qualities of its parks:

- Music, performances
- Nature-based events
- Cultural and multicultural events
- Outdoor movies
- Recreation events
- Visual arts
- Date/season celebrations

Equipment rentals: making a variety of recreational equipment available for visitors, such as watercraft, winter gear, and bicycles. Rental equipment allows visitors to try new activities and build new outdoor skills.

Volunteerism: engaging people and groups who want to do more for the park system by assisting with park natural resources stewardship, citizen science, park clean-ups, public events, education programs, administration, and trail patrol.

Facility rentals: quality of and processes for renting picnic shelters, camper cabins, campground spots, indoor large meeting/gathering spaces, and small retreat centers.

Food and drink: providing refreshment opportunities for visitors through vending machines, concessions stands, and food trucks.



D. Guiding Principles for this Plan

The Visitor Services Plan was prepared in tandem with the County's Natural Resources Management Plan for the parks system and conservation easements. These planning projects informed each other as they developed, with attention to striking a healthy balance in preserving park natural resources while encouraging public use.

- 1. Balance:** Nature-based parks should protect natural resources while encouraging recreational use, to gain the broader benefits of people experiencing the natural environment.
- 2. Build Nature Appreciation:** Nature-based parks and visitor services build appreciation of natural resource systems through discovery, learning, and recreation in natural settings.
- 3. Seek Multiple Benefits of Stewardship:** Natural resource management provides cleaner air and water, biological diversity, native species habitat, improved visitor experience, community attractiveness, and public appreciation for natural resources.
- 4. Build Synergy:** Nature-based parks can and should build synergy between visitor services and resource management through events, education, volunteerism, marketing, and thoughtful design.
- 5. Engage the Public:** Natural resource management on County land should recognize public values and preferences, and provide opportunities for public engagement on resource management, education, and volunteerism.
- 6. Serve Communities:** Parks can strengthen communities and serve more current and potential park users by offering appealing and compatible visitor services, such as events, education, and volunteerism.
- 7. Use Multiple Approaches:** Parks can provide high quality visitor services by employing improved business practices, diverse funding sources, coordination with other providers, partnerships, and innovative approaches.
- 8. Become Known:** A clear system identity and contemporary marketing approaches are essential to building familiarity with and interest in parks.

II. Park System Service Context

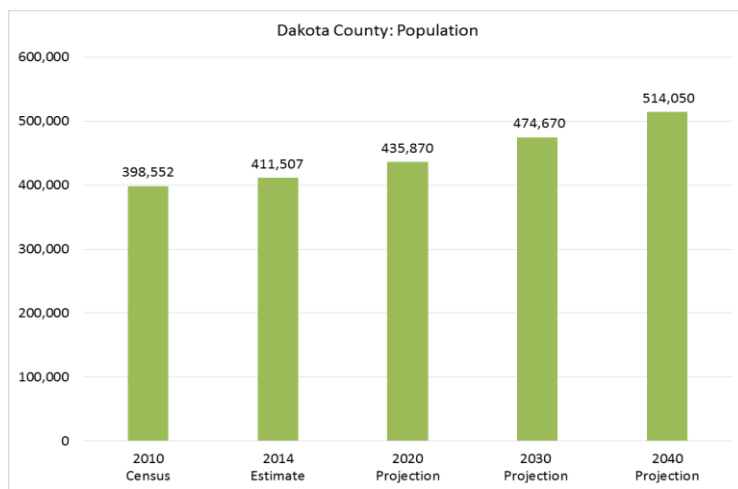
A. Research Findings

Demographics and Market Analysis

Population

Dakota County's population is increasing and is projected to experience strong growth over the next 25 years, exceeding 500,000 by 2040. As population increases, park visitor services should grow commensurate with population. Additionally, development will continue over the next 25 years and the system will need to strategically increase the level of service of parkland, trails and facilities.

As population increases, park visitor services should grow commensurate with population



County Park visitation trends

Park visitation is growing but is lower than expected: Visitation to the Dakota County Park System has grown at about 3.4% per year since 2004. Even with this growth, Dakota County Parks have capacity for greater visitation from County residents and visitors outside of the County. Dakota County's regional parks currently receive only about 2.4 percent of all regional park system visits, regardless of visitor origin, and despite Dakota County having 13 percent of the metro area population as residents.

In addition to total visitation, Dakota County's Parks are not drawing visitors from all communities. Recent Metropolitan Council research on visitor demographics has found that several groups are under-represented among park visitors. People of color¹, people with disabilities, seniors, and those with lower income households comprise a smaller share of park visitors than would be predicted by their proportion of the general resident population.

¹ Metropolitan Council, Regional Park Use Among Communities of Color, 2015

Dakota County residents use the larger regional system extensively: Dakota County resident visits to all regional parks (inside and outside of Dakota County) comprise about 5.1 percent of metro-wide regional park visitation, or 2.4 million visits. More than 70% of the regional park visits by Dakota County residents occur *outside* of Dakota County, according to data studies prepared by the Metropolitan Council.² Most of these visits are to regional parks in St. Paul, Minneapolis, and Scott County. Dakota County residents use regional parks outside of their home county to a much greater extent than residents within the jurisdictions of other regional park systems. Some of this use pattern may be based in geography – residents of northern Dakota County live closer to St. Paul’s regional parks than Dakota County’s regional parks. The extensive use of regional parks outside of Dakota County also suggests that residents are seeking park features and qualities that are less available in the Dakota County system.

Regional Park System Use by Dakota County Residents, 2015		
Regional Park System	Dakota County Resident Visits	Percent Dakota County Resident Visits
City of St. Paul Parks	841,800	34.5%
Dakota County Parks	731,200	30.0%
City of Minneapolis Parks	418,500	17.1%
Three Rivers Parks	123,700	5.1%
Scott County Parks	122,900	5.0%
Washington County Parks	58,600	4.2%
Ramsey County Parks	43,900	1.1%
Carver County Parks	35,400	5.2%
Anoka County Parks	34,300	1.0%
Bloomington Parks	32,100	4.9%

At the same time, Dakota County’s park system tends to draw non-resident visitors (from outside of the County) to a lesser extent than most other metro regional park systems.

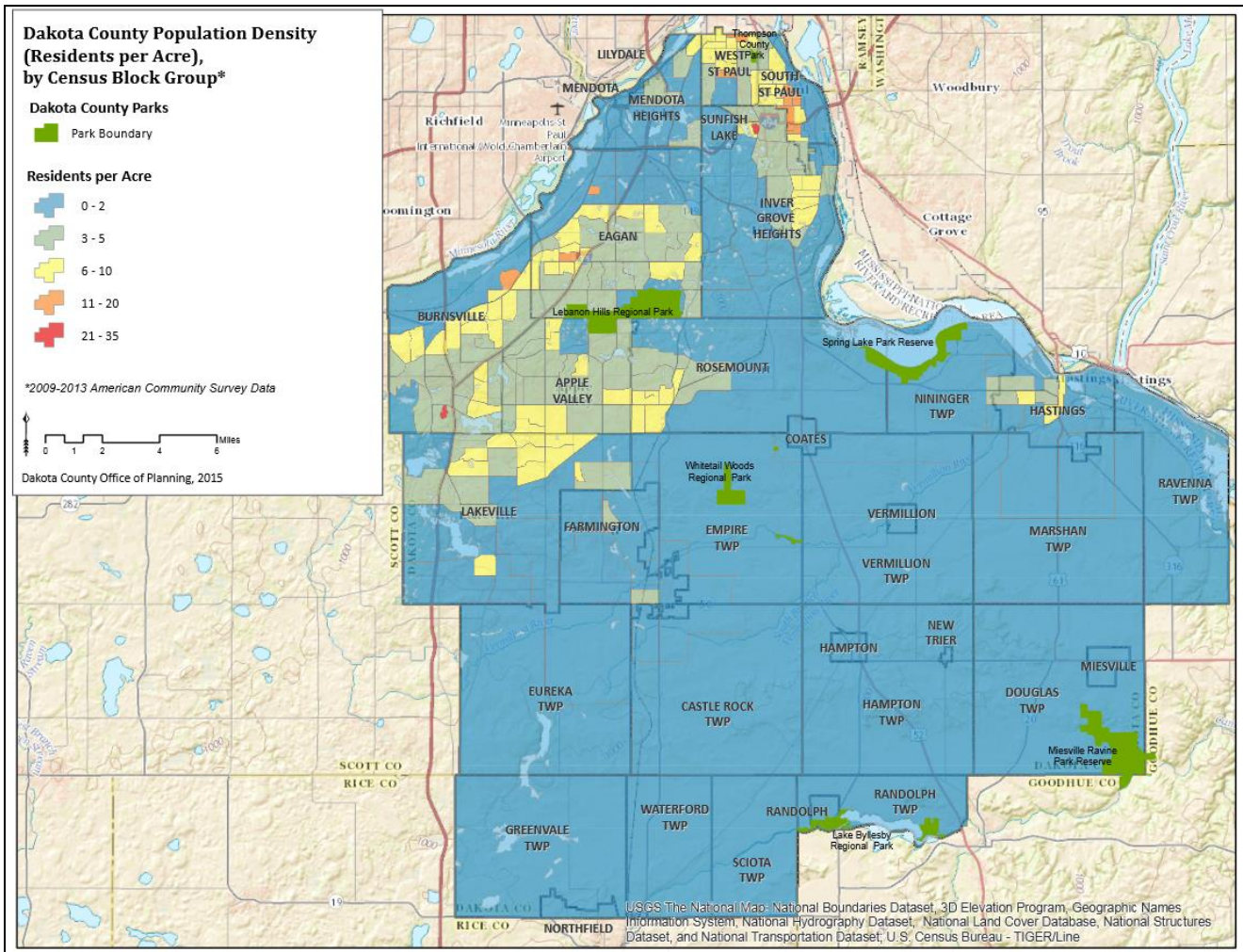
Lack of Awareness/Familiarity is a Barrier to Park Use: a 2005 survey mailed to all households in the County found that 56.5 percent of respondents were unaware of park locations and facilities. Since that time, Dakota County has marketed the park system more extensively, which has increased resident awareness of their parks. The most recent scientific survey found 36 percent of residents were unfamiliar with Dakota County Parks.

Parks and Population Density: The following map illustrates population density based on number of residents per acre. The County has three areas of population concentration:

- **North:** including South St. Paul, West St. Paul, Inver Grove Heights
- **Southwest:** Eagan, Apple Valley, Lakeville, Burnsville
- **Hastings**

² Metropolitan Council, *Annual Use and Visitation of the Metropolitan Regional Park System, 2015*

Two County parks are located in high-density population areas: Thompson Park in West St. Paul, and Lebanon Hills in Eagan-Apple Valley. The remaining four parks are located in rural areas, remote from population density.



Age

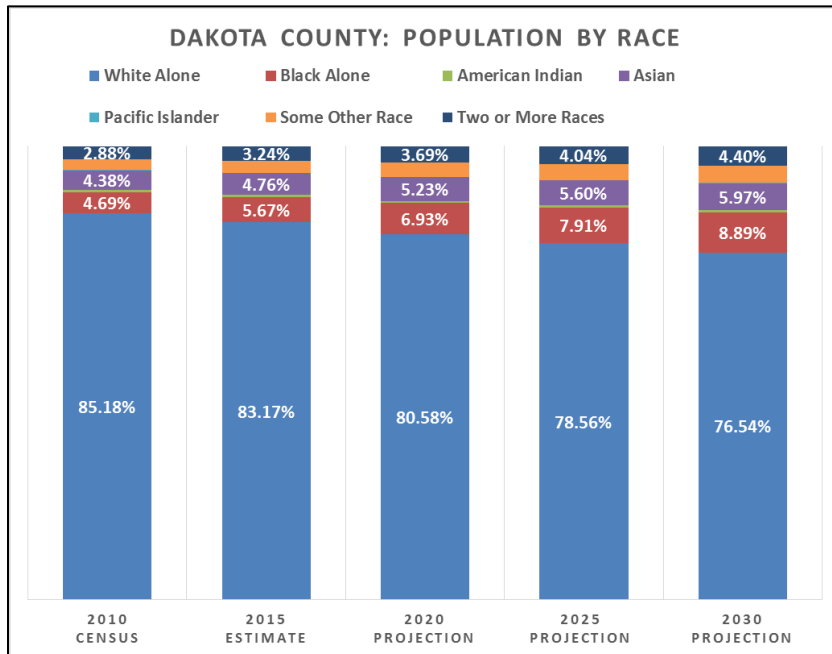
The number of individuals ages 65 and older is projected to increase through 2045. All other age segments will remain generally the same size. The County’s aging trend is noteworthy because programs and facilities focused on an older adult population will assume a greater importance in the years to come. Based on mapping US Census data,

- Younger populations are near **Lebanon Hills** and **Whitetail Woods**.
- Middle-aged to older populations are found near **Lake Bylesby**, **Miesville Ravine**, and **Spring Lake**.
- Greatest age diversity is near **Thompson Park**

Programs and facilities focused on an older adult population will assume a greater importance in the years to come

Racial and Cultural Diversity

Dakota County is diversifying. Growth is expected in virtually all major categories of race and ethnicity. Within the next 15 years, one in four individuals will be a person of color. Another indicator of increasing diversity is that one in ten Dakota County households speaks a language other than English at home.



Within the next 15 years, one in four individuals in Dakota County will be a person of color.

Recent studies on regional parks in the Twin Cities Metropolitan Area have shown that people of color are visiting regional parks to a lesser extent than their percentages of the general population would predict. The studies have shown a number of challenges, including lack of awareness/outreach, cultural barriers, and differences in recreational preferences. A more diverse population requires more diverse programming and ongoing consideration of the needs of different groups for visitor services.

Individuals with Disabilities

With the County’s population aging and approximately 29% of 65 and older adults reporting a disability of some type, the park system will need to accommodate this need. Therefore, inclusive recreation services and appropriately designed facilities will become increasingly important.

Inclusive recreation services and appropriately designed facilities will become increasingly important.

Fitness Trends

The most popular fitness activity nationally is fitness walking. There were a reported 112.5 million participants in 2013, which is a 2.9% increase from the previous year. Other noteworthy growing programs include off-road and road triathlons, trail running, and yoga.³

³ Sports & Fitness Industry Association (SFIA): 2015, Study of Sports, Fitness, and Leisure Participation

Outdoor Recreation

The most popular outdoor activities nationwide include running/jogging, day hiking, camping, road/paved trail bicycling, fishing, and wildlife viewing. Other noteworthy growing programs include adventure racing, archery, and BMX and fat tire bicycling.⁴

Community Interests and Needs

Community engagement is a central part of planning the future of visitor services. A variety of engagement methods were used in the development of this plan including surveys, workshops, and dialogue groups. A comprehensive description and analysis of those community engagement methods can be found in Chapter VI.

Major themes that surfaced regarding community interest and needs include:

- Residents prioritize outdoor recreation, recognize the value of parks and trails, and are supportive of Dakota County's lead role in managing a nature-based park system.
- There are two primary reasons Dakota County's parks and trails are not used more: *lack of time* and *lack of awareness*.
 - Data from the statistically-valid community survey suggests that *lack of time* is a barrier for approximately half of all county residents.
 - Dialogues with under-represented populations in particular suggest that *lack of awareness* is very common among this segment of the population, yet these residents have a higher-than-expected interest in visiting parks.
- Adding new or novel services, facilities, and amenities that help visitors connect with nature are desired. Suggestions included events appropriate for the setting, new forms of recreational equipment rental, and gathering areas to accommodate passive group activities.
- Expanding and creating new educational programs are favored by many community members, especially those that are current users of the park system. Partnerships were frequently suggested to expand the reach of programs to schools and other community organizations.
- Among the County's under-represented populations in parks, some community members do not visit county parks because they perceive nature-based outdoor recreation as unsafe or uncomfortable. This presents an opportunity for Dakota County Parks to do more outreach to these groups and create new introductory recreational experiences for them. Read more in Appendix B.

The two primary reasons Dakota County's parks and trails are not used more: lack of time and lack of awareness.

The fulfillment of Dakota County Parks' vision of "*Great Places, Connected Places, Protected Places*" depends on the park system's ability to meet the community's need and translate it into appreciation and stewardship of these public resources. The community engagement conducted as part of this planning process offers clear and

⁴ Outdoor Foundation, 2017: Outdoor Recreation Participation Topline Report,

valuable insight on how to achieve the vision by strategically adapting visitor services to become a more inclusive and beneficial park system.

Current Service Levels

The following table provides an illustrative comparison of service delivery for each scope area across the Dakota County Park System. Icon sizes represent comparative levels of service – high, medium, and low.

Existing Services: ○=Low, ◉=Medium, ⊙=High

Service Area	Lebanon Hills 576,400 visits/yr.	Thompson Visitation not estimated	Spring Lake 119,500 visits/yr.	Whitetail Woods 51,900 visits/yr.	Lake Byllesby 116,200 visits/yr.	Miesville Ravine 25,400 visits/yr.	Greenways 246,300 visits/yr.
Marketing	⊙	◉	⊙	◉	⊙	○	○
Volunteering	⊙	○	○	○			
Outdoor Education	⊙	○	○	○			
Self-Guided Interpretation	○		○				
Equipment Rentals	⊙						
Events	⊙	○					
Food & Drink	○		○		○		
Facility Rentals	⊙	⊙	⊙	◉	⊙	○	

Lebanon Hills Regional Park is providing the highest level of service within the system, and hosting the largest share of annual park visitation (635,200 visits in 2016). The next highest visitation is the combined total for greenways (371,500 visits in 2016), or the County’s growing network of linear parks with regional trails, although the level of service provision for greenways is the lowest in the system. Spring Lake Park Reserve hosts the next highest level of visitation and offers an intermediate level of service. Whitetail Woods, Lake Byllesby, and Miesville Ravine offer modest levels of service. Thompson County Park has not been included in annual use counts in the past. Use counts will begin in Thompson in 2017.

Planning for the right level of service takes special consideration of each site’s needs. High levels of visitation should not automatically mandate high levels of service. Conversely, parks with low visitation may merit a strategic increase in services such as marketing in order to increase awareness of the site and the appropriate recreational opportunities it offers. *Chapter III* explores the vision for each park and each visitor service area to find a strategic and informed balance.

Similar Providers

An environmental scan looked at service providers within the County that offer programs and facilities similar to that of Dakota County Parks. A total of 28 similar providers were identified, including city parks, school districts, art centers, nature centers, zoos, and other regional, state, and national parks and refuges. The analysis showed that while there are multiple providers of services such as outdoor education programs, events, volunteerism, and general outdoor recreation opportunities, each provider has a unique mission and does not always serve the same audience. Many providers serve specialized groups. Dakota County Parks was shown to be one of the few providers of natural resource based facilities and programs in Dakota County, with limited substitutability from other entities. In the case of equipment rental for nature-based recreation activities (such as canoes or snowshoes), the County appears to be the sole provider. Appendix D provides more information on services offered by similar providers.

B. Assessment/Research Synthesis

Public Interests and Key Opportunities

- Since Dakota County is the largest provider of outdoor recreation opportunities in the County, the system needs to continue its important role of providing this service to the public. More than 80% of residents believe that outdoor recreation is a priority for them.
- It will be important that more park facilities, programs, events, and other services are accessible to all, including those with disabilities, a growing segment of the population.
- The population is diversifying. All visitor services need to recognize that different racial and cultural groups may have different needs and expectations when visiting parks and trails.
- Many County parks are not near populated areas and require an automobile to access them. This poses a challenge to those that have limited access to transportation.
- There is evidence of a need to create places for socialization, both active and passive, while still providing a natural setting that is different from a highly-developed city park. This could include informal gathering places, walking paths, benches, and children's play areas.

More than 80% of residents believe that outdoor recreation is a priority for them.

About half of residents believe that adding recreational opportunities at parks is an essential or very important action to improve services.

Opportunities by Service Area

Awareness, Outreach, and Customer Service

- Enhancing public awareness of parks emerged as a common theme. Especially for under-represented populations, the lack of awareness is perhaps the most significant barrier to visiting a Dakota County park as well as a major factor in creating a welcoming park.
- Multi-lingual and culturally-aware services are necessary to serve an increasingly diverse community.
- Improvements to the park facility reservation process and policies related to timing may be needed.
- According to the anecdotal web survey, improvements are needed to the reservation and booking process for campgrounds and facilities.

