

Regional Parks

What Does it Take to Be a Regional Park?

This section of the report discusses the criteria used by the Minnesota DNR and an LCCMR funded study to identify potential regional park assets which were used to identify lands that were included in this study as existing or potential Regional Parks. This section also describes the proposed standards and guidelines used in this study to determine needed acreage and size of Regional Park units. Once the acreage needs were determined it became necessary to locate key candidate sites which are of sufficient size and location to provide for the desired experience.

To ensure that these Regional Parks provide the desired experience and benefit their local host economy uniform guidelines are necessary. Those guidelines are based of the Minnesota Outdoor Recreation Act.

Non-Metropolitan Regional Parks

Definition

Over the past few years the LCMR has invested significant resources studying Regional Parks in the outstate areas of Minnesota. That investment has provided several valuable outcomes: First, the DNR's Regional Park Grant criteria have been accepted as the criteria for identifying potential outstate regional parks. The LCMR's and DNR's criteria are identical except that the DNR's "Special Features" and "Statewide Significance" criteria were combined in a 2005 study presented to the LCMR.²⁸ Second, an LCMR funded study inventoried lands that have the potential to become regional parks.²⁹ While the five criteria listed below form the guidelines for identifying a regional park, the judgment of the Advisory Committee³⁰ was also informed by the Metropolitan Council's "*The Regional Recreation Open Space Policy Plan*," and the legal definition used by the Metropolitan Council to define regional recreational open space, both of which follow the five regional park criteria below.

²⁸ [Greater Minnesota Park Inventory Regional Park Criteria](#), Final Report to the Legislative Commission on Minnesota Resources, p. 4-5, (January 2005).

²⁹ See 'List of Tables' in Appendix A for lands within this project's study areas that are identified by the LCMR as potential regional parks.

³⁰ [Greater Minnesota Park Inventory Regional Park Criteria](#), Final Report to the Legislative Commission on Minnesota Resources, p. 4-5, (January 2005).

Regional Park Criteria³¹

1. Size: 100+ acres (with exceptions based on use characteristics, special features, etc.)
Discussion: Large tracts of land are often necessary to provide natural resource based recreation opportunities and protect the natural resources for long-term use for outdoor recreation. This criterion will not be exclusively used to determine that a park is not regional. Parks of less than 100 acres may still be determined regional in nature based on other criteria.
2. Use: Evidence that the park serves a regional clientele (as opposed to mostly local). Other factors may include evidence that the facility draws tourists from outside the local area. Discussion: The origination of people who use a park (residents of the jurisdiction that owns/operates the park vs. residents of other jurisdictions) is an indication of whether a park is regional or not. The exact percentage cannot be specified at this time, although the metro area regional park system has a 40% non-local visitation. Evaluation of this criteria will depend on the current methods used to collect origination data and how representative this is of all the people who use the park.
3. Recreation Activities Offered: the park should provide outdoor recreation facilities and activities that are primarily natural resource based (camping, picnicking, hiking, swimming, boating, canoeing, fishing, nature study). A related measure is the range of these activities accommodated within the park (e.g., a park with a beach, campground and boat launch facilities is more likely to attract regional clientele than a park with only one of these facilities).
4. Special Features: Unique or unusual geologic features, historically significant sites, zoos, or parks containing characteristics which are of statewide significance.
Discussion: This criterion could have particular importance for a park that is smaller than 100 acres, yet includes a special feature. A park with one or more special features will be likely to draw clientele from a broader area.
5. Scarcity of Recreational Resources: The park provides public natural resource based recreational opportunities that are not otherwise available within a reasonable distance. These might include water-based activities, such as swimming, fishing, boating, interpretive nature trails, and public campgrounds, etc.
Discussion: This criterion provides a measure of reasonable access to outdoor recreational opportunities.

Metropolitan Council's "*The Regional Recreation Open Space Policy Plan*"

- Regional parks (RP) should contain diverse natural resources...and the ability to provide for a wide range of natural resource related recreational opportunities. Access to water bodies suitable for recreation is particularly important. A regional park should be large enough to accommodate a variety of activities, preserve a pleasant natural aspect

³¹ Legislative commission on Minnesota Resources Greater Minnesota Park Inventory Regional Park Criteria, Final Report, p. 5, (January 2005).

and buffer activity areas from each other. Regional parks are 200 to 500 acres. Occasionally, because of the quality of the resource an exception may be made and a RP may be as small as 100 acres.

