**CMAL QUARTERLY MEETING RECAP**

**Planning for Regional Parks in the Metropolitan Area**

Regional parks were the focus for the quarterly meeting of the Council of Metropolitan Area Leagues (CMAL) on January 17. The new Regional Parks Policy Plan is one of four policy plans that will guide implementation of Thrive MSP 2040, the Metropolitan Council’s 30-year vision for our region. Four panelists addressed the plan and the development and future plans of two of the ten regional park implementing agencies.

Planners Jan Youngquist and Raintry Salk of the Metropolitan Council’s Regional Parks and Natural Resources Division presented an overview of the regional parks system and directions suggested in the new policy plan. The 1974 Metropolitan Parks Act established the system, which is tasked with preserving open space, identifying park lands, and granting funds to regional parks agencies. The regional parks serve the role of state parks in the metropolitan area. Regional parks and trails are natural-resource based, and are generally focused on bodies of water, both lakes and rivers, providing opportunities for passive recreational activities.

The Metropolitan Council does not own or manage the regional parks. It partners with 10 implementing agencies which own, develop and manage the parks and trails, with planning assistance and funding from the Metropolitan Council. The Council is the fiscal agent for dedicated state funds including the Parks and Trails Fund from the Legacy Amendment, which are distributed following the approval of individual park master plans. The implementing agencies (seven county-based and three cities) also manage other local parks that are not part of the regional system.

In 2014, the 54,000-acre system included 42 regional parks, 12 park reserves, 8 special recreation areas, and 40 regional trails. While regional parks are found throughout the metropolitan area, the system does not include local, neighborhood parks, sports fields and recreation centers maintained by local governments.

The new plan provides four directions. Two of them reinforce current plans – expanding the parks system and providing a comprehensive trail system. Two others represent shifts in emphasis – strengthening equitable usage by all residents, and providing multi-modal access to parks, trails and transit networks. Development and implementation of these directions is involving enhanced community engagement. In developing the plan, staff met with many stakeholder groups, and held 16 focus groups with communities of color. All implementing agencies have also had an opportunity to comment on the draft plan, and final adoption by the Metropolitan Council is anticipated on February 11.

Local examples of how regional parks fit into the plans of implementing agencies were provide by John VonDeLinde, Division Manager of Anoka County Parks and Community Services, and Jonathan Vlaming, Associate Superintendent for Planning, Design and Technology for the Three Rivers Park District. Anoka County is addressing equity and access in various ways, including partnering with the Minneapolis YMCA to provide a location for summer day camps, and using the county dial-a-ride bus system to take people to parks. VonDeLinde described an ambitious plan for an improved urban experience in Fridley, a transit-oriented development with trail connections to the Rice Creek Chain of Lakes.

Vlaming pointed out that Three Rivers (which includes Hennepin County outside of Minneapolis and some parks in adjacent counties) comprises half of the entire regional parks system. Their parks and trails are heavily used, with visits doubling in the last six years. They are planning for diversity, including the aging population. At the same time, they are upgrading the Hyland Ski and Snowboard area, which draws teenagers to these gender-neutral activities.

All the speakers agreed that while there are some details to be worked out in how to apply the new directives, all agencies are working together and are anticipating successful implementation and improved services for metropolitan residents. Vlaming said that having 10 implementing agencies provides a nice diversity, and that all are not quite on the same page with the Metropolitan Council yet. But Thrive MSP 2040 is a good beginning, requiring collaboration to determine how the new policies, especially equity, will be implemented. He noted the intent to expand trails in the inner ring suburbs, and the recognition of bicycle networks.

The session was videotaped, and the video and PowerPoint presentations should be available through CMAL at a later date.