Events, Food & Drink

- The public consistently expressed strong interest in park events in the County's statistically-valid survey, and public comments. Given the relatively limited number of events currently offered by Dakota County Parks, this is an area for growth.
- Survey research showed that many residents believe that expanding food service and rental opportunities would be an important action to improve visitor services.
- Given the popularity of fitness activities, there is potential to capitalize upon these activities through fitness events.
- Seventy percent of respondents to the statistically-valid survey indicated they would be very or somewhat likely to attend music, concerts, performances, and multi-cultural celebrations in parks.

Volunteerism & Community Engagement

- The public expressed moderate to strong interest in parks volunteerism in the scientific survey and in public comments.
- It will be important to offer new volunteerism and engagement opportunities to non-visitors while sustaining current volunteers.
- Ongoing, robust engagement with under-represented groups will be required to welcome non-visitors while ensuring those with historically mainstream interests still feel included.

Outdoor Education

- The public has a strong expectation for outdoor education opportunities from Dakota County Parks. City park providers mentioned in stakeholder interviews that County Parks are better suited for outdoor education than their systems.
- Surveys demonstrate strong public expectations for outdoor education opportunities from Dakota County Parks.
- Given the popularity of fitness activities in parks, there is potential to capitalize upon them through programming.
- Additional programs and facilities for youth and families are needed and there is a need to create more distinction between programs for adult and senior age segments.
- Enhanced data tracking and analysis for programs is essential for improving capacity and productivity.

Facility & Equipment Rentals

- Survey research showed that about half of residents believe that adding recreational opportunities at parks is an essential or very important action to improve services. Expanding rental opportunities was mentioned in particular by stakeholders and the public.
- The County's overall level of service for facility rentals is low and could increase within the Dakota County Park system.
- Many residents, particularly traditionally under-represented ones, have a lack of awareness about facility rentals.
- There is a need to streamline and coordinate facility reservations, customer service, check-in, monitoring, and check-out functions of facility rentals.

III. Visitor Service Vision

Research and stakeholder engagement discussed in Section II and the Plan appendices, combined with direction from the Dakota County Board of Commissioners, provided a foundation for the Dakota County Parks service vision over the coming decade. The vision seeks to improve the relevance and value of the park system to more visitors, by increasing awareness of the system, improving programs and events that provide an added reason for visiting the parks, and enhancing the quality of services. Additionally, the service vision advances efforts to realize the vision expressed in the Park System Plan to provide **GREAT PLACES**; which are year-round, destination parks with appropriate visitor services tailored to each park. Within this vision, new services will be selectively assigned to individual park units, and in some cases, to the system as a whole (e.g., awareness and outreach).

This section identifies goals for each service area, such as outdoor education and events, and identifies specific initiatives that will begin within the next five years or beyond. Additional information on implementation is provided in Section IV of this plan.



A. Awareness and Outreach

Dakota County currently does limited marketing of its Park System and specific park visitor services, such as programs and facility rental opportunities. The public consistently has identified a need for increased awareness-building efforts. Effective awareness and outreach can generate interest in specific park services, events, and projects. Additionally, awareness and outreach efforts can increase overall visitation, volunteerism, and use by all communities in the County.

Awareness and Outreach Goal:

Build awareness of Dakota County Parks and its services across all communities, including current users, new users, and under-represented groups.

Current Level of Service:

Current efforts include: program listing in bi-annual County newsletter, Parks Facebook page, limited advertising for fee-based facilities and events (campgrounds and wedding venue), brochure development, news releases, and earned media.

Awareness and Outreach Initiatives:

1. Develop a targeted awareness and outreach plan to raise awareness of parks and match messages and delivery methods to a variety of audiences. Promote services that have capacity.
2. Implement the awareness and outreach plan.

Proposed Level of Service:

- Implement a targeted online advertising strategy with themes, messaging.
- Conduct quarterly targeted direct mail campaigns to target markets and audiences promoting audience-specific interests e.g., winter recreation opportunities, homeschoolers.
- Develop and distribute a brochure packet highlighting the many and varied opportunities.
- Deploy a more strategic, comprehensive social media strategy.
- Create an overall campaign to increase awareness about the park system.
- Appear in local public access TV and radio shows highlighting the park system.
- Partner with Parks community outreach and engagement efforts and events to raise awareness of parks and park services.
- Develop inclusive messaging and strategies to be welcoming to all.
- Incorporate awareness messages and strategies into customer service and public information efforts.

Awareness and Outreach Outcomes:

Awareness and outreach efforts will result in an anticipated 5% increase in park visitation, or 50,000 visitors, over five years with over 6,000 new park users to the park.



B. Outdoor Education

Outdoor education helps visitors interpret the natural sciences and history underlying their park experiences, and plays an important role in building awareness of and appreciation for natural world. Education on outdoor recreation builds self-confidences in one's skills and abilities, and helps visitors develop new ways to experience the parks. Education programs also are an important vehicle for introducing new visitors to the park system. As with events, Dakota County's parks vary in their ability to host structured education programs. Lebanon Hills currently services as the base for education programming and hosts the majority of education programs.



Education Goal:

Enhance education programming to serve more residents, and introduce a variety of education opportunities to more of the system beyond Lebanon Hills.

Education Current Level of Service:

The current level of service includes Lebanon Hills currently serving as the base for education programming and hosts the majority of education programs. In 2016, 291 programs were offered serving over 6,200 participants and 33 school field trips served more than 2,700 students. Modest levels of self-guided interpretation existing in the system currently; however, recently, engaging interpretive plans for the greenways have been developed.

Education Initiatives:

1. Use Lebanon Hills to build strategic school partnerships that can offer more school field trips and other opportunities
2. Limited programming in more parks, primarily where park buildings exist.
3. Enhance self-guided interpretation

Education Proposed Level of Service:

- A targeted approach at building partnerships with schools, youth groups, and community education programs will increase learning opportunities for a range of audiences.
- School field trips will nearly double with an additional 2,500 students learning about and experiencing the natural world while the County reaches the audience that is most representative of its changing demographics. Additionally, there will be opportunities to further connections with families of students.



- Outdoor education programming would expand beyond Lebanon Hills and occur throughout the park system on a limited basis, likely using the existing facilities in Thompson and Spring Lake.
- Meaningful, relevant, and engaging self-guided interpretive will be provided along greenways and in parks.

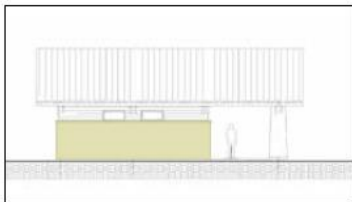
Education Outcomes:

Outdoor education programming will reach more people and new audiences while expanding throughout the park system providing opportunities to further health and wellness as well as connections to the natural world.

NODE 4. SWING BRIDGE
 INTERACTIVE: LINEUP WITH DILLINGER



CORTEN WALL INSET WITH BULLET HOLES



INTERACTIVE LINE-UP WALL
 INTERPRETIVE GRAPHICS



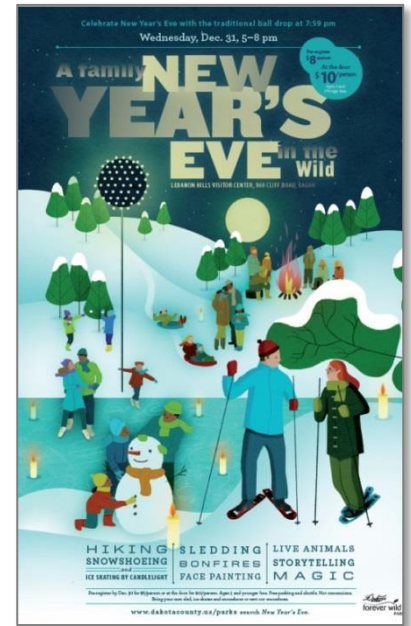
Example interpretive panel, Mississippi River Regional Greenway Interpretive Plan

C. Events

Park-based events were a service of greatest interest to residents in scientific surveys and dialogue groups. In the statistically-valid 2015 Dakota County Park Visitor Survey, 70% of respondents indicated they would be very or somewhat likely to attend music, concerts, and performances in parks. Events can temporarily activate a park, transforming it into a unique community. The benefits of events include welcoming new visitors to parks; enhancing the sense of community value as a good place to live; and raising awareness of parks, natural places, culture, and recreation. Dakota County's Parks vary in their ability to host different types of events, and each park offers a unique range of amenities. The majority of events are currently held at Lebanon Hills.

Events Goal:

Increase events in more of the Park System, celebrating the unique aspects of the park units and the communities they serve.



Events Current Level of Service:

Dakota County Parks organizes and hosts four to five events annually, including Trails by Candlelight, Wild Ride Mountain Bike Festival, and New Year's Eve in the Wild, all in Lebanon Hills and Take a Kid Fishing in Thompson Park. Total attendance is about 3,000 participants. Some aspects of these events are contracted.

Events Initiatives:

1. Add 1-2 new County-organized events per year at Thompson Park and Whitetail Woods.
2. Outreach to other event organizers to hold events at Dakota County Parks, as appropriate and consistent with park character.

Events Proposed Level of Service:

The number of events will increase to approximately six events and examples could include: grand openings, performance type series at Whitetail Woods, community, multicultural events at Thompson, and outside organizers' recreation/fitness event at Lebanon Hills or a Greenway

- Events can occur throughout the park system and over time highlight different park units.
- Events can collaborate with community outreach and engagement to reach people not using the parks.
- Events can leverage new sponsorship and grant opportunities.
- Events can be a tool for raising awareness about the park system.
- Parks staff can market and promote park facilities for permitted-type events hosted by other agencies.

Events Outcomes:

Event initiatives will result in an estimated additional 3,000 participants attending Dakota County Parks-hosted events as well as increase permitted events taking place throughout the park system. Event participation can be a gateway experience for new visitors, leading to increased visitation by new users in the future.

D. Equipment Rentals

Dakota County currently offers equipment rental at one park in its system. Offering rental equipment for visitors can introduce them to new ways to enjoy the outdoors, with a chance to “try it without buying it.” Having rental equipment available can support a planned visit for an activity with equipment, and can also support a spontaneous decision to try an activity while in the park.

Equipment Rental Goal:

Expand a variety of equipment rentals to more parks in the system, building on park natural resources and recreational assets. Equipment rentals have a target of cost-neutrality for the County.

Equipment Rental Current Level of Service:

Lebanon Hills is the only park in the Dakota County system offering equipment rental. Summer watercraft includes canoes, kayaks, and paddleboards. Skis, snowshoes, and kicksleds are rented in the winter. Over 12,000 rental sales are typical with reliable, seasonal weather conditions.

Equipment Rental Initiatives:

1. Contract for bicycle rentals in areas such as Spring Lake, Lake Byllesby, Greenways.
2. Offer watercraft rentals at Lake Byllesby through contracts or in-house service.

Equipment Rental Proposed Level of Service:

- Expand equipment rentals from one park to Lake Byllesby, Spring Lake, and major greenways.

Equipment Rental Outcomes:

Provide visitors more opportunities for equipment rental in the park system resulting in a 50% increase in equipment rentals serving over 1,000 new visitors.



E. Volunteerism

Volunteerism engages people who want to support their parks with meaningful work, and can help build a shared sense of community centered on parks. Volunteerism also can help introduce new people to the park system, and important work is accomplished through engaging dedicated volunteers.

Volunteerism Goal:

Provide training and a variety of volunteer opportunities to engage people who want to contribute to their parks.



Volunteerism Current Level of Service:

The current level of service includes engaging volunteers in the following areas: natural resources stewardship and invasive species management, assistance and support with park special events, cross-country ski and mountain bike patrol, park clean-up opportunities. Over 4,900 volunteer hours were contributed in 2016. A majority of the volunteer efforts are focused in Lebanon Hills with some occurring in Thompson.

Volunteerism Initiatives:

1. Focus volunteer program development in the areas of:
 - Outdoor Education program support
 - Natural Resources Stewardship
 - Special Events
 - Adopt-a-Park/Trail
 - Citizen Science
 - Trail Patrol
2. Host clean-up events annually based on interest and need.
3. Collaborate with County volunteer program to offer meaningful recognition and incentive program.

Volunteerism Proposed Level of Service:

- Develop a targeted year-round overall trail patrol program, providing several levels of responsibility and commitment for volunteers (e.g., lead trail patrol volunteer, trail patrol, trail monitor).
- Provide targeted volunteer opportunities in the park system for adopt-a-park/trail and clean-up opportunities.
- Pilot a citizen science volunteer program.
- Pilot a volunteer program for outdoor education assistance.



Volunteerism Outcomes:

New volunteer opportunities would increase volunteer hours by 50 percent, or about 2,500 hours.

F. Facility Rentals

Rental facilities (including campgrounds, cabins, picnic shelters, retreat centers and larger buildings) provide a natural setting for family and group events, support an extended visit in natural setting, and can introduce new visitors to parks. All Dakota County parks offer at least one type of rental facility, although use and demand vary widely. Several facilities have little excess capacity and are booked far in into the future (such as camper cabins), while others are under-utilized. Competing uses for indoor space include public programs, private group use, and casual public use. Dakota County is interested in making best use of its existing facilities – an empty building offers little benefit.

Facility Rental Goal:

Evaluate and make optimal use of facility rentals to provide program services, private group rental, and casual public use.

Facility Rental Current Level of Service:

Current service includes: indoor/year-round rental facilities (Dakota Lodge, Lebanon Hills Visitor Center, and Schaar’s Bluff Gathering Center), retreat centers with year-round lodge and group campsites (Camp Sacajawea and Camp Spring Lake), campgrounds (Lebanon Hills and Lake Byllesby), cabins at Whitetail Woods, and picnic shelters in all parks. Facilities are used for casual public use (primarily at Lebanon Hills Visitor Center), education programming, and private fee-based exclusive use.

Facility Rental Initiatives:

1. Assess all facilities and rental process to ensure that facilities and service meet customer expectations.
2. Develop a facility use policy and appropriate fee structure to optimize use of existing facilities.

Facility Rental Proposed Level of Service:

- Facility use policies are customer-focused and make sense operationally.
- Cost recovery and pricing meet financial targets while providing affordable rental options for the public.
- Empty facilities are full with adequate operational support to manage increased use.
- Customer service processes are streamlined from start to finish (inquiry, reservations, check-in/out).
- More facilities are marketed more effectively on a targeted basis.
- Service is responsive, using appropriately-supported technology when possible for seamless interactions.

Facility Rental Outcomes:

Facility rentals are at or near capacity with a blend of uses (i.e., general public, outdoor education programming, and private fee-based exclusive use) with differential pricing to encourage use by groups looking for an affordable option. Facility rentals increase by at least 10%.



G. Food and Drink

Providing opportunities for visitors to enjoy food and drink offers a number of benefits, including supporting basic health and hydration, enhancing the visit and allowing for a longer stay, providing for social interaction, and enriching events. Dakota County Parks' food and beverage offerings are currently limited to vending machines, camp stores, and food trucks at events.

Food and Drink Goal:

Maintain opportunities for food and drink in the Park System, to serve current and new visitors. Food and drink should have a target of cost-neutrality for the County.

Food and Drink Current Level of Service:

Current level of service includes vending machines at three park locations (Lebanon Hills Visitor Center, Schulze Beach in Lebanon Hills, and Schaar's Bluff Gathering Center); two camp stores where snacks and convenience items are sold; and food trucks at park events.

Food and Drink Initiatives:

1. Continue to offer food and beverage options at major events.
2. Permit food trucks to be at parks during peak use times.
3. Evaluate service, costs and benefits of incorporating a concession operation into existing buildings, based on potential future expansion (Lebanon Visitor Center, Gathering Center at Spring Lake, and Thompson County Park Visitor Center) as well as future buildings per master plan updates.

Food and Drink Proposed Level of Service:

The proposed level of service includes contracting or permitting with food trucks and carts to be in high use park locations during peak use times e.g., ice cream truck at Schulze Beach.

Food and Drink Outcomes:

Park visitors have the opportunity either through vending or food truck or cart options to purchase food and beverages which will enhance their visit and stay in the park.



H. Customer Service: Commitment to Quality

Dakota County Parks offers visitor services in a variety of ways, for a variety of services, to a variety of people. An increasing number and types of customer portals encourage two-communication and service between parks customers and the County including web, phone, in person, social media, reservations and other e-Commerce transactions, and mobile applications. Although ensuring high quality customer service is everyone's responsibility, Dakota County has identified opportunities to streamline services to be more responsive to customers. Embedded in each service area is an initial evaluation of current customer service practices, policies, and approaches.



- Identify and implement opportunities to enhance the customer experience, e.g., offering user-friendly online e-Commerce opportunities as much as possible while providing support to online customers, improving facility access for customers, and providing Wi-Fi access in key park locations.
- Regularly evaluate service processes and track service quality metrics. Implement service improvements in an ongoing manner.
- Pursue opportunities for new technology solutions, e.g., mobile applications to enhance visitors' experience with geolocation and other mapping solutions, registration and purchasing, and general information.

I. Community Engagement

As part of the public engagement process for this plan, Dakota County worked with Putting Change in Motion, to hold Community Dialogues with several demographic groups that are under-represented among park visitors. A consistent barrier for visiting regional parks is lack of awareness, identified by the general public in scientific surveys and by participants in focus group sessions with under-represented groups. One of the strongest recommendations coming out of this effort and from focus groups convened by the Metropolitan Regional Parks research is a dedicated outreach effort, such as the regional Parks Ambassador program.

Dakota County has requested funding through the Parks and Trails Legacy Fund to develop a community outreach and engagement program for Dakota County Parks beginning in 2018. Program specifics have not been developed, but preliminary objectives include outreach and engagement to build awareness of the park system and its services. The program will focus on outreach to under-represented community groups and develop stronger relationships to understand the unique needs of all communities, solve problems, identify opportunities together, pursue partnership opportunities, and provide programming and services.

J. Service Visions for Individual Parks and Greenways

Lake Byllesby Regional Park

Location: on Cannon River and Lake Byllesby near Randolph

Annual Visitation: 114,800 visits

Assets:

- Large Reservoir with beach, beach house
- Bike Trail connections and bridge
- Cannon Valley history and recreation
- Campground with camp store

- Historic Dam, mill town
- Diverse natural resources
- Western mudflats, floodplain forest, oxbow
- Eastern bluff views, river gorge
- Proximity to Cannon Falls and Northfield
- Two picnic areas; one with shelter
- Maintenance facility, limited storage



Service Vision: Intermediate seasonal service, emphasizing equipment rentals, camping, , and awareness and outreach. Increase general use with bike trail access, water recreation, picnicking, and exploring the Lake and Cannon Valley.