- Park reserves are expected to provide a diversity of outdoor recreational activities. A reserve is also intended to provide, protect and manage representative areas of the original major landscape types in the metro area. Optimal size exceeds 2,000 acres, while the minimum size is 1,000 acres.
- Regional trails are intended to provide recreational travel along linear pathways. They are selected to pass through, or provide access to, elements in the regional park system and to intersect with local trail systems.
- Special recreation features (SRF), which are called for in MS 473.121, are defined as regional park system opportunities not generally found in the parks, park reserves or regional trails. SRF often require a unique managing and programming effort on the part of the regional park implementing agency.

Criteria used by the LCMR Project Advisory Committee:

Metropolitan Council's legal definition of Regional Recreation Open Space:

"Regional recreation open space" means land and water areas, or interests therein, and facilities determined by the metropolitan council to be of regional importance in providing for a balanced system of public outdoor recreation for the metropolitan area including but not limited to park reserves, major linear parks and trails, large recreation parks, and conservatories, zoos, and other special use facilities. (Minn. Stat. 473.121 Subd. 14)

For this project the parks identified both in; "Examples of Regional Parks Outside the Twin Cities Metro Area," Wayne Sames, MN DNR, 2003; and the Greater Minnesota Regional Park Criteria, Final Report to the Legislative Commission on Minnesota Resources, 2005; were used in calculating the total acreage of Potential Regional Parks within each study region.

Many of the parks included in this report exhibit the potential to be regional parks but without additions to many of them they would not necessarily meet the above guidelines.

Outstate Regional Recreation Parks Current Standards / Guidelines

Size of Units

There is no set or standard size for the Regional Recreation Park units. The ideal size of each unit is in the vicinity of 1000 acres, but depending on the features and activities to be provided that size is flexible.

Instead the necessary size depends on several factors including the area needed to; provide the desired visitor experience, provide the desired recreational opportunities, attract visitors from throughout the region, protect the resource in question, and the acreage necessary to sustaina-

bly provide for the outdoor recreation values of Minnesotans. In determining what the preferred sizes for the park units are the uses for the particular unit must understood. Possible uses may be derived from several sources of information which identified the changing recreation preferences of Minnesotans and the perceived need of recreation managers for different facility types.

By definition, Regional Parks and Regional Recreation Open Space provide a diverse set of recreational opportunities and assets. Specific types of activities provided include camping, picnicking, hiking, swimming, boating, canoeing, fishing, nature study, etc.³² Other facilities include; trails (motorized and non-motorized), horse trails, mountain biking trails, skiing trails, unpaved and paved trails, interpretative centers or areas for nature study, and swimming areas.³³ Before an effective park system can be developed it is imperative to have an idea of what the region needs in terms of recreational opportunities. While the participation trend in outdoor recreation is generally to decreasing participation there are specific activities that are increasing, such as camping, jogging, and running (ATV use is increasing, but this is not relevant as regional parks have traditionally not provided for access) and due to the large population increase in the study regions, overall participation in outdoor recreation will increase.³⁴ That increase demands new facilities, and to get an idea of the needed facilities the DNR completed a survey asking recreation providers what type of facilities are needed.³⁵ The survey targeted counties, cities, and school districts. All three survey levels ranked trail facilities as the highest need.

- These needs for different facilities, as provided in the survey, can be used to give a general idea of the necessary size for each unit. As the Facility Adequacy Survey targeted different regions, which broadly correspond with the study regions of this project, the identified facilities can roughly be used to illustrate the size of units within each study region.
- In general terms a Regional Recreation Park where hunting is one of the available opportunities will likely have to be larger than a unit which is designed for experiencing an outstanding historical feature.
- It is of greater importance to accept that one very plausible reason why outdoor recreational participation is decreasing per capita is that the type of recreation Minnesotans want to partake in is not adequately provided. Major complaints of outdoor recreation participants include; overcrowding of popular sites, lack of proximal opportunities, and loss of open space that was traditionally used for recreation.
- Without high-value, attractive, and convenient recreational open space Minnesotans will increasingly forgo outdoor activity to more sedentary and unhealthy forms of recreation.

³² See. LCMR parks Study Group Report, Approved as Amended by the full LCMR on February 4, 2004. page 7.

³³ Legislative Commission on Minnesota Resources, Greater Minnesota Park Inventory Regional Park Criteria. January 2005. Page 8 and Table 2.

³⁴ See part A for discussion on trend. See Metropolitan Council Regional Parks Policy Plan for discussion on ATV access.

