

Public Engagement Plan

Dakota County Parks Visitors Services Plan



PROS Consulting / Confluence

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1. Introduction

The purpose of the Public Engagement Plan is to define the public engagement process that will support the development of the Dakota County Visitor Services Strategic Operations Plan (VSSOP). This plan is centered on an inclusive process that encourages everyone to participate and to motivate those who are not usually engaged to become engaged. Effective public engagement that meets the needs of various stakeholders and provides a meaningful outcome for decision makers is an important step in the overall planning process and will be incorporated from start to finish in the VSSOP.

The Dakota County Park System is relatively young and growing. Visitation data and scientific surveys demonstrate that the System is serving some, but not all residents well. Dakota County has identified increasing the relevance of the System to more residents as a goal. Development of the VSSOP is intended to gain greater insight into the recreation interests and needs of County residents as a whole, and refine the County's park services to more closely reflect public interests.

Effective public engagement is essential throughout this process. The County's Public Engagement Tool has assigned a Level 3 (involve) to this project, indicating that an advisory group is recommended. Planning Commission is identified as the primary advisory body. Tools at Levels 1 (inform) and 2 (discuss) also will be used throughout the project. The Project Team and Consultants will develop, facilitate and organize the process and apply its outcomes to inform the VSSOP.

2. Public Engagement Objectives and Approaches

A strong public engagement process brings together multiple points of view to inform decisions, create legitimacy, and build a sense of shared responsibility by involving the public and diverse stakeholders early and often, rather than after decisions have been made. This process will foster new allies and collaborations and stimulate broad awareness and momentum for change. The keys to engaging the Dakota County stakeholders include visibility, transparency of process, the use of multiple channels of communication, respect for all points of view and ensuring the opportunity for every stakeholder to voice his or her opinion during the planning process.

The key public engagement objectives are:

- Learn more about public perceptions and expectations of the Dakota County Park System
- Identify barriers to use of the Park System.
- Identify service gaps in the Park System.
- Identify public preferences for specific visitor services.
- Understand the public's willingness to support different plan options
- Provide the Planning Commission and the stakeholders with accurate, relevant, and timely information to help them understand the plan and make informed comments and recommendations.
- Collect data that will best inform specific plan decisions and strategic direction.

General public engagement approaches for the VSSOP include:

- Provide and promote a variety of opportunities for a diversity of people, ideas, and information to influence the development and implementation of the plan.
- Throughout the process, inform, listen to and acknowledge feedback of the stakeholders and work to ensure that the feedback is reflected in the alternatives and recommendations that are developed.
- Create opportunities for ongoing communication and maintaining relationships with stakeholders.
- Create opportunities for engagement through channels within and outside of Dakota County.
- Offer multiple opportunities for the public to communicate back to the County (surveys, online forums and meetings) to reflect that different groups will have different preferences in terms of communications channels.
- Provide opportunities for engagement throughout the planning process and show progress, new information, or process changes proactively.
- Provide flexibility in engagement methods to react to stakeholder feedback during the process.
- Address the need for unique and specialized engagement techniques that can allow the plan to communicate with those stakeholders who have language, movement and trust issues.
- Recognize and thank partners and collaborating stakeholders for their efforts during the engagement process.

3. Major Groups to Engage and Methods

Audience mapping identifies the major groups to engage in the VSSOP planning process. It is important to identify key groups that represent the County's diverse demographics, to ensure that the final plan product is reflective of public interests. Valuing inclusiveness and ensuring public engagement is based on building trust and relationships that seek to involve all members of the community. Anyone who is affected by a decision should be involved in some way in the discussion and planning process.

In creating a comprehensive stakeholder list, the following questions should be asked:

- Who is likely to be interested?
- Who might be affected?
- Whose support is needed and why?
- Who are the community leaders that shape public opinion?
- What groups' involvement could affect the project's success?
- Is opposition expected?
- Has every group that could be affected been given the opportunity to participate?

It is important to remember that not all stakeholders will be impacted to the same extent or have the same level of interest in a project. Knowing the stakeholders will impact what engagement techniques to pursue, as the effectiveness of specific engagement methods can vary considerably from one audience to another (e.g., youth may want to communicate through social media outlets, to reach the silent majority we may want to consider using surveys or posting local signage in the community). Major groups to engage and methods of engagement most likely to be successful are listed in the following table.

Groups to Engage	Scientific Survey	Workshops	Focus Group*	Park Intercept	Other Intercept	Open House
a. Current System Visitors:						
– Nature enthusiasts	X	X		X		X
– Active recreationalists	X	X		X		X
– Service users, e.g., facility renters or program participants	X	X		X		X
a. System Non-Limited Visitors:						
– Low Income Households	X		X		X	
– Elders	X		X		X	
– Racial-ethnic minorities	X		X		X	
– People with disabilities	X		X		X	
– Youth	X		X		X	
– People unaware of County Parks	X				X	
– People who go elsewhere	X				X	

Demographic Inclusivity

To ensure that engagement efforts reflect the County’s population as a whole, it is important to understand the demographic trends in Dakota County. Emerging trends that will have impacts on how the County provides services could include:

Aging of the population:

As the Baby Boom generation reaches retirement age, a higher percentage of County residents will be senior citizens, potentially with limitations in physical abilities, and changing needs and interests.