1. Explore Lake Byllesby and the Cannon River Valley with seasonal opportunities

- Watercraft rentals, varied types, including adaptive beach chairs
- Potential occasional event through rotation of awareness events Bike rentals
- Non-led interpretation/app
- Rentable picnic shelter

2. Camp with a range of activities -- services above, plus

- Campsite rental
- Miscellaneous small gear rentals, e.g., fishing poles
- Camp concessions

3. Get to know Lake Byllesby

- Enhanced outreach to all communities including with other Cannon River Valley partners
- Introduce limited volunteer opportunities (adopt a park, others)

Lebanon Hills Regional Park

Location: suburban Eagan and Apple Valley

Annual Visitation: 635,200 visits

Assets:

- Visitor Center: classroom, rentals, staffing, food/beverages
- Operating base for recreation & environmental education
- Limited self-guided interpretation
- Most events held here (fall, winter)
- Extensive trails: hike, mountain bike horse, ski
- Unique portage trail, beach, equipment rentals
- Resource diversity, abundant waterbodies
- Busiest campground in system, with camp store
- Picnic areas, shelters, Camp Sacajawea Retreat Center
- Challenge course
- Base for volunteers in stewardship and trail patrol (ski and mountain bike)



Service Vision: Highest service level, year-round, enhancing education, events, volunteerism, equipment rental, facility rental, food and drink, and awareness-outreach

1. Gather and stay

- Continue to offer County-led events at similar levels
- Permit appropriate events organized by others
- Improve facility rental processes
- Optimize service at Visitor Center, evaluate facility needs for programs

2. Learn something new

- Improve ability of Visitor Center to host school trips and partner with schools on learning opportunities
- Improve cultural fluency of programs to draw visitors from diverse backgrounds

3. Explore the trails

- Trail-based programs and fitness events, self-guided interpretation
- Trail patrol volunteer program
- Trail equipment rental (walking poles, skis, snowshoes, etc.) at more venues

4. Get to know Lebanon Hills

- Enhanced outreach to increase awareness, including multicultural outreach to diverse audiences
- Expand volunteer opportunities (adopt a park, trail patrol, program assistance, stewardship, citizen science, events)

Miesville Ravine Park Reserve

Location: Southeastern Dakota County, near Miesville, remote to urban-suburban areas

Annual Visitation: 27,000 visits

Assets:

- Highest quality natural resources in system: restored bluff prairie with scenic views, ravine bottoms, spring ephemerals, songbird habitat, Trout Brook, springs, lightly glaciated landscape
- Rugged landscape with deep ravine, transition to Mississippi Valley bluff country
- Trout Brook with naturally reproducing trout population, casual fishing
- Cannon River frontage, access
- Stone picnic shelters
- Historic farm foundation ruins

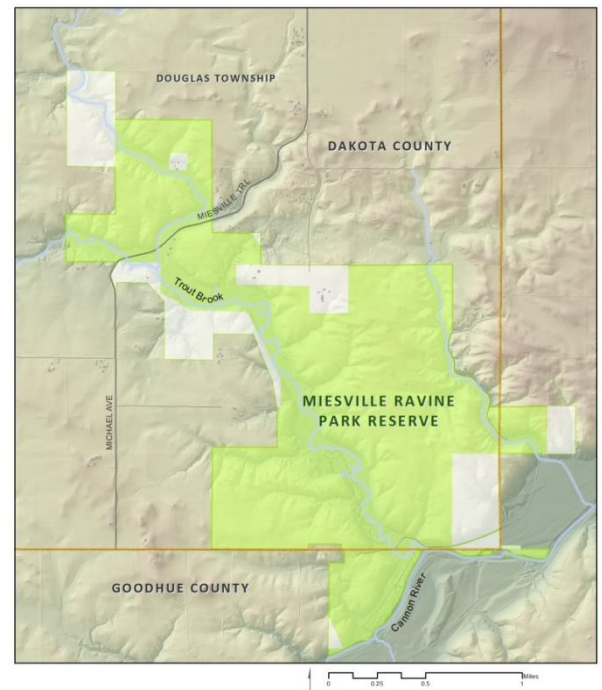
Service Vision: minimalist, focused on experiencing nature, with introduction of mobile and self-guided education

1. Immerse in nature and learn

- Self-guided interpretation on nature and history

2. Get to know Miesville Ravine

- Enhanced outreach to promote the park as a nature immersion experience
- Increase awareness of unique picnic facilities
- Introduce limited volunteer opportunities related to stewardship, education program assistance



Spring Lake Park Reserve

Location: Eastern Dakota County, near Hastings

Annual Visitation: 90,300 visits

Assets:

- Prominent location on Mississippi River, shoreline to bluffs
- Adjacent rural vistas
- Proximity to Hastings and Rosemount
- High quality natural resources, Mississippi flyway
- North-facing slopes, with River access at west end
- Gathering Center and interpretive trail
- Picnic areas and shelters
- Retreat Center
- Significant archaeological findings
- Unique settlement history and Ghost Town of Nininger
- Mississippi River Regional Trail segment, part of national trail
- Unique archery trail
- Winter ski trails



Service Vision: intermediate service focused on the river setting, natural resources, and cultural significance. Introduce education, volunteerism, events, and equipment rentals. Take advantage of the Mississippi River Trail.

1. Gather and celebrate

- Potential occasional event through system rotation of awareness events Improve facility rental processes, evaluate retreat center needs
- Promote picnic facilities
- Evaluate facility needs for service provision

2. Travel through time

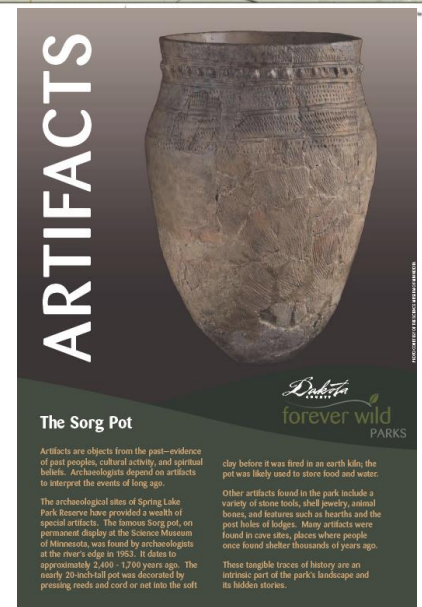
- Potential nature and culture education programming
- Improve program cultural fluency to draw diverse visitors

3. Follow the River

- Trail based self-guided interpretation
- Bike rental and self-vend kayak rental

4. Get to know Spring Lake

- Enhanced outreach to all communities, including multicultural outreach
- Expand volunteer opportunities (adopt a park, stewardship)



Thompson County Park

Location: Northern Dakota County, West St. Paul, urban population density

Annual Visitation: not estimated

Assets:

- Thompson Lake, undergoing restoration
- Fishing pier on lake
- Dakota Lodge-Thompson Park Center – large indoor space, growing rental demand
- Partnership with City of West St. Paul and Community Ed
- Natural qualities in dense urban environment
- On River-to-River Greenway, with connection to Kaposia Park, Simon’s Ravine, and Mississippi River Regional Trail
- New picnic shelter with contemporary amenities
- Large busy playground area near Lodge
- Mixed landscape, with woods, grasslands, wetlands
- Historic connections to Native American culture, Kaposia and Chief Medicine Bottle Villages

Service Vision: intermediate service level, focused on the community, with small celebrations and gathering

1. Gather with family, friends, and community

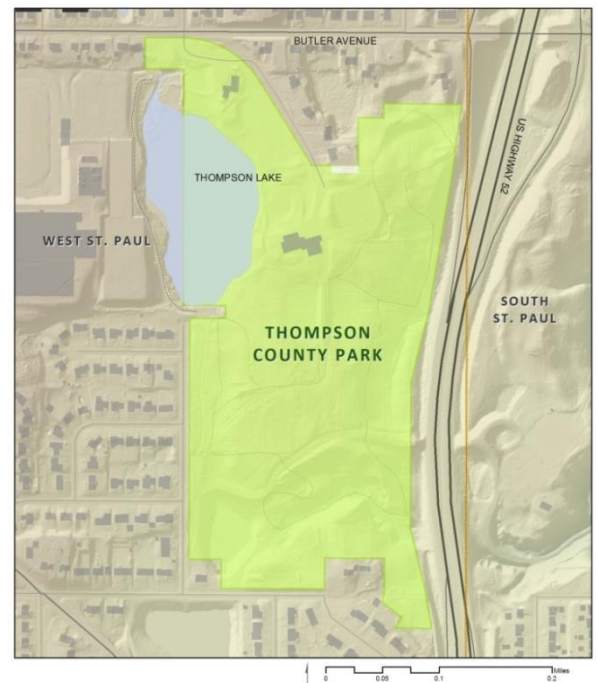
- Introduce multicultural event
- Improve facility rental processes
- Promote picnic facilities
- Evaluate facility needs for services (education programs)

2. Learn close to home

- Introduce limited nature, culture, and recreation education programming
- Improve program cultural fluency to draw visitors from diverse backgrounds

3. Get to know Thompson Park

- Enhanced outreach to all communities, including multicultural outreach
- Expand volunteer opportunities (adopt a park, stewardship, events)



Whitetail Woods Regional Park

Location: Central Dakota County, near suburban edge areas of Lakeville and Farmington

Annual Visitation: 54,900

Assets:

- Dakota County's newest park, opened in 2014
- Park vision as a venue for art, nature, local food, and community life
- Unique landscape setting, high quality water resources
- Adjacent State Wildlife Management Area to remain as open space
- History as buffer to WWII ordnance plant
- Unique camping cabins
- Earthen amphitheater can host programs and events
- Future regional trail connection
- Partnership opportunities with MN DNR and University of MN
- Contemporary picnic shelter

Service Vision: intermediate service level, based on building visitorship, using the performance venue, and growing volunteerism, and self-guided interpretation

1. Gather and listen

- Introduce performance series
- Improve facility rental processes
- Promote picnic facilities

2. Learn something new

- Introduce limited nature, culture, and recreation education
- Improve program cultural fluency to draw visitors from diverse backgrounds
- Self-guided interpretation

3. Get to know Whitetail Woods

- Enhanced outreach to all communities, including multicultural outreach
- Expand volunteer opportunities (adopt a park, stewardship, events)



Minnesota – Big Rivers Regional Greenway

Location: Western Dakota County, following Minnesota and Mississippi rivers

Annual Visitation: 135,500

Assets:

- Bluff geology and ecology
- Floodplain forest ecology
- Mississippi and Minnesota confluence
- Abandoned rail corridor
- Dakota Culture - center of the world
- Black Dog Camp
- European settlement history
- Historic Village of Mendota
- Fort Snelling
- Mendota Ferry Site
- WPA work camp in Great Depression

Service Vision:

Low-intermediate, with opportunities for:

- Recreation activity events
- Self-guided interpretation, Interpretive Plan in 2017
- Rental bicycles through partnership or contract



Mississippi River Regional Greenway

Location: Eastern Dakota County, following Mississippi from South St. Paul to Hastings

Annual Visitation: 148,400

Assets:

- Mississippi River ecology, migratory flyway
- Floodplain forests
- Historic Kaposia Village
- South St. Paul Stockyard history
- Multi-modal transportation: barges, recreational watercraft, rail, roadways
- Rock Island Swing Bridge, trailhead
- Lock and Dam No. 2, impounded river
- Downtown Hastings
- Part of national Mississippi River Trail from headwaters to Gulf of Mexico

Service Vision:

Low-intermediate, with opportunities for:

- Recreation activity events
- Self-guided interpretation, Interpretive Plan Complete
- Rental bicycles through partnership or contract



- Node 1. Kaposia Landing
- Node 2. South St. Paul + Stockyards
- Node 3. Wakota Bridge
- Node 4. Swing Bridge
- Node 5A + B. Pine Bend Bluffs
- Node 6. Spring Lake Park 1
- Node 7. Spring Lake Park 2 Schaar's Bluff
- Node 8. Town of Nininger
- Node 9. Lock + Dam No. 2
- Node 10. Hastings



River to River Regional Greenway

Location: Northern Dakota County, Mendota Heights to South St. Paul

Annual Visitation: 87,600

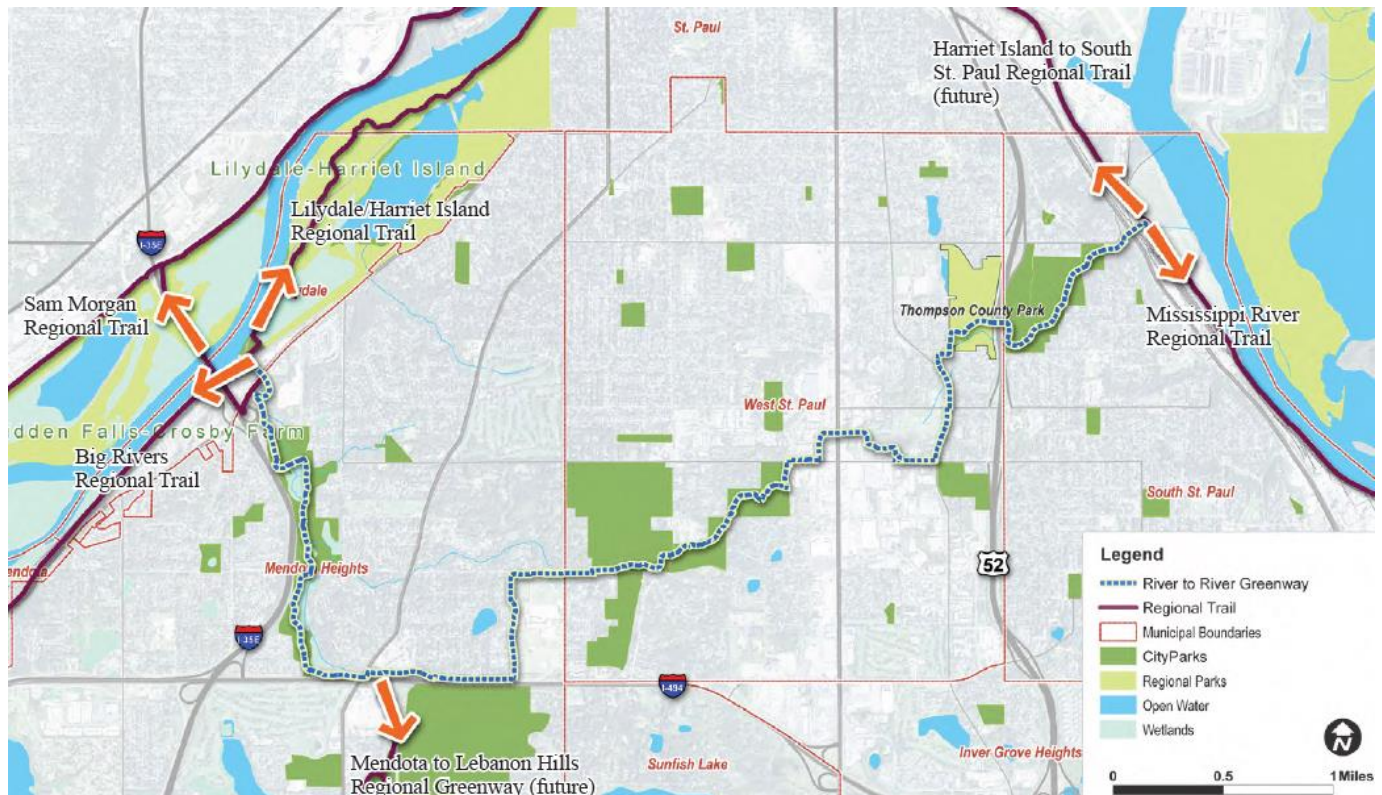
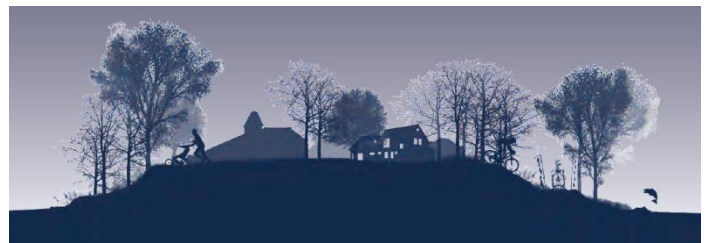
Assets:

- Connection between two major river greenways
- High population density area of the County
- City parks, schools, library, commercial area along route

Service Vision:

Low-intermediate, with opportunities for:

- Recreation activity events
- Self-guided interpretation



IV. Implementation Plan

A. Implementation Priorities

The highest priorities for the plan implementation include efforts that provide a foundation for service improvement, including:

- Preparing and implementing a targeted awareness and outreach plan
- Evaluating and enhancing customer service
- Developing a targeted facility rental/use policy with an appropriate fee structure
- Targeted growth in the Parks volunteer program, including new pilot opportunities for outdoor education and citizen science

The use of partnerships will be vital to implementing many of the other services, including equipment rentals, outdoor education programming, and events. In lieu of providing detailed phasing for implementing each initiative in these service areas, this plan suggests that implementation will be pursued as opportunities arise. New initiatives will be pursued through annual work planning and budgeting processes, subject to County Board approval.

B. Funding

Funding Philosophy

The following parameters established a funding philosophy for implementation of the Dakota County Parks Visitor Services Plan:

- Equipment rentals should be cost neutral or revenue generators for the County.
- Food and drink services should be cost neutral or revenue generators for the County.
- New outdoor education programming is pursued through volunteers and partnerships to help defray costs of new services.
- Facility rentals should maximize use of facilities by striking a balance among revenue generation during peak times, increasing appeal of rental use during off-peak times, and maintaining availability for programs.
- Non-levy funds should be used when possible.
- Events can be increased through partnerships and permitting to outside organizers.
- Maximize the use of volunteers within existing staff capacity.

External Funds

External funding sources will play an important role in implementing the visitor service initiatives. Two key external funds are *Parks and Trails Legacy* and *Met Council O&M*. Revenue from these funds may be selectively applied to certain visitor service areas and initiatives that are more likely to require funding and fit within the framework of each funding source.

Parks and Trails Legacy Fund

The Parks and Trails Fund receives a portion of sales tax revenues to finance projects and programs that support parks and trails of regional or statewide significance. The Metropolitan Council grants appropriations to Dakota County Parks along with nine other agencies that own and operate regional parks and trails in the Twin Cities.

Metropolitan Council Regional Parks Operation and Maintenance Allocation

Met Council O&M distributes state dollars to regional park agencies for operations and maintenance costs. Eligible expenses include the cost of providing for the operation and maintenance of waters, lands, and facilities in the metropolitan area regional park and open space system.

Current Services Compared to Proposed Service Levels

The following table shows current services and summarizes new services with needed resources and targeted participation outcomes. New staff positions are proposed to be funded near-term with external resources, including Met Council O&M funds, Parks and Trails Legacy Funds, and fee-based revenues.

Visitor Service Initiative Summary and Targeted Outcomes:

Service Area	Current Service Level	Current Expense, Revenue, & FTE	Proposed Service Level Additions	Increased FTE	External Funding	Net Revenue or (County Cost)	Activity Increase Target (by 2022)	New User Target (by 2022)
Awareness and Outreach	County media, Limited advertising, news items	E: \$67,687 R: \$0 FTE: 0.1	Targeted Awareness-Outreach Plan and Approach	0	\$100,000	\$0	5% visit increase in 5 years (>50,000)	6,000
Events	4-5 per year, 3,000 participants	E: \$32,019 R: \$18,907 FTE: 0.2	1-2 new events	0.85 Temp	\$26,430	\$TBD	3,000 more participants	1,000
Volunteer	4,900 hours: Event, Stewardship, Trail, Clean-up	E: \$19,652 R: \$0 FTE: 0.2	50% growth in hours New: education, citizen science, targeted trail patrol	0.15 Perm	\$11,250	\$0	2,000 more volunteer hours	500
Outdoor Education	291 programs 6,200 people; 33 field trips 2,740 kids	E:\$198,500 R: \$49,658 FTE: 3.3	Outreach-partner for school, groups, Limited programs at more parks	0.85 Perm	\$63,750	\$0	1,000 more participants 2,500 more field trip students	1,000
Facility Rentals	78,000 guests; 1,251 events; 56,500 camp days	E: \$542,288 R: \$905,276	Evaluate and enhance customer service	0		\$TBD	10% increase in rentals, 8,000 more guests	500
Equip. Rentals	Lebanon: 8,446 watercraft 3,872 winter 12,338 total	E: \$91,000 R: \$88,439	Rentals at Byllesby and Major Greenways	0.50 Temp	\$14,000	\$TBD	50% increase in rentals, 6,000 more rentals	1,000
Food and Drink	Vending, camp stores, events		No change	0		\$TBD		
Current Needs Requested in 2018 Budget	Existing demand for reservations, customer support, public contact		New Guest Services position	1.0	County levy from fee-based revenues	\$0		
New Opportunity for Limited Term Position	None		Special Limited Term Outreach position	1.0	\$75,000	\$0		
Est. Total				2.0 Perm. 2.35 Temp.	\$290,430	\$0	72,500 more participants/visits	10,000 new users

C. Key Performance Indicators

Dakota County tracks the quality of its efforts by measuring specific activities and outcomes annually. Within the Parks Department, data is tracked annually for the following areas:

- Park and Greenway visitation sampling (submitted to Metropolitan Council for annual use estimates).
- Customer service tracking for specific services, such as education programs or renting park facilities.
- Campground and facility rental activity and revenue in the Operations Annual Report.
- Programs and events tracking for participation and revenue in the Parks Special Services Report.

To evaluate how well Visitor Services are performing overall and to assist with implementation of this plan, KPIs tailored to each program area are recommended to evaluate *what* is accomplished, *how well* it was done, and if park visitors are *satisfied*. Potential measures for specific service areas are identified below.

