

PROTECT OUR PARKS AND RECREATION FACILITIES

In\$ight St. Paul
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BACKGROUND

We are proud that our Saint Paul parks have been consistently rated in the top five nationally based on their accessibility, equity, acreage, investment, and amenities. It includes 26 neighborhood recreation centers, a zoo and conservatory, 180 parks, 3 public swimming pools, and 120 miles of trails. However, there is a \$230 million backlog of deferred maintenance on our existing parks. Developing new major park projects and facilities now threatens the quality of our existing parks and places an enormous tax burden on citizens and businesses.

ACTION REQUESTS

For Elected City Officials, District Councils, City Staff

1. Prioritize the maintenance of existing parks and recreation facilities before spending money to design and develop any new ones.

Saint Paul Parks and Recreation Department noted that the backlog of deferred maintenance on the city's existing parks has ballooned to \$230 million from \$100 million despite spending nearly \$60M on maintenance projects since the inception of the 1% sales tax. The city's park system is rated in the top five nationally, so there is no real need to design and develop any new facilities at this time. All park funding should be directed to reducing the deferred maintenance backlog, and spending on any new facilities (the River Balcony, Mississippi River Learning Center, Regional Athletic Complex, and Como Pavilion) should be paused until the deferred maintenance backlog is reduced by 90 percent. Prioritizing maintenance of existing park facilities is consistent with the Capital Improvement Budget (CIB) Committee's criteria for reviewing capital projects.

2. Use the 1% Sales Tax revenue designated for parks and recreation solely to reduce the deferred maintenance backlog at this time.

The sales tax should be used to pay for needed park maintenance without the sale and use of bonds. All maintenance should be prioritized, so that park facilities and amenities most in need of repair or replacement are taken care of first. Data supporting the Department's request for sales tax funding for projects must be provided to the CIB Committee and included in the capital budget document. Currently, we do not know if sales tax revenue is being spent on parks in accordance with the CIB Committee's adopted criteria.

3. Present all capital improvement projects using the 1% Sales Tax to the CIB Committee for their review and recommendation to the mayor and city council.

Currently, park projects using sales tax funding are not adequately vetted by the CIB Committee, which leaves the city council lacking essential information about how sales tax revenue is being spent and prioritized on parks and facilities across the city. To improve vetting, the city should establish a Parks and Recreation Task Force to review and propose capital improvement projects for submittal to the full CIB Committee. The task force should include a representative from each of the city's neighborhood planning districts and two representatives from the existing CIB Committee.

4. Pause major new projects currently in design until the mayor and city council can identify how they will find funding to construct and operate them.

The River Balcony (\$114 million), Mississippi River Learning Center (\$65 million), Regional Athletic Complex (\$30 million), and Como Pavilion (\$30 million) require more than \$239 million to complete construction. The city had requested significant funding from the State of Minnesota to develop these projects. In addition, the city was relying on the National Park Service to rent office space at the River Learning Center for its regional office. Based on the current financial uncertainty of state and federal government support for new park projects, the city should suspend any further spending, currently \$10 million, to develop these projects. If these projects were to move forward, it is unclear how the city would be able to fund their operation, maintenance, and programming.

5. Request full funding for the city's regional parks to meet the state's statutory obligations to regional parks.

Minnesota Statute 473.351, subd. 3 requires that "each implementing agency must receive no less than 40 percent of its actual operation and maintenance expenses." The concept behind this law is that approximately 40 percent of visitation to regional parks is assumed to come from outside the park operator's boundaries. If the state does not cover this cost, local taxpayers are paying for visitation (wear and tear) by non-taxpayers. This has been the law since 1985.

Currently, the city receives only about \$1.5 million of the \$7 million it is due for operating regional park facilities, which include Como Park, Hidden Falls, Phelan, Battle Creek, Crosby Farm, Cherokee, Lilydale, Harriet Island, and Wicahapi.

Furthermore, the city's legislative platform should prioritize its request for fully funding the city's regional parks as required by state law, and the state should meet its statutory obligation to fund regional parks.

The city should not request any funding for new parks until the state meets its obligation to fund operation and maintenance costs for existing regional parks.

ACTION REQUESTS

For Concerned Community Members

Contact your district council and find out when your local park will receive funding from the sales tax to take care of all its maintenance needs.

Share this Protect Our Parks proposal and its action requests with friends, neighbors and your contacts on social media.

Contact your council member and demand a moratorium on spending any money for new park development until the maintenance backlog on existing parks is completed.

Ask your state legislators to meet the state's statutory obligation to provide sufficient funding for the city's regional parks.

Write a letter to the editor to your local newspaper to state your priorities for our park system.

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