

IMPROVING ACCESS TO PARKS IN WASHINGTON COUNTY

RESILIENT COMMUNITIES PROJECT

About the Partner



Washington County is on the eastern edge of the Twin Cities Metropolitan area, composed of 423 square miles of land, and possessing a distinct set of landscapes and resources. The physical environment is very diverse; its surface and underground features vary throughout the county. The county is framed by unique and exceptional water features - the St. Croix River forms the entire eastern border and the Mississippi River forms the southern and southwestern border. In addition to the rivers, important natural features are: the bluffs and ravines in the St. Croix valley; the county's abundant streams, wetlands, lakes, forests, and groundwater; and the prime farmland soils of the agricultural areas of the county. While much of Washington County has retained its rural atmosphere, it includes urban, suburban and rural communities.

The County parks system consists of seven regional parks, one county park, two regional trails, and one historic courthouse site. The parks and trails provide a gateway to aforementioned scenic landscapes and treasured natural resources. With more than 4,400 acres of parkland, there are a variety of ways to discover and enjoy the outdoors.

Project Description

Visitor surveys and research by the Metropolitan Council Regional Parks division have shown discrepancies in regional park use among demographic identifiers such as age, ability, income, race, and ethnicity. Specifically, communities of color and seniors are two groups that use parks less than other groups. Park usage was shown to be lower among these groups for a variety of reasons, including structural and cultural barriers. Through this research, increasing and diversifying parks programming was identified as a recommendation and strategy to introduce new users to the park system or a new recreational activity.

In Washington County, the population is becoming older (projected 60% increase in residents 65+ years old by 2030) and more diverse (projected 20% increase in people of color by 2030). In order to become an equitable park system, Washington County aims to focus on increasing participation among these two groups and reducing discrepancies among visitors.

County staff are seeking research and guidance to help implement improved programs and services that better serve underrepresented park users. Notably, the County will soon be hiring a new position, Community Outreach Specialist, who will be able to put this research into practice.

Key Issues, Questions, and Ideas to Explore

1. What structural barriers prevent communities of color and seniors from using parks? What strategies can be used to remove these barriers?
2. What are best practices and ideas for park programming that would serve underrepresented populations, such as communities of color and seniors?
3. What program design features reduce barriers to participation (i.e. registration process, providing transportation, different times of day, etc.)?
4. What strategies can park staff implement to better reach and engage with underserved populations?

How Student Work Will Be Used to Build Community Resilience

- To create an equitable parks system where all residents can experience the benefits of time in nature

Potential Community Partners or Stakeholders Existing Plans & Reports

- Cimarron Park (manufactured home community)
- Community Thread (non-profit)
- Washington County school districts
- Regional Park Use among Select Communities of Color (Metropolitan Council 2014)
- Regional Parks System Visitor Study Report (Metropolitan Council 2016)
- Youth and Parks Research Report & Toolkit (Metropolitan Council 2021)

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