PUBLIC AWARENESS AND OUTREACH

Potential Key Performance Indicators	Measure of
Number of referrals from awareness-outreach materials per visitor	Reach among visitors
Number of referrals from awareness-outreach materials per County population	Reach among residents
Awareness-outreach cost per visitor	Financial efficiency
Sponsorship or advertising revenue (in materials) per total awareness-outreach budget	Earned revenue
Visitor demographics compared to overall County population demographics	Reach among all residents

EVENTS

Potential Key Performance Indicators	Measure of
Number of event participants per total visitors	Reach among visitors
Number of event participants per capita of County population	Reach among total population
County cost per participant	Financial efficiency
Sponsorship or advertising revenue per total event budget	Earned revenue
Overall cost recovery	Financial equity
Event participant satisfaction poll or survey	Participant satisfaction

OUTDOOR EDUCATION

Potential Key Performance Indicators	Measure of
Number of program participants per total visitation	Reach among visitors
Number of program participants per County population	Reach among residents
County cost per participant	Financial efficiency
Overall cost recovery	Financial equity
Student assessment survey	Environmental literacy
Program participant satisfaction poll or survey *	Participant satisfaction

VOLUNTEERISM

Potential Key Performance Indicators	Measure of
Total number of volunteer individuals per total visitation	Reach; magnitude
Total number of volunteer individuals per County population	Reach; magnitude
Total volunteer management cost per volunteer hour	Management efficiency
Volunteer satisfaction poll or survey	Participant satisfaction

FACILITY RENTALS

Potential Key Performance Indicators	Measure of
Total utilized hours per total available hours	Productivity
Operating cost per rental	Financial efficiency
Revenue per rental	Financial efficiency
Number of reduced rate hours per total rented hours	Efficiency; equity
Overall cost recovery	Financial equity
Rental customer satisfaction poll or survey	Customer satisfaction

EQUIPMENT RENTALS

Potential Key Performance Indicators	Measure of
Total utilized (rented) hours per total available hours	Productivity
Revenue per piece of equipment	Productivity
Number of rentals per total visitation	Reach among visitors
Number of rentals per County population	Reach among residents
County cost per rental experience	Financial efficiency
Overall cost recovery	Financial equity

FOOD AND DRINK

Potential Key Performance Indicators	Measure of
Number of visitors with food and drink access per total visitation	Availability of service
Number of vendors per event or program attendance	Magnitude of service
County revenue per visitor	Financial efficiency
County cost per visitor	Financial efficiency
Total gross sales per delivery cost	Financial efficiency
Overall cost recovery	Financial equity

CUSTOMER SERVICE: Improvements integrated through current operations and service area initiatives

Potential Key Performance Indicators	Measure of
Visitor and customer satisfaction surveys (residential survey) *	Quality of service Quality of service delivery

*current Program and Service Inventory measure

D. Policy Recommendations

Cost Recovery Policy

While a detailed fee policy exists and is updated on a regular basis, Dakota County Parks currently lacks a formal cost recovery policy. Cost recovery targets should be identified for each core service and/or program type. Determining cost recovery goals and setting appropriate price points involves a three-step process:

1. Classify all programs and services based on the public or private benefit they provide.
2. Conduct a Cost of Service Analysis to calculate the full cost of each program/service.
3. Establish a cost recovery target, through County policy, for each program or program type based on the outcomes of the previous two steps, and adjust program prices accordingly.

The following information provides more detail on steps 2 & 3.

Cost of Service

A Cost of Service Analysis should be conducted on each program or service to accurately calculate direct (i.e., program-specific) and indirect (i.e., overhead) costs. Completing a Cost of Service Analysis not only helps determine the true and full cost of offering a program, but provides information that can be used later to price programs. Overall, major costs that should be accounted for in a Cost of Service Analysis include: personnel, administration, supplies, materials, equipment, contracts, fleet, utilities, uniforms, facility, and debt service (if appropriate).

Cost Recovery Targets and Pricing

Cost recovery targets should reflect the degree to which a program provides a public versus private good. Programs providing public benefits should be subsidized more by the County; programs providing private benefits should seek to recover costs and/or generate revenue for other services. To help plan and implement cost recovery policies, the project team has developed the following definitions to help classify specific programs/services, also utilized in the Classification of Services.

Classification	Typical Cost Recovery	Notes
COMMUNITY	0-25%	Basic services intended to be accessible and of benefit to all; supported wholly or significantly by public funds.
COMMUNITY/Individual	25-50%	Benefit accrued to both the general public and individual interests, but to a significant community advantage.
INDIVIDUAL/Community	50-75%	Benefit accrued to both individual and general public interests, but to a significant individual advantage.
MOSTLY INDIVIDUAL	75-100%	Nearly all benefit received by individual(s), with benefit provided to the community only in a narrow sense.
HIGHLY INDIVIDUAL	100%+	Exclusive benefit and gain received by individual(s) and not the general public; individual pays at least the full cost of service provision.

Program/service pricing should be established based on the Cost of Service Analysis, overlaid onto programs areas or specific events, and strategically adjusted according to market factors and policy goals. Staff should continue to monitor the effectiveness of the various pricing strategies they employ and make adjustments as

necessary within the policy frameworks that guide the overall pricing philosophies. It is also important to continue monitoring for yearly competitor and other service providers benchmarking.

Scholarships and Needs-Based Assistance Program

Dakota County believes that everyone should have the opportunity to benefit from participation in parks programs and services. Dakota County provides access to park facilities, programs, and services regardless of economic situation. Financial needs-based assistance is available to qualifying organizations, families, and individuals. Currently, more organizations, specifically youth-focused groups, are applying for scholarships for outdoor education programming. Funding to support a scholarship program does not currently exist. As part of the future Cost Recovery and Pricing Policy work it will be important to designate funding streams to support this important initiative of providing access to all. Potential funding option to consider could include: designating excess Parks fee-based revenues or annual donations to parks for scholarship program.

Staff will conduct the Cost of Service Analysis and develop cost recovery targets in advance of the 2018 Parks Fee Schedule recommendation.

Sponsorships and Partnerships

Sponsorships and partnerships are frequently seen as an easy “go-to” solution for addressing shortfalls in staffing and funding. In reality, strong lasting sponsorships and partnerships take careful cultivation and should not be taken for granted. They are an extension of an agency’s service delivery and can affect the brand and reputation of Dakota County.

The Parks Visitor Services Plan suggests a focused yet achievable goal for expanding sponsorships and partnerships with an emphasis on appropriateness and equity for each one. *No initiative recommended in this plan relies solely on a sponsorship for implementation.* However, partnerships in general – whether with other agencies, contractors, nonprofits, or volunteers – are important to the success of the Parks Department and should be strategically and purposively managed.

Dakota County Parks staff currently works with several different types of partners and sponsors. A database should be used to track these partnerships; this not only helps to monitor their effectiveness, but can demonstrate to stakeholders, policy makers, the public, and other partners how successful the agency can be at leveraging resources.

Many times partnerships and sponsorships are inequitable and do not produce reasonable shared benefits between parties. To mitigate this, Dakota County Parks should adopt a formal partnership policy, identifying a few major partnership/sponsorship types and ideal, measurable outcomes for each.

In general, policies should promote fairness and equity while helping staff to manage against potential internal and external conflicts. In some cases, formal partnership policies are based around core principles that must apply to all explicit partnership/sponsorship agreements. Recommended principles for Dakota County Parks are listed below.

All partnerships and sponsorships should:

- Have a written agreement with measurable outcomes.
- Track costs associated with the partnership to demonstrate the shared level of equity.
- Be evaluated on a regular (e.g., annual) basis, including reports to/from both parties on the performance and outcomes of the partnership.
- Maintain a culture that focuses on collaborative planning, regular communication, and mutual support.

V. Planning and Public Engagement Overview

This plan was developed through three project phases – *Assessment, Potential Future Directions, and Draft Plan* – with each phase developing an interim product, conducting extensive stakeholder engagement, and receiving direction from the County Board of Commissioners.

A. Assessment:

Technical Research: evaluated Dakota County Parks’ demographics, current visitor service operations, and the market supply of park visitor services in the Twin Cities South Metro area. The overall goal was to evaluate how well the County is providing services, what other providers offer, and who potential visitors could include.

METHODS USED	OUTCOMES
Demographic Analysis	<i>Identified major demographic patterns in the County and groups that are growing in number, but not well-served by existing park services.</i>
Parks Service and Recreation Trend Study	<i>Looked at national trends in park recreation services</i>
Local Market-Similar Provider Study	<i>Evaluated what is currently available in the county area from other park and recreation agencies and nature centers</i>
Benchmarking Services with Similar Agencies	<i>Reviewed program summary data and information from local County-based Regional Park Agencies</i>
Current County Program Inventory and Evaluation	<i>Reviewed current Dakota County Parks Visitor Service program areas, looking at performance and opportunities for improvement</i>
Current County Classification of Services	<i>Classified current Dakota County Park services according to the degree they provide individual vs. community benefit</i>
County Park Facility Occupancy Evaluation	<i>Reviewed use levels for park facilities to identify those with excess capacity</i>

Public Interests: varied engagement methods sought clarity on public expectations for services and specific interest areas, whether or not they are current users of Dakota County Parks. Of special interest were opinions of people who are not well-represented among parks visitors, including people of color, seniors, youth, people living with disabilities, and people with low household incomes.

- Statistically-Valid Scientific Residential Survey
- Community Dialogues with Under-Represented Audiences
- Online Survey
- Intercept Surveys within Parks and Non-Park Public Venues
- Recreation Provider Workshop
- County Client Service Provider Workshop
- Open House

Statistically-valid Community Survey

The National Research Center, Inc. (NRC) administered the “Dakota County 2015 Park Visitor Survey.” A total of 896 surveys were completed and used for analysis. The survey’s key findings include:

- Dakota County residents are aware of Dakota County parks that are close to them and think highly of Dakota County Parks and Regional Trails.

- A high majority of residents prioritize outdoor recreation and value benefits of parks and trails.
- Survey participants said they visit Dakota County parks or trails because they enjoy out-of-doors natural settings while about half do not visit because they are too busy.
- Residents were most likely to use benches and scenic overlooks along trails, rent several types of recreational equipment, and attend events related to music, concerts and performances. Residents were least likely to rent adaptive recreation equipment and purchase souvenirs.
- Residents feel it is important to add recreational opportunities and provide nature-based/ environmental programs.
- Most residents support increased funding for park visitor services, but did not agree on a single preferred funding method.

Dialogues with Under-Represented Populations

Putting Change in Motion facilitated a series of dialogues were conducted with groups that are under-represented among park visitors during the community engagement process. These groups included Seniors, Foreign-Born Latinos, South Asian Indians, Youth, African Americans, Vietnamese, People Living with Disabilities, Somalis, and US-Born Latinos. Key findings derived from the conversations include:

- Lack of awareness among under-represented populations is the biggest barrier to park system use.
- Under-represented populations have interest in new and additional types of amenities and activities.
- Safety and signage improvements would be helpful.
- Many feel that accessibility improvements would increase use.
- There is an interest in making the rental of park facilities more affordable.

Stakeholder Meetings

Dakota County city park agencies, other service providers, and other stakeholder organizations participated in workshops to discuss the Dakota County Park System. Key themes from the discussions included Dakota County Parks' role as the leading provider of natural area recreation in the County, building partnerships among similar providers, the need for enhanced marketing and communication (in partnership with other agencies), offering new or expanded opportunities for under-represented populations, and expanding programming to meet a wider audience.

Intercept Surveys

A total of 320 intercept surveys were collected from a variety of locations throughout the County including Dakota County Parks, libraries, at community events, and area shopping centers and malls. Less than half of people surveyed reported using Dakota County Parks on a regular basis. Of note, performances/concerts and having food in parks were top interests. Additionally, nature education programs, watercraft rentals, and winter recreation gear rentals were also identified as important.

Electronic Survey

Residents were provided the opportunity to provide feedback electronically. A total of 257 responses were collected. Many respondents reported visiting Dakota County Parks only about once each year. The most visited park is Lebanon Hills, which is popular due to its location and natural setting.

Public Workshops

Two “Great Outdoors” workshops were held in conjunction with the County’s Natural Resource Management Plan. Participants were able to provide feedback via real-time polling questions, open house posters, and in-depth focus groups. Environmental education programs were highly desired by the workshop participants. Participants also felt that marketing efforts can be expanded to increase community awareness.

County Board: Received and commented on Visitor Services research findings.

B. Concept Development and Testing:

Technical Research: identified concept framework, developed concept ideas for each service area to test with the public and stakeholders.

Public Interests: sought comment on preliminary service concepts. Of special interest were the opinions of people who are not well-represented among parks visitors, including people of color, seniors, youth, people living with disabilities, and people with low household incomes.

- Community Dialogues with Under-Represented Audiences
- Potential Partner Workshop
- Open House

County Board:

The County Board provided direction at two workshops in the Concept Development phase.

Service Concept Framework, September 13, 2016: The Board reviewed and commented on draft Guiding Principles and opportunities for each service area.

Service Area	General Direction from September 13, 2016 County Board Workshop
General	<ul style="list-style-type: none">• The County should not duplicate or compete with services provided by other agencies.• Focus on unique services that fit with each park, rather than the same service everywhere.
Marketing	<ul style="list-style-type: none">• Marketing is a key priority to increase park awareness and visitation
Equipment Rentals	<ul style="list-style-type: none">• Expand to more parks, fit with what each park has to offer, don’t need to have at all parks• Cost neutrality is desirable
Outdoor Education	<ul style="list-style-type: none">• Seek partnership and volunteer opportunities• Need information on facility availability• School Field Trips are a growth area for Lebanon and Thompson• More self-guided interpretation is desirable
Volunteerism	<ul style="list-style-type: none">• Very supportive of increased volunteerism, including in outdoor education and events
Events	<ul style="list-style-type: none">• Multicultural events would help reach under-represented groups• Free movies and concerts would work well at Thompson and Whitetail Woods• Use of sponsorships for events is an option• Provide the parks to outside event organizers as a venue• Need to market our events
Food & Drink	<ul style="list-style-type: none">• The County should have food trucks or options at all events• Restaurants or cafes don’t make sense for this system

Draft Service Concepts, November 29, 2016: The Board reviewed draft initiatives for each service area.

Service Area	General Direction from November 29, 2016 County Board Workshop
Marketing	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> The initiatives cover the key points of interest
Events	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> As events are planned, make sure we are not duplicating what others are already doing Focus on events that capitalize on the natural type of system the County has Evaluate revenue and cost recovery
Food & Drink	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> With an emphasis on food trucks and more food at events, the parks also should have vending options for people who aren't there for an event Not interested in staffing a food sales site if there is no draw.
Volunteerism	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> Recognizing and retaining volunteers is a Tier 1 priority
Outdoor Education	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> More self-guided interpretation, including signage, is desirable
Facility Rentals	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> Make best use of the existing park buildings Focus on customer service and process improvements for facility rentals
Equipment Rentals	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> Focus on increasing use at more parks before offering equipment rental Equipment rentals should have a higher cost recovery than the other service areas

C. Draft Plan:

Technical Research: developed draft plan based on concepts tested with the public and the County Board.

County Board Direction: Release the draft plan for 30-day public review through September 21, 2017.

Public Interests: sought comment on draft plan, though web, social media, and open houses.

Service Area	Participant Ideas and Suggestions from Public Open Houses: September 21-22, 2017
Awareness and Outreach	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> Do more outreach to the Native American community Do outreach at Farmers Markets Apps for trail maps Trail maps that identify surface, length, difficulty Seek sponsorships for programming with local businesses Parks web page is clunky, reservation system is not user-friendly Revamp website, not user-friendly, can't find info I want Facebook is good for finding Parks info Tag Mom's Clubs and other groups in Facebook to promote events, programs Partner with cities on information, promotion, e.g., city newsletters
Outdoor Education	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> Do more programs with the Native American and Dakota communities Story time for kids, focused on age groups pre-school to school age, followed by a hike Nature gardens outside the Visitor Center that can be incorporated into programs Native American herbalist programs on medicinal plants Engaging things for kids Collaborate with school districts and Early Childhood and Family Education on programs Puppet mobile at Thompson Park Partner with the U of MN Garden Club Target population could be parents going to County libraries Partner with the Y on more education programs. Pollinator friendly gardens. Team up with local businesses, e.g., Amore Coffee Shop, to promote/collaborate on programs Dog programming

Service Area	Participant Ideas and Suggestions from Public Open Houses: September 21-22, 2017
Events	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • New Year’s Eve event should be free with no reservations. I just want to walk the trails. I don’t come because I have to register and pay. Other events – the same, they should be free. • Dog events • Event focused on installing a pollinator patch or two – could be a way to reach new volunteers • Book signings • Art in the Park
Volunteerism	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Share information on the Buck Pond restoration with Wetland Health Evaluation Program (WHEP) volunteers – it would be of interest to them • Some WHEP volunteers are interested in doing more beyond gathering information on current quality – e.g., doing more to improve the resource with restoration. Partner with WHEP Program Coordinator to let WHEP volunteers know about Parks restoration volunteer opportunities. • Keep using poster board signs at parks to advertise volunteer opportunities • Hold volunteer events more regularly – quarterly, with kid-friendly activities • Saturday morning park clean up events • Volunteer events yearly, focused on families in particular • Partner with 4H – their kids are looking for community service projects • Advertise volunteer events with MN Master Naturalists, if not already doing so
Equipment Rental	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Teach people how to use the rented equipment
Facility Rental	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Please allow dogs in camper cabins. My dog is my family and I won’t come without her. You can keep a few dog-free cabins, but allow dogs in the rest. I would pay a refundable damage deposit and clean up (leave the cabin as I found it).
Other Services	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • More things in the play area at Thompson Park, please, such as diggers • Allow well-behaved dogs off-leash throughout the park • Program to allow Native Americans to harvest medicinal plants in parks. Many have to travel to other states to collect plants.

Public Comments Requesting Revisions to the Draft Visitor Services Plan Document

PAGE	COMMENT	HOW ADDRESSED IN PLAN
3	Show greenway connections around Lebanon Hills Regional Park on the map.	<i>Central Greenway Connectivity study added to map after Board approval of study</i>
4	Delete restaurant or café under “food”	<i>Revision made</i>
11	Cite the source for trend info stating that bicycling is one of the most popular recreational activities. Include other popular activities such as hiking and trail running.	<i>Clarification added</i>
11	Explain more about the concerns expressed about safety in parks. Countywide surveys show that residents generally feel very safe in County Parks.	<i>Clarification added</i>
17	Clarify/explain “full service parks.” Parks don’t need to all have the same services or be “full-service” and have all services.	<i>Revision made</i>

D. Plan Adoption:

The revised draft plan was adopted by the Dakota County Board of Commissioners on October 31, 2017.

Appendix A: 2015 Parks Visitor Services Survey Summary

Dakota County worked with the National Research Center (NRC) in Boulder, Colorado, to administer a scientific residential survey on park service preferences. Completed in 2015, the report is online at <https://www.co.dakota.mn.us/Government/Analysis/ResidentSurvey/Documents/ParkVisitorSurveyReport.pdf>.

- 887 Dakota County residents responded of the 5,000 surveys sent (17% response rate)
- 46% of respondents had lived in Dakota County for more than 20 years
- 41% of respondents held a Bachelor’s degree, and 91% identified as white.
- Across all age groups (18 to 55+), and income levels (less than \$50,000 to \$100,000 or more), statistically significant priority rankings of “high” or “medium” were given to outdoor recreation as a way to spend free time.

I. Public Information and Marketing

- Almost all survey respondents (98%) either strongly or somewhat agreed that benefits of parks and trails include improved physical or mental health and fitness. Additional identified benefits included (1) protect natural resources and water quality; (2) improve quality of life in the county; (3) create places for scenic landscape views and (4) preserve large areas of open space.
- About 9 in 10 respondents agreed that parks and trails increase property values, while 8 in 10 agreed they provide opportunities for people to be with other people and cultures.