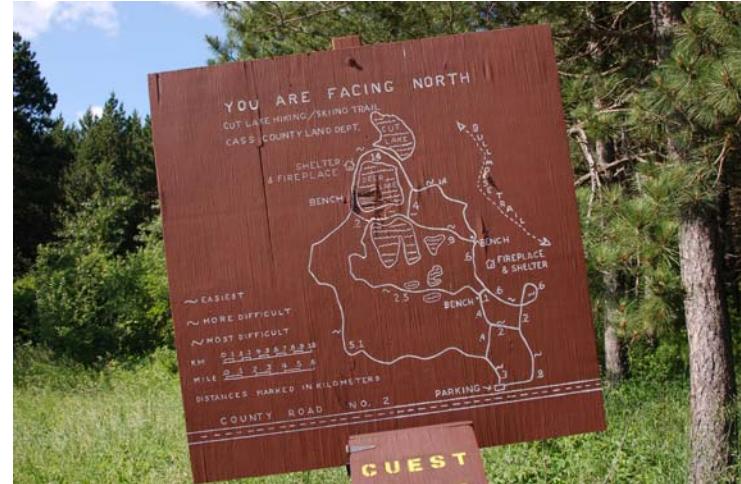
³⁵ The 2004 Outdoor Recreation Facility Survey of Minnesota Cities, Counties, and School Districts was funded by the Legislative Commission on Minnesota Resources with an allocation of Land and Water Conservation Funds. Prepared by Ron Sushak. March 2005. See infra Table 47 for a summary of perceived facility needs.



Acres per Resident

This project operates on a guideline of 25 acres of regional park per 1000 people to *roughly* determine the amount of acreage necessary to make the outstate regional park system equitable with the lauded regional park system of the seven-county metropolitan region. This guideline is a straight forward and simple way to gauge the equitable nature of investment in the outstate regional park system when compared to the Metro regional park system. Unfortunately, the guideline is not relevant to determine if the acreage will meet the desired values or provide the necessary experiences the region's citizens desire.

This guideline has a firm basis in history. The Metropolitan Council employed the 25 acre per 1,000 residents guideline to determine if the early metro park system was acquiring adequate infrastructure. In 1974 the Metropolitan Council published a minimum goal of 25 acres per 1,000 residents for regional recreation open space.³⁶ The 25 acre per



1,000 ratio was successful during the early years of Met Council's regional park system but has largely been abandoned as the system reaches maturity. The guideline is eminently useful for the virtually nonexistent Greater Minnesota Regional Park System as it gives an idea of what level of acquisition is needed in the next few decades for creation of successful systems in Minnesota's new urban areas. This ratio of about 25 acres of Regional Recreational Open Space per 1,000 people must be a guiding principle in developing a regional park system in Minnesota's new urban areas in order to ensure equitable distribution of recreational opportunities for the public. The 25 acres per 1,000 people estimate also coincides with other estimates from literature.³⁷

Currently the Regional Park system operated by the Metropolitan Council includes more than 52,000 acres and 170 miles of regional trails.³⁸ The population of the seven county Metropolitan area is 2.64 million thus the Metropolitan Council operates parks at a ratio of slightly less than 20 acres per 1,000 people. The Council also indicates that it will work to expand the Metropolitan Regional Park System to 69,716 acres by 2030³⁹ when the population of the Metro area is estimated to be 3.41 million. This will give the Metropolitan area more than 20 acres of regional park land per 1,000, which is impressive for a mature system.

It is necessary to have a guideline that allows for a measure of equity between the mature Metro

³⁶ Technical Appendices 2030 Regional Parks Policy Plan, Metropolitan Council, April 2005. Appendix D: Recreation needs analysis.

³⁷ Recreation, Park and Open Space Standards and Guidelines, National Recreation and Park Association. Edited by, Roger A. Lancaster. 1983. p. 66: Kansas City Metropolitan Region. Total public park per 1000 = 55 acres, regional park (service area entire metro region) 20 acres per 1000, minimum size of regional park is 500 acres.

³⁸ 2030 Regional Parks Policy Plan, Metropolitan Council, June 29, 2005. Executive Summary page i.

³⁹ Id at Executive summary page iv.

system and the nascent outstate regional park system. This 25 acre per 1,000 residents ratio is a simple, and functional, guideline that can illustrate the lack of equity, and identify areas in need of regional park investment.