Increasing diversity:

Dakota County is predominantly white (83%) but also has a growing number of Hispanic/Latino (6.8%), Black (5.7%), and Asian (4.7%) residents. Racial diversity is higher among school age children in Dakota County.

Ongoing economic stress:

Although the economy is recovering from the most recent recession, U.S. Census figures have shown a steady increase in poverty rates in Dakota County, from 6.9 percent in 2011 to 9.1 percent in 2013.

Youth represent the future of the County and are an important audience to engage. Focus groups to engage youth at local schools are being planned.

Communicating about Opportunities to Be Involved

Promoting engagement can include a variety of methods, including traditional tools and potentially explore newer, visually rich, creative tools. Creative tools could include storytelling, social-networking technology, web, exhibits, performances, festivals, pop up workshops, community lead engagement, events and community gatherings.

Using these tools can indicate openness to feedback, appreciation of others’ viewpoints, and a commitment to making participation as easy as possible. To keep the community interested in a project,

it is helpful to have simple, engaging, easily available updates. Web resources enable this possibility and can further be used to make visioning a more engaging process. Creative tools make planning more accessible and inviting, which can help attract stakeholders to workshops, meetings, and events. Furthermore, as a part of daily life, creative tools promote greater engagement with activities besides meetings and workshops.

4. Key Questions to Ask

Questions to ask participants in public engagement efforts will address major plan topics:

- Recreation and Recreation Service Provision
- Outdoor Education and Events
- Facility Rentals
- Connecting with the Public (Public Information, Marketing, Engagement, and Volunteerism)
- Customer Service

Engagement with current users should focus on:

- What could we offer that we don't now? How can our services be enhanced?
- Who will it serve?
- Where will it be provided?
- What level of service will be provided, and how will it be provided?
- How do visitors use Dakota County parks?
- What do visitors see as strengths of the system to build on?
- What are the missing/needed amenities, facilities, and programs?
- How well Dakota County markets and communicates its facilities and services?
- How can the system be enhanced?
- Ideas for new partnerships?

Engagement with current non-users should focus on:

- How aware/unaware they are of the system?
- What their barriers to use are?
- How the system could be enhanced?
- Ideas for new partnerships?

5. Action Plan by Project Phases

1] Project Initiation

November-December 2015

- Develop public engagement and communication pieces on project and how to be involved (web, listserv, news, etc.)
- Develop an approach for engaging underserved audiences and initiate contacts
- Begin organizing public engagement sessions
- Develop and conduct scientific survey of County residents

2] Assessment and Analysis

December 2015–April 2016

- Conduct public engagement events planned as part of the project research phase.

Methods of Engagement	Groups to Engage					Number of Sessions	
	Current System Visitors	People Unaware of County Parks	People Who Go Elsewhere	Under Represented Population*	Students		
Scientific Survey	X	X	X	X	X	1x	
Workshops	X					2x	Two county areas, one per area
Focus Groups	X	X		X	X	12-14x	6-8 with under-represented populations 4 with school student classes 2 group sessions with current users
Park Intercepts	X					4x	Dakota County Parks events
Other Intercepts		X	X	X		Up to 8	Events, retail, attractions, busy places

*Includes low-income households, elders, racial and ethnic minorities, and people with disabilities

3] Service Concept Alternatives

May 2016- August 2016

- Conduct public engagement events planned as part of the concept alternatives phase.

Methods of Engagement	Groups to Engage					Number of Sessions
	Current System Visitors	People Unaware of County Parks	People Who Go Elsewhere	Under Represented Population	Students	
Workshops	X	X	X	X	X	2x
Focus Groups	X			X		8-10x

Two county areas, one per area
 6-8 under-represented populations
 2 group sessions with current users

4] Draft Plan

September 2016- December 2016

- Conduct public engagement events planned as part of the draft plan review phase.

Methods of Engagement	Groups to Engage					Number of Sessions
	Current System Visitors	People Unaware of County Parks	People Who Go Elsewhere	Under Represented Population	Students	
Open House	X	X	X	X	X	2x

Two county areas, one per area

6. Available Resources and Budget

The resources required in conducting the extensive public outreach and engagement necessary for this process will fall primarily on the Consultant Team, the Dakota County Project Team and additional staff time. Also important will be the time of Planning Commission, Dakota County Board of Commissioners, Senior Management and Communications Department.

Major groups to engage, recommended methods of engagement, and areas of responsibility among the Project Team (County staff and consultants) are listed in the table below. This plan recommends expanding the Project Team to include an Outreach Consultant with expertise in engaging specific populations that are under-represented among park visitors, including people from low-income households, people with disabilities, minorities, seniors, and youth. The Outreach Consultant would be selected based on cultural competency with audiences with diverse demographics (e.g., age, race, income), and having relationships with and connections to groups and communities in these demographic areas.