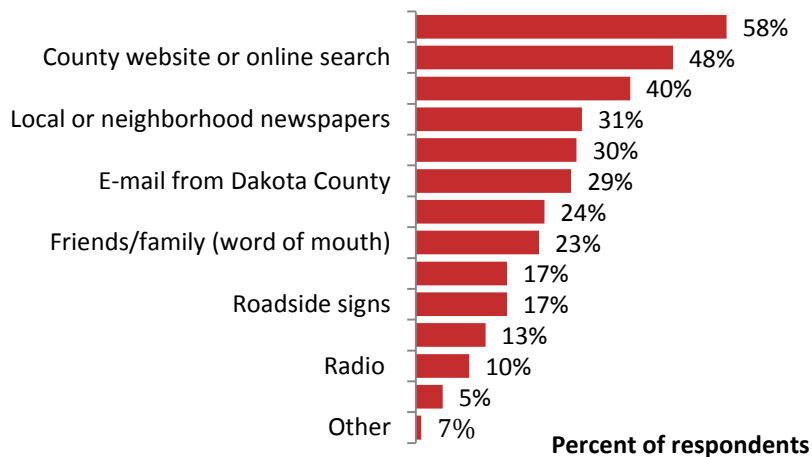
Perceived benefits (Percent "somewhat" or "strongly" agree)	Length of residency			Household Income			Education			Race/ethnicity		Age			Gender		Overall
	Less than 5 years	6 to 20 years	More than 20 years	Less than \$50,000	\$50,000 - \$100,000	\$100,000 or more	Some high school or high school graduate	Associate or technical school degree	Bachelor's, graduate or professional degree	White alone, not Hispanic	Hispanic and/or Persons of Color	18 - 34	35 - 54	55+	Female	Male	
Improves physical or mental health and fitness	99%	99%	96%	98%	98%	98%	97%	98%	98%	99%	95%	100%	97%	97%	98%	98%	98%
Improves quality of life in the county	97%	98%	96%	97%	97%	97%	94%	97%	97%	98%	93%	99%	96%	96%	97%	97%	97%
Protects natural resources and water quality	98%	98%	95%	95%	98%	99%	93%	98%	97%	98%	92%	99%	97%	95%	97%	97%	97%
Creates places for scenic landscape views	97%	100%	94%	97%	93%	99%	96%	97%	96%	97%	94%	97%	96%	97%	98%	95%	96%
Increases property values	91%	96%	88%	89%	92%	95%	86%	91%	93%	93%	84%	91%	93%	90%	93%	89%	92%
Provides opportunities for people to be with other people and cultures	79%	81%	77%	88%	77%	77%	90%	87%	74%	79%	79%	74%	81%	80%	81%	76%	79%
Preserves large areas of open space	97%	97%	93%	96%	96%	96%	95%	97%	95%	96%	94%	96%	95%	95%	95%	96%	95%
I don't see any benefit for me or my household	4%	6%	11%	13%	6%	4%	26%	6%	5%	7%	12%	1%	7%	16%	9%	7%	8%

- c. Over 36% of Dakota County residents either strongly or somewhat agreed that lack of familiarity with Dakota County parks/trails is an impediment to visitation for either the respondent or members of their household.

To what extent do you agree or disagree that each of the following reasons keep you or members of your household from visiting Dakota County parks or trails?	Strongly agree		Somewhat agree		Somewhat disagree		Strongly disagree		Total	
	%	N	%	N	%	N	%	N	%	N
I prefer to visit other parks instead of Dakota County parks or trails	3%	N=20	16%	N=118	30%	N=216	52%	N=377	100%	N=731
I'm too busy; I do other things with my leisure time	15%	N=129	34%	N=286	21%	N=178	29%	N=239	100%	N=831
I am not familiar with Dakota County parks/trails	11%	N=88	25%	N=212	25%	N=206	39%	N=327	100%	N=833
Dakota County Parks don't offer the activities that I want to do	4%	N=26	13%	N=94	28%	N=196	55%	N=388	100%	N=704
I have no interest in ever going to a park or trail	4%	N=29	4%	N=29	11%	N=93	82%	N=671	100%	N=822
Dakota County parks/trails are too far away	2%	N=13	15%	N=119	21%	N=160	62%	N=478	100%	N=770
I don't have a way to get there	2%	N=18	2%	N=19	6%	N=47	90%	N=733	100%	N=818
I experience cultural or language barriers when I am among other park users	1%	N=7	2%	N=14	4%	N=28	94%	N=727	100%	N=777
I don't have anyone to go with me	4%	N=30	13%	N=109	13%	N=105	70%	N=569	100%	N=813
My physical condition prevents me from going to parks	3%	N=25	6%	N=47	6%	N=49	85%	N=704	100%	N=826
I don't feel safe visiting Dakota County parks or trails	1%	N=9	5%	N=39	12%	N=91	82%	N=642	100%	N=780
Other reasons	35%	N=37	9%	N=10	7%	N=7	48%	N=51	100%	N=105

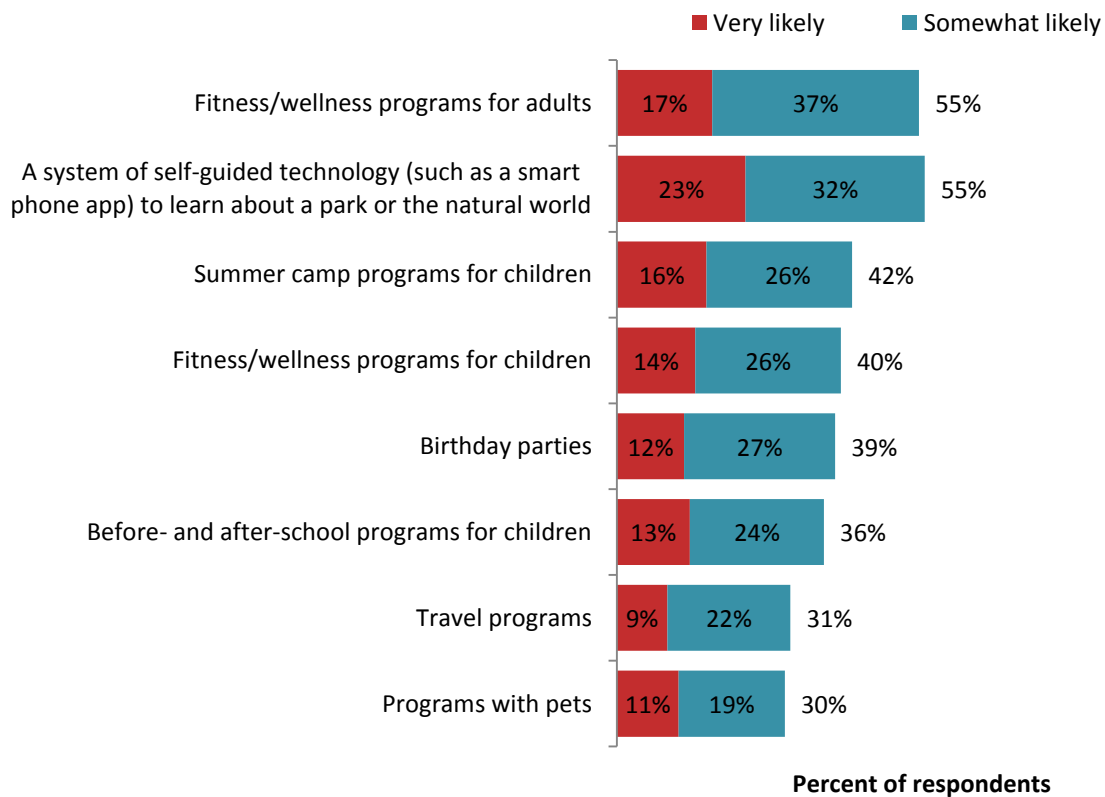
- d. About 7 in 10 respondents felt it was essential or very important to be able to enjoy nature or scenic views in regional parks. Other important activities (rated essential or very important by about 4 in 10 respondents) included hiking or running on paved trails, picnicking, bicycling on paved trails and playground use.

- e. Residents preferred to receive information in the following formats:

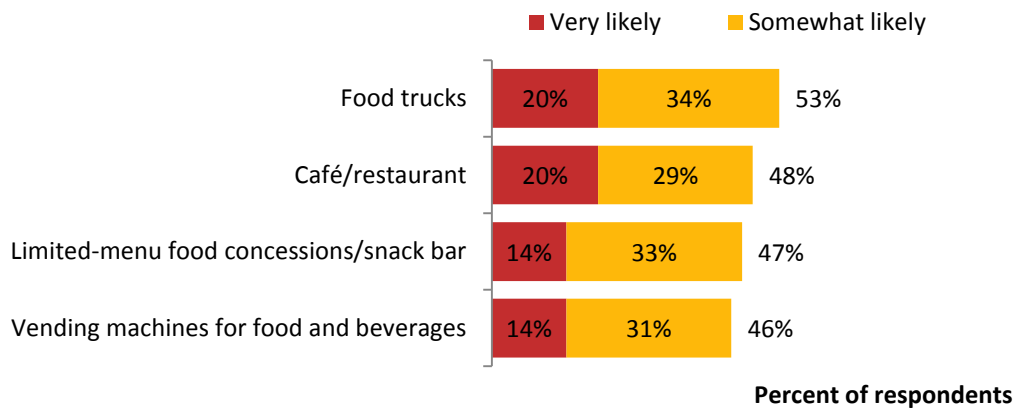


II. Events

- a. About 7 in 10 residents would be somewhat or very likely to attend events related to music, concerts or performances and 6 in 10 would be likely to attend evening showings of movies in parks. Between 43% and 49% would be likely to attend the other listed events (including summer camp programs for children, fitness/wellness programs for children and for adults, birthday parties, and programs with pets).
- b. Residents who had lived in the community for less than five years and were aged 18 to 54 were more likely to indicate they'd attend each of the events listed compared to other survey respondents.
- c. Residents with a higher education level (Bachelor's, graduate or professional degree) were more likely than other survey respondents to attend recreation activity events.
- d. Residents who identified as Hispanic and/or Persons of Color were more likely to attend visual and public arts events and multicultural celebrations compared to residents who identified as White alone, not Hispanic.



III. Food and Drink



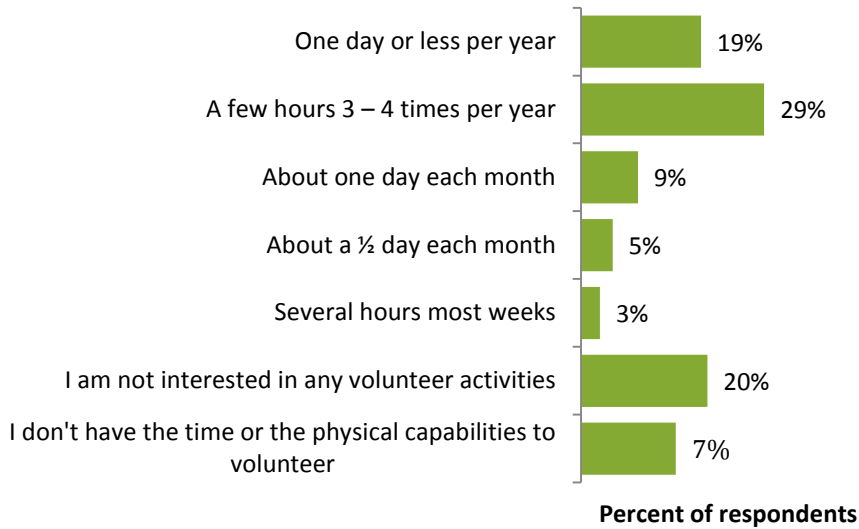
- a. Between 46% and 53% of survey respondents indicated they would be somewhat or very likely to use each of the four listed food services within the next two years. No more than 20% indicated that they would be very likely to use any of the food service options.
- b. Residents who had lived in the community for 6 to 20 years tended to be more likely to use food services compared to residents who had lived in the community for a shorter or longer period of time. Residents with a household income of less than \$50,000 tended to be more likely to use a Café/restaurant compared to residents with a higher household income.
- c. Residents with an Associate or technical school degree or higher level of education tended to be more likely to use food trucks compared to other survey respondents. For each of the four food services choices, residents who were aged 18 to 54 were more likely to use the services compared to older residents.

When considering the list of parks services or programs below, how likely would you be, if at all, to use each of the following in the next two years? (Percent "very" or "somewhat" likely)	Length of residency			Household Income			Education			Race/ethnicity		Age			Gender		Overall
	Less than 5 years	6 to 20 years	More than 20 years	Less than \$50,000	\$50,000 - \$100,000	\$100,000 or more	Some high school or high school graduate	Associate or technical school degree	Bachelor's, graduate or professional degree	White alone, not Hispanic	Hispanic and/or Persons of Color	18 - 34	35 - 54	55+	Female	Male	
Vending machines for food and beverages	45%	52%	42%	47%	46%	48%	47%	51%	44%	45%	53%	50%	50%	37%	47%	45%	46%
Limited-menu food concessions/snack bar	44%	54%	44%	52%	45%	48%	49%	53%	44%	47%	47%	47%	54%	38%	51%	44%	47%
Food trucks	56%	62%	47%	53%	52%	58%	45%	60%	53%	52%	62%	67%	56%	39%	56%	52%	53%
Café/restaurant	50%	56%	43%	57%	41%	53%	56%	53%	45%	47%	56%	53%	52%	40%	55%	42%	48%

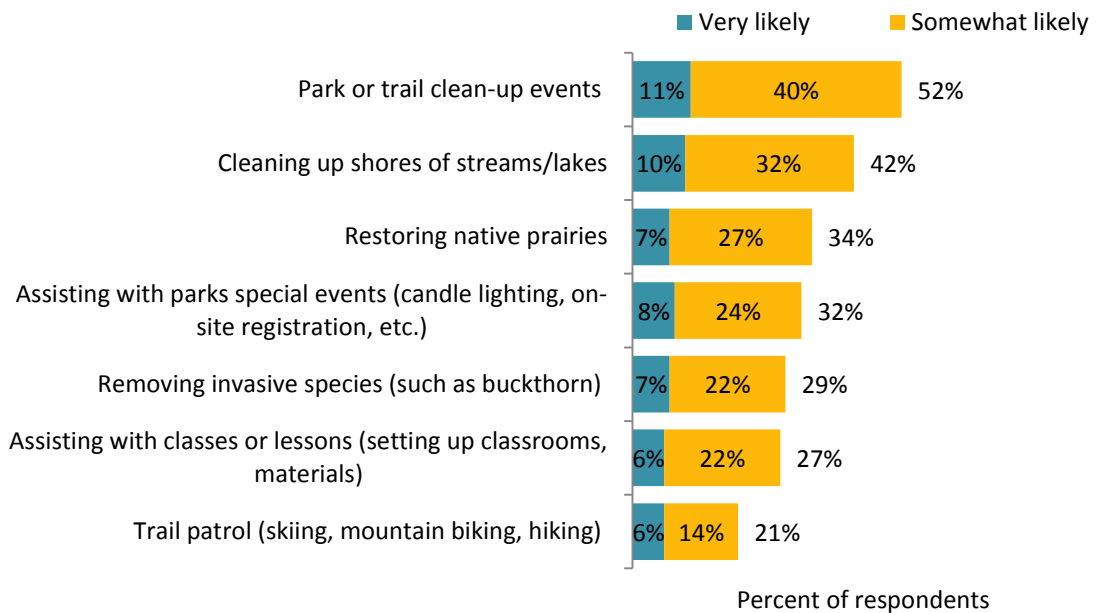
IV. Volunteerism

- a. About half of residents indicated that they would be willing to volunteer a few hours, three to four times a year or less. One-fifth indicated they were not interested in any volunteer activities. 1 in 5 residents

would be willing to volunteer at least one day each month.



- b. Dakota County residents responded that they were most likely to participate in park of trail clean-up events (52%), followed by cleaning up shores of streams/lakes (42%), restoring native prairies (34%), and assisting with special events (32%). Residents who had lived in the County for less than 5 years, and residents with an associate or technical degree were more likely to volunteer. Residents aged 18 to 34 were also more likely to volunteer.

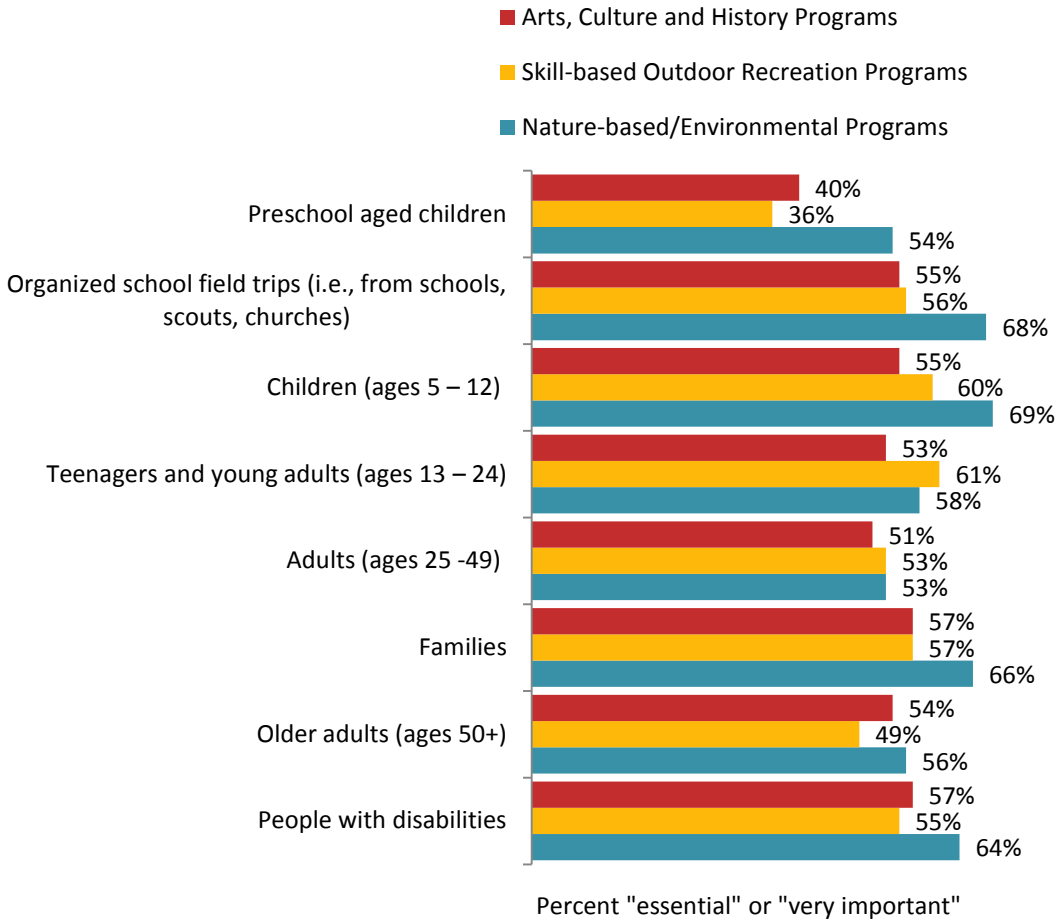


V. Outdoor Education

- a. When asked what services Dakota County should improve for visitors, over half of respondents (54%) wanted recreational opportunities at more of the existing regional parks (such as hiking, bicycling and show shoeing), while 45% wanted more environmental education programs (such as nature appreciation programs for preschoolers, Scout badge programs, or guided bird hikes), and 44% wanted more recreation skill-based programs (such as cross-country ski lessons, archery lessons, adaptive

outdoor recreation programs for people with disabilities, mountain biking).

- b. Respondents felt that it was equally important to provide outdoor recreation opportunities such as classes and lessons for all age groups (with responses ranging from 36 – 61% in favor, with the highest preference towards teenagers and young adults (13 to 24).



VI. Facility Rentals

- About 4 in 10 residents would be somewhat or very likely to rent a picnic shelter for a gathering of 100 people or fewer while 3 in 10 would be likely to rent a smaller retreat center or lodge for a family, corporate or organization event of fewer than 50 people.
- About 2 in 10 would be likely to rent a visitor center for a family, corporate or organization event for 50 to 200 people or rent a picnic shelter for a gathering of more than 100 people.
- Residents who identified as Hispanic and/or Persons of Color were more likely to rent each of the listed park facilities compared to residents who identified as White alone, not Hispanic.
- Residents with a lower education level (some high school or high school graduate) were more likely than other survey respondents to rent a picnic shelter for a gathering of more than 100 people or rent a smaller retreat center or lodge for a family, corporate or organization event of fewer than 50 people.
- When asked how likely they would be to use proposed services or programs in the next 2 years, 81% residents identified benches and scenic overlooks along trails. For that same question, 66% of respondents desired improved park trail signs for way-finding. 57% desired outdoor splash pads and amphitheater (outdoor entertainment venue).