Current Policies / New Modified Recreation State Park Policy (Appendix B)

Currently there is no unifying policy that guides the development and operation of the Outstate Regional Park System. Having such a policy is important to ensure that assets within the Outstate Regional Park System are meeting the role that they were created for. That role includes providing the desired experiences and values that regional parks are able to provide as opposed to those that City Parks, State Parks, or Wildlife Management Areas provide.

In drafting a unifying policy to ensure that these experiences and values are accounted the 1981 *Minnesota Department of Natural Resources Recreational State Park Policy* was utilized. This document was made effective 3/11/1981 to guide the development and acquisition of Recreational State Parks. It was adopted in accordance with the *Outdoor Recreation Act of 1975*.⁴⁰ Although the original document was adopted, the Recreational State Park System component of it was never implemented.

This plan was adapted into the current policy “Minnesota’s Outstate Regional Recreation Parks” (See Appendix B for proposed policy document) to fill the piece of the outdoor system left vacant by the failure to implement the “Recreational State Park” plan. This new policy document will function to *accommodate recreational needs of outstate citizens, preserve open space, form social and ecological connections between urban areas and existing open space, create buffers for sensitive habitat, and to generally provide access to outdoor resources for the public's benefit.*\

Facility Adequacy Survey

Minnesota’s most recent SCORP identified the need to better understand the changing nature of outdoor recreation in the state.⁴¹ As part of that effort the LCMR funded a 2004 survey of Minnesota Cities, Counties, and School Districts asking recreation providers what their current facility needs are, and what those needs will be within five years.⁴² Forty-six types of facilities were included within the survey, many of which can be provided by Regional Recreation Parks. The facility adequacy survey is being used to show the broadly perceived need, throughout the state for the type of recreational facilities that regional parks can provide.

For this report, the facilities that are more relevant to the type of opportunities Regional Parks provide are discussed. Since Regional Parks can provide very diverse opportunities there are

⁴⁰ Minn. Stat. 86A.01-11 (1975)

⁴¹ Minnesota’s 2003-2008 State Comprehensive Outdoor Recreation Plan, Minnesota Department of Natural Resources, (2002) (Available at www.dnr.mn.gov/aboutdnr/reports/scorp.html) accessed June 3, 2007.)

⁴² The 2004 Outdoor Recreation Facility Survey of Minnesota Cities, Counties, and School Districts was funded by the Legislative Commission on Minnesota Resources with an allocation of Land and Water Conservation Funds. Prepared by Ron Sushak. March 2005.

quite a few facilities are relevant. Of the more than one hundred tables included in the Facility Adequacy Survey Report, 'Table 47' (below) is the most appropriate. Table 47 includes the "Facilities Needed Now Plus Facilities Needed Within Five Years" as indicated by counties. The need is illustrated as a percentage of respondents that indicated a need now or within the next five years for each facility.

Table 47

Facilities Needed Now Plus Facilities Needed Within Five Years by County (Total of all regions in percent indicating need)	
Facility	Percent Indicating Need
Paved Trails for walking, hiking, skating, biking	70.3
Modern campgrounds with electric hookups	59.4
Unpaved trails for walking, hiking, biking	57.8
Mountain bike trails	53.1
Nature/interpretive trails	53.1
Horseback trails	50
Cross-country ski trails	50
Fishing Piers	46.9
Natural park areas/open space	45.3
Dispersed camping sites	45.3
Primitive campgrounds	43.8
Swimming beaches	39.1
Nature/interpretive centers	39.1
Wildlife/nature observation areas	39.1
Big game hunting areas	31.3
Small game hunting areas	29.7
Hunter walking trails	26.6
Waterfowl hunting areas	25

From this table it is apparent that County leadership is expressing a perceived need for many of the recreational resources that Regional Parks can provide. This identification of facility need is an unambiguous expression that investment in recreational assets such as regional parks is urgently needed.

Key Candidate Sites

Many different factors were considered in building the maps of prime candidate sites including: existing land uses, land type and cover, needed recreational opportunities, acreage needs, topography, etc.

The general locations of the broad study areas are based on outstate population growth hot-spots. These areas are in need of immediate investment to insure that the current and future residents have equitable recreation opportunities when compared to the Metro. These new out-

state urban complexes also have an opportunity to create an open space system as one of their first pieces of infrastructure. Regional Recreation Parks can act not only as a recreational and social hub, but also as an ecological hub to provide a framework for the development of the region. Just as the designers and policy makers of the time had the foresight to invest in and create the Minneapolis park system before that city matured, now is the time to invest in our out-state areas to ensure that they maintain quality open space resources as they mature.

Part B: Regional Recreation Resource Districts