Groups to Engage	Scientific Survey	Focus Group	Park Intercepts	Other Intercepts	Public Review Session
Current Users					
-Nature enthusiasts	S	P	DC		P
-Active recreationalists	S	P	DC		P
-Service Users, e.g., facility renters	S	P	DC		P
Limited or Under-represented					
-Low income households	S	O		O	P/O
-Elders	S	O		O	P/O
-Racial and ethnic minorities	S	O		O	P/O
-People with disabilities	S	O		O	P/O
-Youth	S	O		O	P/O
Non-Users					
-People unaware of County Parks	S	P/O		P*	P/O
-People who go elsewhere	S	P/O		P*	P/O
<i>Included in Survey Consultant scope</i>					S
<i>Included in Planning Consultant scope</i>					P
<i>Recommended for Outreach Consultant scope</i>					O
<i>Incl. in Planning Consultant scope; supporting role recommended for Outreach Consultant</i>					P/O
<i>Included in Dakota County staff role</i>					DC
<i>Not currently in Planning Consultant scope; recommended</i>					P*

Outreach Scope and Budget

The existing contract with the Planning consultant covers the following outreach efforts:

- Scientific survey data review and incorporation into project research findings
- Focus groups for Current Users and Non-Users

- Public sessions at the research and concept alternatives phase
- At least one review session for the general public on the draft plan

Engagement activities not currently covered under contract include:

- Focus groups for Under-Represented Populations by an Outreach Consultant (8-12 groups for Assessment Phase, 8-12 groups for Concept Alternatives)
- Intercept surveys for Under-Represented Populations or other method advised by an Outreach Consultant
- Intercepts to engage Non-Users (or other method) by the Planning Consultant, to be held at busy venues that draw a broad range of County residents.
- Assistance in identifying participants for Park Non-User focus groups and public review events (by the outreach Consultant)

Proposed Additional Fees

Task	Fee*
Subtotal (Outreach Consultant)	\$26,500
Subtotal (Planning Consultant)	\$2,500
TOTAL FEE	\$29,000



Appendix: Visitor Services Plan Audiences to Engage

1) Public Engagement Audiences (residents, park visitors): Multiple Methods

Current Park Users: *Groups engaged through multiple methods include current and past users of parks services (e.g., education program participants and general park users). Outreach will focus on learning what types of visitor services are of most interest to them and how services could be enhanced.*

Examples include:

- Participants at current and past events or education programs
- Current volunteers
- Current Park partners (e.g., Thompson Park Senior Activity Center)
- Facility renters and equipment renters
- General park users

Non-Users and Limited Users of the Park System: *Engagement efforts will reach out to people who may be users of parks outside of the County system, people who aren't aware of the County system, and populations that are under-represented in County Parks compared to their representation in the general population. Engagement efforts will focus on identifying services that would increase their awareness and use of the parks, and in some cases, services that help remove barriers to participation in park use. Groups include:*

- People using other park systems and people who are unaware of County Parks
- People with low-limited incomes
- Elderly
- Racial and ethnic minorities
- People with disabilities
- Youth

2) Peer Recreation Service Providers, Potential Partners: Workshop/Interviews

South Metro Park and Recreation Service Providers: *Identify gaps in south metro parks service market and discuss opportunities for collaboration, cross-promotion, developing niche programming and minimizing duplication or competition. Learn from other providers. Examples include:*

- Dakota County cities with park systems
- US Fish and Wildlife Service
- National Park Service
- MNDNR, Fort Snelling State Park
- Metro Council
- Other Regional Park Implementing Agencies
- Minnesota Zoo

Outdoor Education and Event Providers: *Identify gaps in the south metro outdoor education and events market; discuss opportunities for collaboration, cross-promotion and marketing approaches, niche programming and minimizing duplication or competition. Examples include:*

- Environmental educator organizations (e.g., Minnesota Naturalists Association)
- Other regional park agencies (e.g., Three Rivers, Ramsey County)
- Nature centers
- Youth organizations and camp providers
- Organizations assisting people with disabilities (e.g., Wilderness Inquiry)
- Outdoor equipment retailers / outdoor skills program providers
- Event organizers (e.g., trail runs, outdoor adventures)

3) Potential Collaborating Organizations: Workshop/Interviews

Educational Institutions: *Identify program interests and collaboration opportunities. Examples include:*

- Schools districts
- Homeschool Community
- Community Education
- Pre-Schools
- Colleges
- Early Childhood Family Education
- English Language Learning Programs

Public Service and Advocacy Groups: *Identify collaborative opportunities for providing services for under-represented groups (e.g., elderly, minorities, and people with disabilities). Examples include:*

- Dakota County Departments (e.g., Libraries, Community Services)
- United Way
- CLUES
- DARTS
- Wilderness Inquiry

Civic and Community Groups: *Identify opportunities for increasing awareness of Dakota County Parks, marketing opportunities, collaborating on programs and events. Examples include:*

- Chambers of Commerce
- Tourism Bureaus
- Service organizations (e.g., Rotary, Lions)

Potential Volunteering Partner Organizations: *Identify potential partner organizations and learn from groups that have successful volunteer programs*

- Environmental stewardship organizations (e.g., Friends of the Mississippi River)
- Public service volunteer organizations