When considering the list of parks services or programs below, how likely would you be, if at all, to use each of the following in the next two years? (Percent "very" or "somewhat" likely)	Length of residency			Household Income			Education			Race/ethnicity		Age			Gender		Overall
	Less than 5 years	6 to 20 years	More than 20 years	Less than \$50,000	\$50,000 - \$100,000	\$100,000 or more	Some high school or high school graduate	Associate or technical school degree	Bachelor's, graduate or professional degree	White alone, not Hispanic	Hispanic and/or Persons of Color	18 - 34	35 - 54	55+	Female	Male	
Picnic shelter for a gathering of 100 people or fewer	55%	37%	40%	42%	45%	41%	50%	43%	40%	39%	60%	54%	41%	33%	46%	38%	42%
Picnic shelter for a gathering of more than 100 people	24%	19%	20%	23%	21%	19%	27%	23%	18%	18%	35%	22%	23%	15%	23%	17%	21%
Renting a visitor center for a family, corporate, or organization event of 50 - 200 people	24%	19%	22%	26%	22%	19%	26%	24%	18%	18%	34%	25%	21%	18%	24%	18%	21%
Renting a smaller retreat center or lodge for a family, corporate or organization event of fewer than 50 people	38%	30%	29%	33%	31%	31%	40%	34%	28%	29%	45%	35%	30%	28%	34%	28%	31%

VII. Equipment Rentals

- a. When asked about recreational equipment rentals, over half of residents indicated they would be somewhat or very likely to rent canoes or kayaks in the next two years. Just under half indicated they would be somewhat or very likely to rent paddleboats (47%), paddleboards (47%), snowshoes (46%) and bicycles (46%).
- b. At the bottom of the list (with 20% or fewer indicating they would be somewhat or very likely to rent these items) were headlamps, kicksleds and adaptive recreation equipment.

When considering the list of parks services or programs below, how likely would you be, if at all, to use each of the following in the next two years?	Very likely		Somewhat likely		Somewhat unlikely		Very unlikely		Total	
	%	N	%	N	%	N	%	N	%	N
Canoes	20%	N=173	35%	N=297	16%	N=137	29%	N=244	100%	N=851
Kayaks	22%	N=186	33%	N=278	15%	N=129	30%	N=259	100%	N=852
Paddleboards	17%	N=144	30%	N=258	20%	N=173	33%	N=278	100%	N=852
Paddleboats	15%	N=123	33%	N=279	22%	N=187	31%	N=261	100%	N=851
Rowboats	12%	N=101	25%	N=213	28%	N=238	35%	N=294	100%	N=847
Bicycles (or mountain bikes)	20%	N=169	26%	N=223	21%	N=180	33%	N=276	100%	N=849
Bows for archery	15%	N=124	25%	N=210	24%	N=206	37%	N=313	100%	N=853
Fishing gear	12%	N=99	21%	N=175	25%	N=215	43%	N=362	100%	N=850
Cross-country skis	16%	N=136	29%	N=244	22%	N=187	34%	N=286	100%	N=852
Snowshoes	20%	N=171	26%	N=220	21%	N=180	33%	N=283	100%	N=854
Kicksleds	6%	N=49	14%	N=117	30%	N=250	51%	N=427	100%	N=843
Camping gear	8%	N=66	17%	N=147	25%	N=214	50%	N=423	100%	N=850
Adaptive recreation equipment (sit-ski for cross-country skiing)	7%	N=59	9%	N=74	23%	N=195	61%	N=521	100%	N=849
Yard games (bocce ball, croquet, bag toss)	15%	N=131	27%	N=230	22%	N=191	35%	N=298	100%	N=850
GPS units	8%	N=66	21%	N=177	26%	N=222	45%	N=381	100%	N=846
Headlamps	6%	N=54	14%	N=115	28%	N=233	53%	N=445	100%	N=846
Nordic walking poles	6%	N=54	18%	N=149	24%	N=204	52%	N=436	100%	N=843

- c. Generally, residents who had lived in the community for more than 20 years and were 55 years or older tended to be less likely to rent recreation equipment compared to those who had lived in the community for less than five years and were aged 18 to 54. Among the statistically significant differences across the subgroup of race and ethnicity, residents who identified as Hispanic and/or Persons of Color tended to be more likely to rent rowboats, bicycles, fishing gear, kicksleds, camping gear and adaptive recreation equipment compared to other survey respondents.

Appendix B. Report on Community Dialogues

Multicultural Outreach Project

April 2016

Victoria Amaris, Loudi Rivamonte, and Ron Hick
Putting Change in Motion



Latino Immigrant Dialogue April 11, 2016

Table of Contents

Introduction.....	70
Purpose	70
Methods.....	70
Compilation of Data from Dialogue Sessions	72
Participant Perspectives.....	72
Barriers for Visiting Dakota County Parks.....	72
Creating Welcoming Parks.....	74
Community Leadership Interviews	77
Issues Unique to Specific Sultural Groups	79
Recommendations and Conclusions	81
Dialogue Questions	83
Putting Change in Motion Team Approach and Format for Multicultural Community Engagement.....	84
Rules of Engagement – Principles of “Cultural Complementarity”	85

Introduction

This report summarizes the results of nine dialogues conducted in Dakota County as part of the public engagement process to inform the Strategic Operations Plan for the Visitor Services as well as setting the stage for on-going relationship building.

Purpose

Dakota County has a goal of increasing the relevance of the Parks System to more under-represented residents and wishes to learn more of the perceptions, needs and ideas from the public first, rather than later when the planning is already underway.

The purpose of this part of the public engagement project was to engage the public in an inclusive manner which will bring the diverse voices of all stakeholders to be heard, encourage participants to provide their knowledge, key opinions and ideas regarding the Parks System to Dakota County. An important goal is to promote on-going relationships between participants and Dakota County planners.

Methodology

To that end, a variety of opportunities were created through interviews with key informants and interviews with leaders from under-represented groups. Nine dialogues (alternative framework to focus groups), and six interviews were conducted in the months of February, March and April 2016. The nine targeted groups from under-represented populations were selected through researching Dakota County demographics; maps and school data in addition to having conversations with persons who are knowledgeable about diverse populations living in Dakota County. Throughout the process PROS provided clear information about desired specifics, such as diverse groups.

Nine Underrepresented Focus Groups to Engage

1. Two (2) Hispanic/Latino groups; one immigrant and one US born
2. Somali
3. Vietnamese
4. Indian/South Asian
5. African American
6. Youth
7. Seniors
8. Persons living with Disabilities

The groups represented all ages from elderly individuals to youth and couples plus several children; a broad range of income levels. Many had a rich breadth of knowledge, wisdom and much experience, easily offered very creative ideas for the Parks System.

The focus questions were developed by the Putting Change in Motion Team, in collaboration with PROS and Dakota County. Learning from them what the County wanted to know, we were able to construct eleven (11) questions that worked served well for the dialogues and which we had reviewed for cultural competence.

Outreach practices included making contact with existing networks as well as reaching out to Dakota County individuals, organizations, schools, churches/mosques, libraries, restaurants, marketplaces, and many more.

Limitations of the data

The budget was limited and only allowed for nine focus groups. To engage communities in more rural areas or to focus on low income groups was not possible. The *Putting Change in Motion* Team sought to engage key communities of those who are underrepresented.

Care must be taken in generalizing findings to other segments of the same communities. For example, Latino participants do not represent all Latino subgroups, or economic levels. Participants were not randomly selected, but identified one by one or by groups and invited.

Framework

The approach was one that was egalitarian, inclusive and provided an environment which encourages participation and mutual learning. Cultural competence was fundamental in guiding the team in creating authentic relationships built on respect with the respective communities, be it ethnic groups, senior citizens or youth.

The framework utilized for the dialogues was guided by the Principles of the Cultural Complementarity Model™. This framework operates on basic principles of a participatory democracy; is dynamic, asset-based and promotes respect and trust.

Each event was thoughtfully customized, which sometimes meant identifying facilitators from specific communities when possible, particularly for those for whom English is a second language. This allows for a more natural, welcoming interaction than using interpreters would.

This report summarizes themes that emerged within, as well as across dialogue groups and interviews.

Noteworthy is how it was clear to the Team that most of the participants were very pleased and excited by being invited, by being able to provide perceptions and creative ideas. Many said they wish to continue to be involved and to know of the progress made. For two (2) young Latina professionals and mothers, it gave them hope that they could make a difference.

Some participants expressed interest in volunteering for the Parks Visitor Services.

Furthermore, participants had appreciation of the parks and of the beauty of nature a park offers to their families.

There are many issues of concern and recommendations for improvements, but there were also positive elements voiced.

Compilation of Data from Dialogue Sessions:

Participant Perspectives on Parks

Meaning of the Term “Park”

The meaning of the term “park” varied across the various group. All the groups saw it as a place for outdoor activities. All but one (people living with disabilities) viewed parks as a place to take children or for time with your family and most saw parks as gathering places for groups or to hold celebrations. It is interesting to note that the Somali and Indian/South Asian people looked at parks in urban areas as open spaces, perhaps with some playground equipment for children. Both had very low expectations for amenities and activities. Three of the groups (Vietnamese, Youth and Latinos (US born)) emphasized parks as a place for family time and being outdoors.

Choosing a Park to Visit

The primary reason that people choose a park to visit is its proximity to where they live. Other reasons included the type of amenities, the atmosphere and the available activities (e.g. shelters to rent for a large gathering, peacefulness, safety, hiking, swimming and fishing).

Awareness of and Use of Dakota County Parks

A major theme that cut across all of the groups, except Seniors and Youth, is a lack of awareness of Dakota County Parks. In a group of fifteen seniors, ninety-nine (99%) and all twenty of the youth dialogue participants were familiar with Dakota County Parks. The majority of the people did not know about the parks or about their features or activities. However, it turns out that people do not distinguish between a county and a city park. When they were shown a map of the parks and a publication describing the activities, some realized that they had actually been to a county park, but had no idea that Dakota County was the operating jurisdiction. In the words of one participant “A park is a park” even though they understood that each park was different from another park due to its amenities.

The Dakota County Park that was visited the most was Lebanon Hills. It had been visited by people from Somalia, Indian/ South Asian, US born Latinos; Latino Immigrants, Youth, Seniors, People Living with Disabilities and African American. Other Dakota County parks that were visited are Sacajawea (actually a retreat center in Lebanon Hills), Lake Byllesby, Whitetail Woods, Miesville Ravine Park Reserve, Thompson and Spring Lake Park Reserve.

Barriers to Visiting and Using Dakota County Parks

Lack of Awareness

Lack of awareness about Dakota County Parks was far and away the number one barrier to visiting the parks. Some of the key indicators of this barrier included:

- The majority of people knowing Lebanon Hills, but not realizing it was a Dakota County Park.
- The surprised reaction in seven (7) of the groups when they were given a map of Dakota County Parks and realized that they had visited one or more of them.
- The surprised reaction in seven (7) of the groups when they were provided with copies of the Winter 2015 publication describing the different features and activities available in each of the parks and then requested multiple copies of the publication that they could give to other organizations and people.

Extending this topic, people in more than one group mentioned that they found Lebanon Hills by accident. One person stated that she wished she had known about it earlier because she likes it so much and visits the park six

(6) or seven (7) times a month during the warm weather. Another individual who rents a picnic shelter at Spring Lake Park Reserve for two large gatherings during the year indicated that it was a perfect facility for these events but it was initially hard to find because of a scarcity of information. US born Latinos also mentioned a scarcity of information stating that “a lot of research had to be done to find out things” about county parks.

Availability of Time

Not having enough time was cited as barrier to visiting Dakota County Parks, particularly by the groups comprised of immigrants. Vietnamese, Somalis and Latino Immigrants pointed out that there are many families where each parent [or for Vietnamese it was single parents] is working and, in some cases one of them has two jobs so there isn't always time for any sort of recreation. People from the Indian/South Asian group stated that, because of the scale and size of county parks, they are usually a destination for families on weekends when they have enough time to go hiking or use the swimming beach. Smaller city parks that are closer to their residences are the choice during the week for each of these groups.

Safety Concerns

Concerns about personal safety were stated as a barrier to visiting the parks by five different groups. Not enough of lighting and poorly lit trails were mentioned in two groups; the secluded feeling one can get in a park was described as “uncomfortable” in another group. African Americans, People Living with Disabilities and Seniors also mentioned the lack of emergency phones, panic buttons or some sort of alert system. Somalis and People Living with Disabilities raised the concern about not seeing park attendants or security officers.

Security as a barrier was the most palpable in the Somali discussion. It was pointed out that personal safety is concern when going anywhere these days because of the amount of anti-immigrant and anti-Muslim rhetoric that is currently very public and very prominent. This makes security an especially big concern for a woman taking her kids to a park on her own.

Affordability/Cost

Affordability and cost was raised as a barrier in terms of fees, especially for renting facilities in Dakota Parks. This was a barrier raised in the African American, Somali, US born Latino and Vietnamese dialogues. These were also groups that indicated that they like to go to parks in groups that included more than just one family.

Distance from Home

The long distance from where people lived and a Dakota County Park was mentioned as a barrier in five of the dialogue groups. It was cited in the African American, Latino Immigrant, Indian/South Asian, Persons Living with Disabilities and Somali dialogues as something that would prevent people from visiting a Dakota County Park

Transportation

Transportation was a barrier raised in three of the dialogue groups. The Seniors, Youth and US born Latinos all cited the lack of an available way of getting to a county park as an impediment to going to a county park. Vietnamese were very concerned about elders not being able to get there, when their isolation could so benefit from park visits. US born Latinos had similar comments.

Creating Welcoming Parks

Marketing and Communications

Marketing and communications regarding Dakota County Parks is an area that needed some significant attention for increasing awareness about and as a way for welcoming people to visit Dakota County Parks. The

general sense from the dialogues was that work had to be done to get information about Dakota County Parks on a more widespread, accessible, and usable basis.

Some very direct, interesting and creative ideas emerged for the dialogue groups including:

- Publish information and promotional materials about the parks in different languages.
- Have information about county parks distributed through schools or libraries. The material should be actively distributed and not left in a stack hoping that people will pick it up. For example, have librarians give the information to kids when they check out a book.
- Consider using regional cable TV programs oriented to a particular ethnic group.
- Use social media.
- Make sure promotional material emphasizes that parks are a place to “come and hang out with your family and not a wild retreat.”
- Be sure the material about the parks shows that there are activities for each generation.
- Improve the information on the homepage.

Intentional Outreach

Undertaking outreach efforts that were focused on encouraging specific groups to visit Dakota County Parks would be a positive action toward gaining a wider and diverse set of visitors. The Somali group unanimously addressed a response saying “Go to where people gather. There are two mosques in Burnsville – be sure to put material there to distribute at each of them.”

This idea was echoed by both the Vietnamese and US born Latinos who suggested “reach out to Vietnamese elderly who are isolated” and “reach Latino senior citizens who are kept from engaging in the parks” or, simply “have better outreach.”

The African American group stressed that relationships need to be built between the County and neighborhoods. They suggested that Dakota County Park staff join in city block National Night Out Parties. Then the following year, the County could invite the neighborhoods to join them in a “National Night Out in the Park Night”.

Taking this a step further, there was a proposal to have engagement days where a specific group would be the focus of activities and events at a selected park on a designated day with representatives from the group involved in the planning. It would include targeted publicity and outreach.

Instruction on How to Take Advantage of Available Activities

There are certain activities in the county parks that are interesting to people from a different culture and they would like to try, but need instruction in learning how to do them. This was pointed out in both the Somali and Indian/South Asian dialogues about canoeing. One person from the Indian/South Asian group stated that he asked about canoeing lessons at Lebanon Hills but found they weren’t available.

Accessibility

Making amenities and activities in county parks more accessible was definitely an issue to address for People Living with Disabilities, but it was also raised in the Indian/South Asian and Seniors dialogues.

People Living with Disabilities suggested that parks would be more welcoming for them with:

- A ramp to the beach.

- Some paths should be wider with a surface for wheel chairs and people that use walkers. No wood chips.
- Bathrooms need to be bigger.
- More benches.
- Swings that accommodate wheel chairs

One person in the Indian /South Asian group pointed out that he could not get his child’s stroller onto a walking path. Making the parks more accessible to people with disabilities was a general observation from the Seniors dialogue. Seniors wanted paths that would be easier, safer to walk for all of them, disabilities or not. They also had that debate about some bird watcher seniors who do NOT want paths at all (in some areas).

Signage Improvements

Improving and adding signage was offered as a way to make Dakota County Parks more welcoming and usable. For the Latino groups, the first step to welcoming was signage in different languages. This was raised even before one of the dialogues held at Lebanon Hills began when a participant called the facilitator because, even though he had entered the park and was on the road leading to the Visitor’s Center, he was unsure that he was headed in the right direction. Other observations about better signage were:

- General agreement in the Indian/South Asian group that better signage was needed because, as it is now, you could get lost on one of the trails.
- General agreement from the Somali and Indian/South Asian Groups that signage in their languages would be very helpful in getting to people use and enjoy the parks. There was even an offer from the Indian/South Asian group that they could find volunteers to translate signs into Hindi.
- The African American group proposed placing mile markers or distance on the trails. In addition, the trail posts could be color coded e.g. red for a one mile hike, blue for two a mile hike etcetera. They also indicated that they saw getting lost in a park as a real possibility.
- Youth were interested in signs that explain what types of plants are growing in specific areas.

Safety Improvements

Safety improvements were mentioned in three of the dialogues as measures that would create a welcoming park:

- The African American and Somali dialogue groups mentioned improved or additional lighting.
- The People Living with Disabilities and the Somali groups indicated that having more park attendants or security officers in the parks would be appreciated.
- Having emergency phones or panic buttons strategically located in the parks was recommended in the African American, Immigrant Latinos and Seniors dialogues.

Affordability and Cost

The idea of having fewer, lower or no fees for renting park facilities or for instruction or classes was brought forward in the Somali and Immigrant Latino and Vietnamese dialogues. The Somali group, in particular talked about needing to find no cost/low cost facilities for celebrations or events that would be attended by a large number of people. The Vietnamese group emphasized that fees should be waived for senior citizens.

Additional Active Areas

The observation that having additional areas for specific activities arose in five of the dialogue groups as an aspect that would make Dakota County Parks more welcoming. The recommendations included:

- Adding playground equipment. Seniors suggested swings and sandboxes and US born Latinos were interested in playground areas near picnic shelters.

- US born Latinos also suggested areas for basketball, volleyball and horseshoes.
- Immigrant Latinos mentioned areas for basketball and futbol (soccer).
- Youth suggested tree houses and ropes courses along with open areas to play different games and a course for Frisbee golf.
- An interest in having cricket fields had complete agreement in the Indian/South Asian dialogue.

New or Additional Amenities

Increasing the number of existing amenities or adding new ones was mentioned in six (6) of the dialogues.

- Additional clean bathrooms/restrooms (permanent not portable) were mentioned in the African American, Immigrant Latino, Somali and Youth dialogues.
- These same four groups indicated that more drinking fountains, especially on the trails would be appreciated.
- Adding more picnic tables was a recommendation voiced in the African American, Asian Indian and US born Latino dialogues.
- Having a concession stand was brought up in the African American, Indian/South Asian, People Living with Disabilities and Youth dialogues. At least having vending machines that work was a follow-up comment in the Youth dialogue.

Cultural Events/Performances

Allowing or organizing cultural events or performances was a suggestion raised in the Indian/South Asian, Somali and Vietnamese dialogues. There were slight differences in what each group meant. The Indian/South Asian group meant actual performances of popular music that might be heard in their home country and they also suggested hosting a Bollywood night where movies from India were shown. The Vietnamese talked about cultural events or exchanges with other groups in celebration of the parks. The Somalis specifically mentioned being allowed to hold the two (2) Eid celebrations that occur each year in the parks.

Learning About Nature

There was a range of responses to the question about how people would like to learn about nature in Dakota County Parks from a lack of interest in the Indian/South Asian dialogue to very high interest in the Somali dialogue.

Responses about means for learning about nature in the parks included:

- Ideas offered during the Youth dialogue were social media, field trips, learning labs, mobile friendly apps, tours with guides and geo markers and signage that explains what types of plants are growing in specific areas.
- Experiences of being in nature as a means was suggested in the US born Latino dialogue.
- Via Spanish materials or the internet was proposed in the Latino Immigrant dialogue.
- People Living with Disabilities indicated a way for them would be mobile educational programs that they could see and touch.

Community Leadership Interviews

Indian/South Asian

The two (2) Indian/ South Asian leaders interviewed made the point throughout the interview that parks, as they knew them in India were really open areas for general use that might have some playground equipment. This makes their expectations about parks very low, so the parks in the United States and Minnesota were something totally out of their experience.

They related that Indian /South Asian people usually go to parks as a family or in a large group of other friends and families. They usually go there for some sort of activity like hiking, swimming, soccer or badminton. Culturally, things like camping or learning about nature do not interest them. They choose parks usually based on how close it is to their residence.

There was some knowledge of Dakota County Parks and their experiences with their use was extremely good and there was nothing they didn't like. They felt that the best feature was being able to rent facilities for large gatherings solely for their use so that there was no conflict with others also wanting to use the space.

Their thought that the biggest improvement Dakota County could make for their parks was improving the publicity about them. They commented that the County Parks seem to be well kept secrets, you are very glad once you discover them. Some additions that would improve the parks included adding tennis courts, grills in the picnic areas and cricket fields.

Somali

The Somali leader stated that she really did not know about Dakota County Parks and, when she viewed the map showing the parks, she stated that she had never been to one. She also speculated that very few people from her community had ever been to one either because they are located so far from Burnsville where the Somali population in Dakota County is concentrated.

She also mentioned that Somalis go to parks with their kids so they can play and the adults can walk around the area and socialize. She also said that they go to parks as a family or in groups. They like parks where there are activities like play grounds with equipment or soccer fields – playing or watching soccer in a park as a favored pastime. Well-kept picnic areas are also a desired amenity.

Right now, personal safety is a major concern for Somalis about going anywhere in public. She cited the anti-Muslim and anti-immigrant sentiments that are being expressed everywhere as the primary reason. This makes going to a park, without being in a large group a risk unless people feel they are safe because there are police or some other security people around.

After looking at literature about the county parks, she said that they should do a better job of getting out the information. She emphasized that it would be a good idea to connect with the two mosques in Burnsville to help distribute the information and encourage them and their members to visit the parks.

Latino

In an interview with a well-known and respected Latina leader living in the community for many decades, a picture was painted of Latinos in Dakota County and their lives in relation to parks. It appears that for most, the parks are for family fiestas, celebrations. And the favorite park is Thompson County Park. Extended families go there for big and small festivities. She also provided a cultural learning about the word “parking” which is what the community there refers to for going to the park. Used in a sentence it would be “my family is going parking on Saturday”.

Access to parks is so important for young parents, for the elderly and for those who may have limitations of mobility. And she urged that planners not only consider the person or child who may have a disability, but to add the needs *parents* with disabilities have, and what would make it easier for them to take their children to a park.

She suggested signage in Spanish is good, but also that bilingual signs send a better message. Because some new resident are not aware of the parks system or procedure, education would be helpful. It is also an opportunity to educate younger Latinos on the policies, “las reglas”. They need to know about how to use parks, cleaning up after themselves and curfews. Promotion and education of the Dakota Parks could be done well in churches or schools where people feel safe. This is a good time to inquire of Latinos what are they interested in doing at the parks – such as swimming pools; concerts, hikes.

Vietnamese

This is an interview with a Vietnamese leader who has been involved with the community for many years. She tells that parks are for family outings, for relaxing and exercise to many Vietnamese. They are drawn to water, lakes and woods and scenery. Clearly, the beauty of Nature is important.

She herself goes to different parks both County and Regional. In addition, she has used parks for cultural events for the organization she helps.

People in the Vietnamese community do not like if a park is dirty, too alone, making it a safety issue. Suggestions have been made to improve lighting, see motion detectors, Emergency phones, instructions on where to go in an emergency. A sign saying WELCOME in multiple languages is inviting. Suggests advertising more for parks, offering yoga classes for the older adults. Have better walking paths for the elderly. And once more mentions WATER elements. “It is Mental Therapy,” she said. She is interested in the Parks planning and would like to continue to keep in touch.

People Living with Disabilities

A parent who has a child living with disabilities was interviewed who is very active in a Dakota County disability association. Additionally, interviewed the director of a business whose mission is to serve adults living with disabilities. According to the community leaders, for youth living with disabilities, much of their time is spent in school/educational settings. Their parent/guardians play an essential role in assisting with Individual Educational Plans (IEP) meetings, carry out negotiations with school personnel and health care providers. They stated that there is not a lot of time for visits to parks. In addition, parks in the county do not have accessible equipment for youth.

Adults living with disabilities have many barriers to finding employment and community inclusion. Age appropriate social and recreations programs are hard to find in Dakota County. Transportation is very difficult for individuals to get to parks and the amenities are not accessible for many of the adults.

Both leaders were very excited to hear that Dakota County Parks wanted to learn how to make parks more welcoming to this population.

African American

An African American community leader was interviewed who was born and raised in Dakota County. He was also very grateful to learn that Dakota County Parks wanted feedback from the African American community as to how to improve the Parks Visitor Services from his community's perspective. He stated that most of the community goes to city parks for grilling and playground equipment use for their children. He stated that knowledge was such a valuable tool and that if the community knew of the county parks and their offerings, more community members would visit. He only knew of Dakota County Parks because he attended a field trip with students from Independent School District 196.

Issues Unique to Specific Cultural Groups

Somali

Somali participants expressed that there was no real concept of a "park" but rather any open space. One participant stated that, "Don't know a park since we never had one in our country".

Community members present at the dialogue all stated that security is a huge concern especially with all the anti-Muslim talk that is prevalent at this time. Statements made by group members such as, "Security is a big concern especially for a woman going to a park alone with her kids" and, "I choose go back to this park because of the level of security. When was first there I saw a police car parked in the lot", speak to this issue.

African Americans

After reading some of the promotional materials the group stated that the promotions were aimed at white middle class, more privileged people. "Culturally a park for canoeing and archery aren't usually our interest, so I would not seek it out' or "The word 'wild 'does not invite us, and "Wild Retreat" it isn't necessarily attractive. The word, retreat is too formal. If the pamphlet expressed to me to come hang out with your family, that would be inviting to me. We are afraid of 'wild'".

People Living with Disabilities

All participants expressed how they love to come to Lebanon Hills. It is a place to relax and people watch. But participants also spoke about their frustration to having limited experiences to the parks features due to accessibility. They could not get down to the beach because there was no ramp and they could not experience the natural beauty of the trails and wildlife because they could not get far on the trails. One comment expressed this best, "I am tired of only seeing the perimeter or parking lot of the park because I can't gain access to the trails."

South Asian/Indian

Participants of this group stated that culturally, they are not outdoors people. They said that they do not mind paying for facility use but are shy to learn new things and that it was embarrassing for them not to be able to teach their children how to canoe and yet there was no one available to give instructions. "Culturally we are

not outgoing. If we see new area, normally see connections first like picnic or go for a walk and depends on the age of kids. Last year, we tried canoeing and asked if someone could train us, like to use because, we do not know how, embarrassing. Have a facility and don't mind paying for use or education."

US born Latinos

Latinos want parks that can be for children as they grow throughout their lives – be part of children at different ages and when they become adults they take their children.

Latinos see parks as celebratory, to use for family events, not just as a park stating," As a community we look for family spaces". For example, places to celebrate Quinceañeras (a rite of passage ceremony).

Seniors

Senior participants stated that parks are places to enjoy and to protect the environment. Many comments in their dialogue focused on solving transportation issues. "Unless you have a car or a driver, cannot get to parks. The seniors were forward thinking about providing ideas on using technology in parks such as 'geo caching" and would like to see more "apps" tied into the DNR.

Youth

The entire group of youth participants had visited Lebanon Hills. They were very knowledgeable about the types of activities offered at Dakota County Parks. Their comments about the parks centered on the timing of the activities and felt that there were too many activities happening in the same place making it too crowded but yet not enough activities for their age stating, "Not enough things to do for our age.

Vietnamese

The Vietnamese participants stated that parks are a place to do things as a family. They believe that parks are good for children, and they love parks but they just do not have time to spend in the parks because they work multiple jobs. The group also emphasized reaching out to the Vietnamese elderly who are isolated and have nothing to do. Nature walks with guides would be good and classes in their language. Create opportunities for urban farming, fishing (elders like this and others younger can learn).

Recommendations and Conclusion

Examining the issues, observations and recommendations that bubbled up from all of dialogues with the selected participants provides the ability to draw some conclusions about the use, and barriers to the use of Dakota County parks along with some considerations for action to make the parks more welcoming and attractive to these particular groups.

Lack of Awareness about Dakota County Parks

The lack of awareness about Dakota County Parks and what they have to offer is the major barrier to visiting a Dakota County park as well as a major factor in creating a welcoming park. The interest triggered in going to one of these parks when dialogue participants were made aware of their locations and available activities strongly suggests that it would be beneficial in having new and multiple strategies for getting information to the entire community about the parks.

There was also a significant amount of discussion about how the lack of awareness of Dakota County parks could be ameliorated. The themes that emerged under the category of “**Creating a Welcoming Park**” and included Better Marketing and Communications and Intentional Outreach.

Recommendations:

- Publish materials about Dakota County parks in more than one language. Good choices would be Spanish, Somali and Vietnamese.
- Develop a strategy for actively distributing this information. The Indian/South Asian dialogue participants provided the following example of an element for this strategy: they agreed that a good way to get information to them was by giving it to their children because they will show it to their parents. They then pointed out that their kids are always visiting the libraries and that librarians could hand the children information about the parks when they check out a book.
- The information about parks in different languages could also appear on the County’s homepage.
- Organize an intentional outreach initiative. This would entail identifying ethnic, cultural and interest based organizations that involve the underrepresented groups engaged in this process and taking the first steps to build an ongoing relationship. One aspect could be contacting the two mosques in Burnsville, supplying them with information about the parks in Somali and asking them to distribute it to their members. It might also be wise to provide the name of a contact person who could be called for more information or even to make a presentation about the parks.

There is interest in additional and new types of amenities and activities.

Adding to some current amenities as well bringing in new amenities and activities that have an appeal to particular group can make any place feel more welcoming. Some of the recommendations that arose are clearly physical planning and capital expenditure issues that would have to happen over the long term however, others could be initiated over a relatively short term. Also, some of the things mentioned would have a broad appeal, while others are more attractive to a particular group.

Recommendations:

- Where possible, increase the number of tables in picnic areas.
- Examine the idea of adding playground equipment near the picnic areas; basketball courts; swimming and wading pools; bathrooms, accessible bathrooms and water fountains, especially on the trails in any planning for physical and capital improvements for the parks.
- Find areas to create fields for soccer and cricket.

- In lieu of a permanent concession stand, consider attracting food trucks to certain parks on days with high attendance.
- Organize and schedule at least one celebration/performing arts event in the next 12 months that comes out of one of the newer cultures/ethnic groups in Dakota County.
- Make certain that any lessons available for park activities are well publicized. Also, find a way to meet requests for lessons for activities for which there aren't currently offered.

Safety and signage improvements would be helpful.

Improvements in signage and safety would make those visiting the parks feel more at ease and interested and engaging in some of the activities. The two are related as can be seen through the observations about it being easy to get lost in the parks and the description of the experience of a dialogue participant being unsure about heading in the right direction to get to the Lebanon Hills Visitors Center.

Recommendations:

- Examine the idea of increased lighting especially in areas where people might congregate in any planning for physical and capital improvements for the parks.
- Be certain that security personnel and other park staff make their presence known by circulating throughout the parks on planned intervals.
- Begin including other appropriate languages on park signage.
- Increase the amount of signage for better directions on the trails and, as appropriate, on roads in the parks.

Accessibility should be addressed

Making certain aspects of the parks accessible was clearly an interest in the dialogues with People Living with Disabilities and Seniors.

Recommendations:

- Develop and implement a plan to make at least one trail accessible for people with disabilities.
- Consider the addition of a playground with playground equipment that meets the Americans with Disabilities Act standards for accessible design.
- Add more benches.

There is an interest in making the rental of park facilities more affordable

The idea of having low or no fees for the use of park facilities or participation in activities was suggested in more than one of the dialogues and it should be given some consideration.

Recommendations:

- Consider establishing criteria for reduced rental rates for facilities in Dakota County parks. An example of this might be reduced rates for cultural events or celebrations sponsored by organizations based in Dakota County.
- Reduce the cost for senior citizens for any activities where fee is involved.

Conclusion

The participants of the various dialogues were generous and impressive in their willingness to take time and give much of their experiences, knowledge, wisdom and bright ideas. It was an opportunity to do work with them that will complement the other facets of the Visitor Services Strategic Operational Plan (VSSOP) project by really getting to the heart of the matter with the goal Dakota County has of increasing the relevance the parks to underrepresented groups.

It has been a very effective civic engagement study, which lays the ground work for building on-going relationships with the community. And the participants have given an opportunity to apply creative thinking from the community in the planning process in the VSSOP.

Dialogue Questions

1. What do you and your family like to do for outdoor activities?
2. What does a park mean to you?
3. Do you know which parks are part of the Dakota County Park System?
4. Are you aware of what any of these parks have to offer such as picnicking, swimming, hiking, classes or any other activities?
5. Have been to any of these parks that part of the Dakota County Park System? Why did you choose to go there, what attracted you?
6. How was your experience? What was the best thing about your visit? Was there anything you didn't like?
7. How could the things you didn't like be improved?
8. Did you go back to the parks you visited? How often?
9. What prevents you from visiting a park in the Dakota County Park system?
10. If you could create a welcoming county park, what are the things that are important to have in it?
11. How would you like to learn more about nature in Dakota County Parks?



Putting Change in Motion Team Approach and Format for Multicultural Community Engagement

Framework

The Community Outreach focus groups will be conducted as dialogues, using a unique framework. The *Putting Change in Motion Team* approach will be one that is egalitarian and participatory, creating an environment which draws out participant's knowledge, ideas, interests and concerns.

The dialogues' framework is guided by the principles of the Cultural Complementarity Model™ - a multicultural communication and dialogue model. This framework operates on basic principles of democracy; is dynamic; participatory; and asset-based. And it has been successful with many diverse groups from the elderly to youth; police and new immigrants, etc.

The dynamics of the dialogue is one which begins in a circle. Food and refreshment are offered. Each group is thoughtfully customized to the culture of the participants. Therefore, we strive to identify facilitators, note takers from each community, particularly, in groups for whom English is a second language, or not spoken at all. If the size is suitable, the circle is divided into "villages". The dialogues in the villages are more user friendly for some, as a result new ideas and new leaders emerge. Afterwards the villages reconvene into the larger circle and mutual learning occurs as we hear the stories of each village.

"Commitments to Future Actions" can be made when it is appropriate, before the closing.

The Rules of Engagement- Principles of Cultural Complementarity™

- Sharing equally in the creation of future actions
- A sharing of rights and responsibilities among all members
- A “power with” concept which utilizes personal and community empowerment by acknowledging multiple values, participatory negotiation, nurturing and a spirit of cooperation
- An attitude of abundance, creativity and the belief that limitless collective power is shared, instead of a scarcity approach for power and resources.
- A positive inclusive approach in communicating that eliminates dualistic thinking.
- A celebration of differences that evolves into on-going dialogue and exchange among participants to achieve shared goals
- A sharing of experiential/active learning based on personal experiences, supporting the premise that knowledge is an on-going, continuous process.

Appendix C: Benchmarking with Metro County Regional Parks

Metropolitan County-Based regional park agencies graciously provided data on their provision of visitor services, to help Dakota County benchmark its level of service in comparison to the region. Because of the differences between city and county-based regional systems, Dakota County requested data from the county-based systems, including Anoka, Carver, Ramsey, Scott, and Washington counties and Three Rivers Park District (based in Hennepin County). Summarized results follow for visitation, offerings and participation, and budgets.

Baseline Visitation and Use

Visits per year: Dakota County ranks fifth among the seven agencies, with 1,135,666 visits. The highest annual visitation is for Three Rivers Park District, with 10,062,300 visits to its parks in Hennepin County.

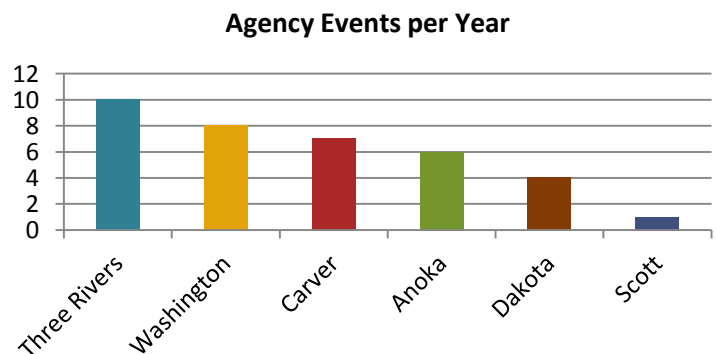
Agency	2015 Annual Park Visits	"Home" Population	Park Visits per Capita	Regional Park Acres	Visits per Park Acre
Three Rivers	10,062,300	1,199,000	8	20,714	486
Ramsey County	3,821,922	526,714	7	3,945	969
Anoka County	3,439,499	330,534	10	9,399	366
Washington County	1,404,111	246,603	6	5,355	262
Dakota County	1,135,666	408,509	3	5,347	212
Carver County	686,240	99,562	7	671	1023
Scott County	332,078	137,232	2	4,499	74

Visits per capita (resident population): Dakota County ranks sixth, with three visits per capita per year. The highest value is for Anoka County Parks, with 10 visits per capita per year.

Visits per park acre: Dakota County ranks sixth, with 212 visits per acre per year. The high value is for Carver County Parks, with 1,023 visits per acre per year.

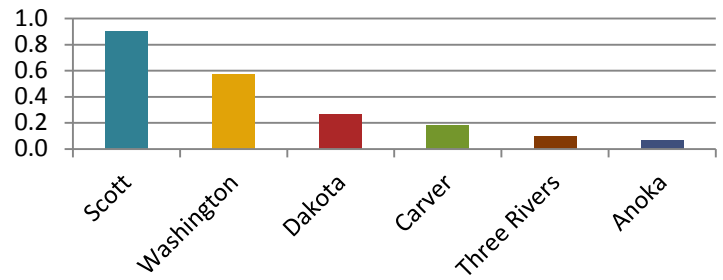
Service Offerings and Participation

Agency-Organized Events per Year: Dakota County ranks fifth in the number of agency-organized events offered to the public, with 4 events per year. The highest value is for Three Rivers, with 10 agency-organized events per year. Note: Ramsey County Park events are organized by outside entities.



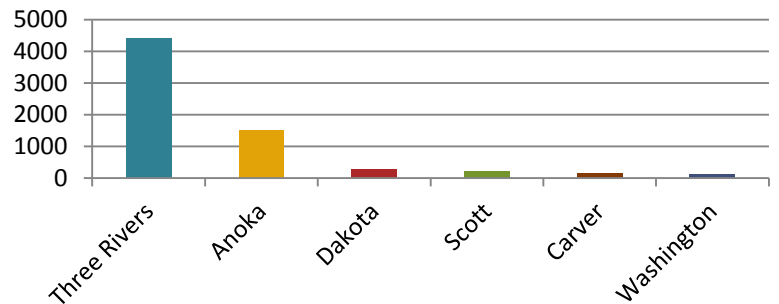
Agency-organized event participation as a percentage of annual visits: Dakota County Parks ranks third in the percentage of visitors who were attending an event organized by the agency, (0.3 percent). Scott County reached the highest percentage of event participants among visitors (0.9 percent). For all agencies that provided data, event participation was less than 1 percent of annual visits. Note: Ramsey County Park events are organized by outside entities.

Agency Event Participation as a Percent of Visits



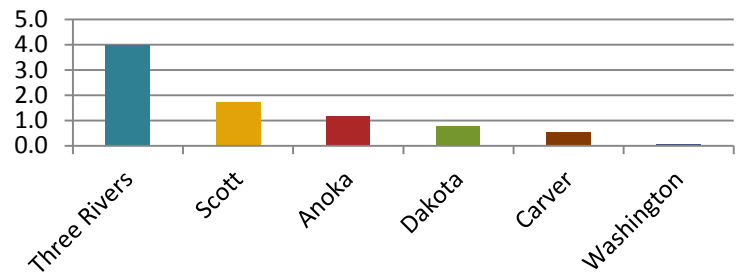
Education Programs per Year: Dakota County ranks fourth in the number of education offerings, with 257 programs. Three Rivers is at the high end, with 4,400 programs. Program totals were not available for Ramsey County education.

Outdoor Education Programs, Total Number



Outdoor education program participation as a percentage of annual visits: Among the counties, Dakota ranks fourth in the percentage of visitors who participated in an education program, at 0.8 percent. At the high end, 4.0 percent of Three Rivers’ visitors were participating in an education program. Participation data were not available for Ramsey County.

Education Participation as Percent of Visitation



Volunteerism hours and types: total volunteer hours for the most recent year are provided below, with types of volunteer activities. Dakota County Parks ranks third, with 2,000 park volunteer hours.

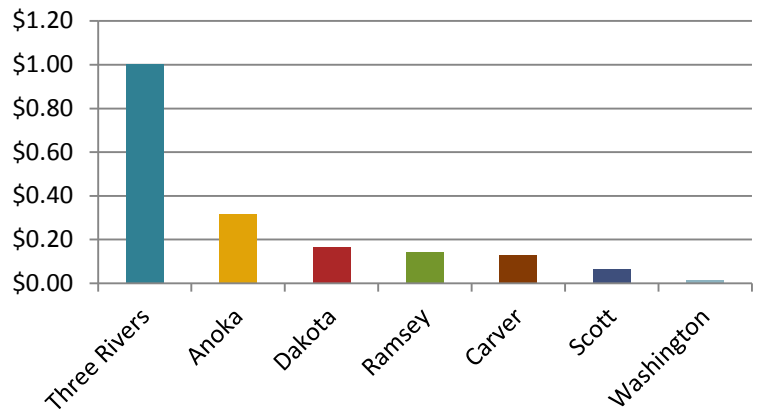
Agency	Total Vol. Hours	Resources Stewardship & Citizen Science	Outdoor Education	Clean-up	Events	Admin.	Park-Trail Patrol	Other
Anoka	423		✓	✓	✓	✓		
Carver	220	✓	✓	✓				
Dakota	2,000	✓		✓	✓		✓	
Ramsey	22,546	✓	✓	✓	✓	✓		✓
Scott	656	✓	✓	✓			✓	✓
Three Rivers	46,014	✓	✓	✓	✓	✓	✓	✓
Washington	120				✓			✓

Budget for Services

Marketing Budget per Capita

Dakota County ranks third among the seven County-based regional park agencies in per capita marketing budget for parks, with an annual budget of \$67,687, or \$0.17 per resident. Roughly half of the County's budget is for park program marketing in the County newsletter published by the County Communications Department. Three Rivers represents the high end, with an annual marketing budget of over \$1.2 million, or roughly \$1 per resident.

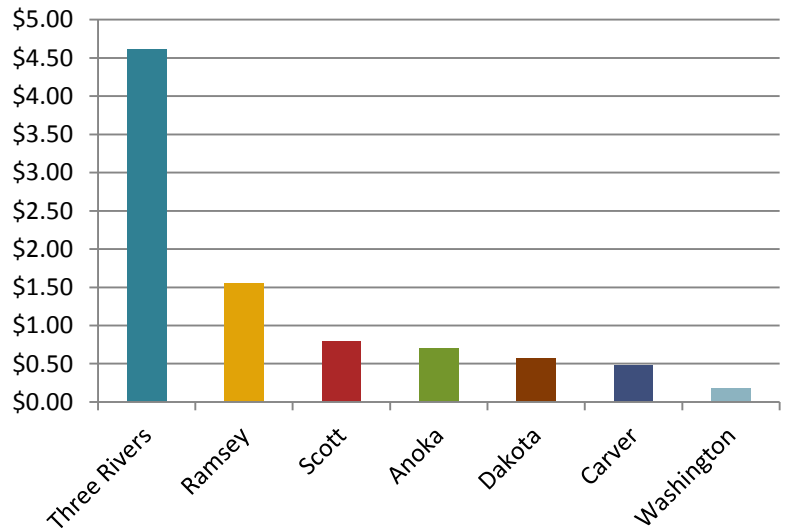
Marketing Expense per Capita



Event and Education Budget per Capita

Dakota County Parks ranks fifth among the seven agencies in per capita budgeting for programmed park events and outdoor education, with a total budget of \$230,519, or \$0.56 per resident. Three Rivers has the largest budget at over \$5.5 million, or \$4.61 per resident.

Event & Education Budget per Capita



Appendix D: Similar Provider Study

Purpose: Evaluate current local availability for park visitor services similar to Dakota County’s and gain insight into market gaps and duplication. Areas evaluated include: *equipment rentals, outdoor education, volunteer programs, events, and park facility rentals* (picnic shelters and gathering spaces).

Methods: Similar providers were selected based on location within Dakota County or close proximity for County residents. Research included review of agency websites, with follow-up calls, as needed. Initial research was conducted in winter-spring of 2016, with follow-up in fall 2016. Findings generally represent current offerings and may not reflect what agencies historically have offered.

Providers Studied: City parks, Fort Snelling State Park, Minnesota Valley National Wildlife Refuge, Dodge and Carpenter Nature Centers, Minnesota Zoo, and Caponi Art Park were included for all services areas. Community Education was added for public education programs.

Equipment Rental Summary:

Within Dakota County, Dakota County Parks is the primary provider for rental recreation equipment: skis, snowshoes, canoes, kayaks, etc. Several cities offer storage rack space for canoes. Cleary Lake Regional Park (Scott County) has the most similar rental offerings to Dakota County’s rentals.

EQUIPMENT RENTAL								
Agency	Winter (e.g., skis)	Watercraft-Storage	Fishing Gear	Bikes, Wheels	Games	Locating GPS	Adaptive	Other
Apple Valley Parks		Canoe racks			Y			
Burnsville Parks		Canoe racks						
Eagan Parks		Canoe racks						
Farmington Parks								
Hastings Parks								
Inver Grove Heights								
Lakeville Parks								
Mendota Heights Parks								
Rosemount Parks								
South St. Paul Parks								
West St. Paul Parks								
Fort Snelling State Park						GPS		
Cleary Lake Regional Park (Scott Co.)*	skis, snowshoes	canoe, kayak, rowboat, etc.			horseshoe	GPS	Canoe programs	
Dakota County Parks	skis, kicksleds, snowshoes	Canoes, kayaks, paddleboards	poles, bait sales			GPS		

*Agencies with activities and rentals similar to Dakota County Parks

Education Topics Summary:

Fort Snelling State Park, MN Valley National Wildlife Refuge, and Dodge Nature Center offer a similar mix of nature and nature-based recreation skill classes (e.g., cross country ski and paddling). Nearby providers (Carpenter Nature Center and the two Three Rivers Parks in Scott County) offer similar nature and recreation programming. The Minnesota Zoo offers a large variety of nature programs, many focused on the great variety of animals present in the Zoo, including native wildlife. Little overlap in topics and content exists among city parks-school districts and Dakota County Parks. Cities offer a variety of recreation programs for team sports, fitness, yoga, and basic skating and swimming lessons with less emphasis on nature-based recreation. City parks and Community Education in Dakota County offer fewer nature education programs focused on natural settings.

OUTDOOR EDUCATION: Topics				
Agency Name	Nature Classes	Recreation Classes	Food, Gardens	Arts and Culture
Minnesota Zoo	Zoo animals	Yoga	Zoo Farm-Animals	Photography
Fort Snelling State Pk*	6-7/month	1-2/month: nature based		1-2/month
MN Valley National Wildlife Refuge*	Public classes-hikes (6-7/month)	2-3/month: nature-based		
Dodge Nature Center*	3+/month		Farm/Orchard	limited
Carpenter Nature Ctr.*	4+/month		Orchard	
Caponi Art Park, Eagan	limited	Yoga		Visual arts, music
Apple Valley Parks		Sports, swim, skate, yoga	Baking-cooking	Yes, varied
Burnsville Parks		Zumba, skating, sports		Arts Center
Eagan Parks		Sports, fitness	Market Fest, food	Yes, Eagan Art House
Farmington Parks		Sports, skate, swim		
Hastings Parks		Team sports		
Inver Grove Heights Parks	limited 1-2/year	Fitness, yoga, sports, swim, skate, martial arts		
Lakeville Parks	limited	Swim, skate, sports		Music, dance, Art Ctr.
Mendota Heights Parks				
Rosemount Parks		Skate, sports		art
South St. Paul Parks		Fitness, yoga, swim, gymnastics, skate, sports		Arts, crafts
West St. Paul Parks		Skate, swim, sports		dance
Cleary Lk. RP, Scott*	1-2/month	4-6/month: nature based		
Murphy-Hanrehan PR*	3-5/month	1-2/month: nature based		
Burnsville Comm. Ed.		Fitness, sports	Garden, cooking	Arts, crafts, dance, music
Cannon Falls Comm. Ed.		Sports		Arts, crafts
Farmington Comm. Ed.		Fitness, sports, swim	Garden, cooking	Arts, crafts, dance, music
Hastings Comm. Ed.		Fitness, sports, swim, skate	Cooking	History, music, arts, crafts, dance
TriDistrict Comm. Ed.	limited	Fitness, sports, swim, skate	Cooking, gardening	History, music, arts, crafts, dance
Lakeville Comm. Ed.		Fitness, sports, swim, skate	Cooking, gardening	Music, arts, crafts, dance
Randolph Comm. Ed.				
Rose-AV-Eagan Comm. Ed.	limited	Ski, snowshoe at Lebanon; fitness, sport, swim, skate	Home, garden, cooking	Music, arts, crafts, dance,
Dakota County Parks	7-10/month	7-10/month: nature based, plus yoga		Arts, crafts

*Agencies with topics, curriculum similar to Dakota County Parks (nature, nature-based recreation)

Education Formats and Audiences Summary:

Many city park agencies and community education offer youth programs, including day camps, before-after school programs, and a variety of classes and activities. Families, seniors, and adults are well-served by city parks and community education, although on different topics than offered by Dakota County Parks. Audiences less well-served include multi-cultural groups and people with disabilities.

OUTDOOR EDUCATION: Formats and Audiences Served										
Agency Name	Day Camp	Before After School	Birthday Parties	School Field Trips	Youth	Adult	Family	Senior	Multi-cultural	Adaptive
MN Zoo	Y		Y	Y	Y	Y	Y			
Fort Snelling SP*				Y	Y	Y	Y			
MN Valley NWR*		Y				Y	Y	Y		
Dodge NC*	Y		Y	Y	Y	Y	Y	Y		
Carpenter NC*	Y		Y	Y	Y	Y	Y			
Caponi, Eagan				Y			Y			
Apple Valley	Y		Y		Y	Y	Y	Y		
Burnsville	Y				Y		Y	Y		
Eagan	Y	?	Y indoor playground, Cascade Bay		Y	Y	Y	Y health, fitness, art, defensive driving		
Farmington	Y				Y	Y				
Hastings	Y				Y					
Inver Grove Hts			Y, pool		Y	Y	Y			
Lakeville					Y	Y		Y, tours, driver safety, fitness		Y, Adapt. swim
Mendota Hts.										
Rosemount					Y	Y		Y, tours, driver safety, fitness		
South St. Paul	Y				Y	Y		Y, fitness		
West St. Paul	Y									
Cleary RP*	Y				Y	Y		Y		
Murphy-Han.						Y	Y			
Burnsville CE		Y			Y	Y	Y	Y, driver safety, fitness	History, cultures	Sports, fitness
Cannon Falls CE		Y			Y	Y	Y			
Farmington CE	Y	Y			Y	Y	Y			Y, Adapt. swim
Hastings CE		Y			Y	Y		Y, tours, driver safety, fitness		X
TriDistrict CE		Y			Y	Y		Y, tours, driver, fitness, history,		Y, varied topics
Lakeville CE	Y	Y			Y	Y	Y			Y, Adapt. swim
Randolph CE		Y			Y					
Rose-AV-Eag. CE		Y			Y	Y				Y, Adapt. swim, varied topics
Dakota County	Y		Y	Y	Y	Y	Y			

*Agencies with formats and audiences similar to Dakota County

Volunteerism Summary:

Most providers have volunteer programs for a range of efforts, with the most opportunities in park clean ups, Adopt-A-Park, assisting with events, and natural resources. Fewer opportunities are available for trail patrol and assisting with classes.

VOLUNTEER PROGRAMS						
Agency	Natural Resources	Park Clean-Ups	Trail Patrol	Events	Education	More Info
MN Zoo				Y	Y	Interpretive, gift shop, data, farmhand, customer service
Fort Snelling SP				Y		Campground hosts, school class projects, trail monitors
MN Valley NWR	Y	Y	Y		Y	
Dodge Nature Ctr.	Y			Y	Y	Also: fundraising, research, administration, art
Carpenter Nature Ctr.	Y			Y		Naturalist assistant, animal care, garden tending
Apple Valley Parks	Y	Y				Adopt a park, clean-ups, invasives, bluebird boxes, administrative
Burnsville Parks	Y	Y				Buckthorn removal, adopt a park, wetland health evaluation, bluebird nest monitoring, breeding bird survey, lake monitoring, raingarden maintenance
Eagan Parks	Y	Y		Y		Lake & wetland monitoring, clean-up
Farmington Parks		Y				Adopt a park
Hastings Parks	Y	Y		Y		Adopt a park
Inver Grove Heights Parks	Y	Y		Y		Park usage surveys, invasive removal, bluebird boxes
Lakeville Parks		Y		Y		Adopt a park, Art Festival
Mendota Heights Parks						
Rosemount Parks		Y				Adopt a park, bluebird boxes, assist with landscape maintenance
South St. Paul Parks		Y		Y		
West St. Paul Parks		Y		Y		Adopt a park, bluebird boxes, assist with landscape maintenance
Cleary Lake RP, Scott Co.	Y	Y	Y	Y	Y	Adopt a park, seed collection, buckthorn removal
Murphy-Hanrehan PR, Scott	Y	Y	Y	Y	Y	Adopt a park, seed collection, tree planting, buckthorn removal
Lilydale-Cherokee-Harriet Island RP	Y	Y			Y	Ongoing and group stewardship events, adaptive rec, Zoo and Conservatory, rec centers
Caponi Art Park	Y	Y		Y		
Dakota County Parks	Y	Y	Y	Y		

Events Summary:

Event types with the fewest offerings include multi-cultural, nature, and visual art events. Recreation events include races, often organized by outside groups and more often hosted by regional parks and nature centers than by city park agencies. Nature events are also less common with city park agencies –examples cited included native plant sales and park clean-up events. A variety of music and performance events are offered by city parks. Five cities in the county offer evening movies in the parks. Date and season celebrations are popular across nearly all agencies, with fall (Halloween, harvest) and winter holiday events the most common.

EVENTS									
Agency	Rec. Activity	Nature-Based	Music	Movies	Visual Arts	Date/Season	Multi-cultural	Fund-raisers	Notes/Examples
MN Zoo	Y	Y	Y		Y	Y		Y	Fun Run, Nature-Zoo animals, concert series
Fort Snelling SP*	Y	Y					Y		
MN Valley NWR*									40 th Anniversary event
Dodge*	Y	Y	Y			Y		Y	Fundraising gala, hayrides, holiday photos, Halloween
Carpenter*	Y	Y			Y	Y		Y	
Apple Valley Parks			Y			Y			Halloween, Christmas, Home-Garden Show
Burnsville Parks		Y	Y	Y		Y	Y		Winter Lighting, International Festival, Native Plant Sale, Friday Movies, Sunday concerts,
Eagan Parks		Y	Y		Y	Y			Winter Market, Home-Garden, Holz Farm Fest, Lake Fest-, Art Fest, Food Truck, Halloween, Lone Oak Days,
Farmington	Y		Y	Y		Y			Arbor Day tree Planting, 5K
Hastings Parks			Y	Y	Y				Concert series
Inver Grove Heights Parks					Y	Y			Halloween, Family New Year's Eve, Farm event, Art-craft fair
Lakeville Parks			Y		Y	Y			Haunted Forest, Holiday, Art Center
Mendota Hts									
Rosemount Parks						Y			Christmas
S St Paul Parks				Y		Y			Halloween, Christmas
W St Paul Parks				Y		Y			
Cleary Lake*	Y								Racing/Running Events
Murphy-Han.*	Y								Race/Run Events
Lilydale-Harriet Island RP*	Y	Y Annual park clean-up	Y	Y	Y	Y	Y	Y	MN Opera, Beer Dabbler, Organized races, health org. fundraisers. Irish Fair, Festa Italiana, Mexican Consul.
Caponi Art Park			Y			Y	Y		Summer music, Medieval Fair, Halloween
Dakota Parks	Y	Y	Y			Y		Y	Permitted fundraisers

*Agencies with event types similar to Dakota County

Facility Rental Summary:

Similar providers offer a broad variety of rental meeting/gathering and wedding space, with somewhat lower availability in northern Dakota County and in Hastings. Nearly all providers have rental picnic facilities. Most city park shelters are under 100-person capacity, although Levee Park in Hastings has a listed capacity of more than 300 people. Large capacity shelters are a gap throughout the County.

FACILITY RENTALS					
Agency	Gathering Meeting Space	Retreat Space	Wedding Venues	Picnic Shelters--Capacity	Notes
MN Zoo	Y	Y, Education Center	Y, Lakeside Terrace Tropics Trail	1--400 people, 1--350 people 1--300 people	Can rent Zoo for private events. Buildings: Education Center, Restaurant-Banquet Center, Lakeside Terrace
Fort Snelling SP	Y			1—open shelter 1—enclosed shelter	Visitor Center: several meeting rooms
MN Valley NWR	Y				2 Visitor Centers (Bloomington, Carver)
Dodge NC	Y		Y		Cottage Conference Room, Education Bldg
Carpenter NC	Y		Y	Gazebo – 20 people Ravine Lookout -- 20 River Overlook -- 50	Lodge/Conference Center (1 large meeting room, 2 small meeting rooms)
Apple Valley Parks	Y	Y		7 parks have shelters	2 community centers, senior center, golf course clubhouse
Burnsville Parks	Y	Y	Y	7 parks (6 have 25-30 capacity, 1 has 75-125 capacity)	Park Buildings: Neill (100 people) North River Hills (50 people) Paha Sapa (50 people) Red Oak (50 people) Terrace Oaks (100 people) Vista View (100 people)
Eagan Parks	Y	Y		Y	Buildings: Community Center, (facility finder offline)
Farmington Parks	Y	Y		2 parks: 20 capacity 8 parks: 35 capacity 2: 50-75 capacity 2: 100 capacity 1: 150 capacity	Rambling River Center: meeting and gathering rooms City Hall: meeting rooms
Hastings Parks				Levee Park: 350 capacity Wallin Park: 30 capacity Lions Park: 30 capacity Vermillion Falls: 40 capacity Roadside: 35 capacity	
Inver Grove Heights	Y	Y	Y	5 parks: up to 20 capacity Swing Bridge: 50 capacity South Valley: 50-75 capacity	Community Center: 6 rooms for groups under 150, and gymnasium for up to 300
Lakeville Parks	Y			8 parks with shelters (13) One larger shelter: 75 cap.	Meeting room at Steve Michaud Park
Mendota Heights				5 parks with shelters (8 total)	
Rosemount Parks	Y	Y	Y	8 parks with shelters (10 total), max capacity ~100	Small to large rental meeting/gathering rooms in Steeple Ctr., Community Ctr.
South St.				8 shelters in 5 parks, including	

FACILITY RENTALS					
Agency	Gathering Meeting Space	Retreat Space	Wedding Venues	Picnic Shelters--Capacity	Notes
Paul Parks				large pavilion in Kaposia	
West St. Paul Parks				Shelters in 5 parks	
Cleary Lake RP	Y	Y	Y	1: capacity 100	Visitor Center: Parkview Room (25 cap.) Pavilion (175 cap.)
Murphy-Hanrehan					No rental facilities
Lilydale-Cherokee-Harriet RP	Y	Y	Y	Harriet: Kelley shelter (50 cap.) Cherokee: 2 shelters (60 and 100) Lilydale: future proposed	Wiginton Pavilion (275 capacity) Raspberry Island (2,000 cap)
Caponi Art Park			Y		Outdoor venues
Dakota County Parks	Y	Y	Y	11 shelters in 6 parks, ranging in capacity from 50 to 200 capacity	



DAKOTA COUNTY PARKS VISITOR SERVICES PLAN

Adopted October 31, 2017