



Parks Research Update: 2025 Annual Use Estimates

Ismael Ramirez, PhD, Principal Researcher

Metropolitan Parks and Open Space Commission

June 30, 2026



Use Estimates Background



- Produced annually since 1995
- Used in formulas to calculate each implementing agency's share of Regional Parks and Trails System grant program dollars
- Allows for monitoring trends over time
- One of two ongoing research responsibilities: The other is the Visitor Study, conducted about every 5 years.

Use Estimates Background



The Goals of the Annual Use Estimates

What the estimates do:

- Inform operations and maintenance funding allocations among partner agencies
- Measure annual visits to the Regional Parks and Trails System
- Track trends over time at the regional and agency level
- **What they cannot do:**
 - They are statistical estimates, not precise counts based on summer sampling.
 - Not statistically valid at the unit (park or trail) level

2025 Annual Use Estimates



- The estimates include data from 139 regional parks, trails, park reserves, and special recreation features.
- Fifth and last year of multipliers from the 2021 Visitor Study
- Annual estimated visitation is one way to demonstrate the value of the Regional Parks and Trails System. Others include climate mitigation and public health benefits.

Calculating Annual Use Estimates

Raw Counts

- Parks staff count all people entering all parks and trails at designated locations
- Schedule has randomized times, days, and entrances, Memorial Day to Labor Day (~99 days)

Expansion

- Averaged with previous three years to account for weather, flooding etc.
- Counts are “expanded” to apply to all days and entrances

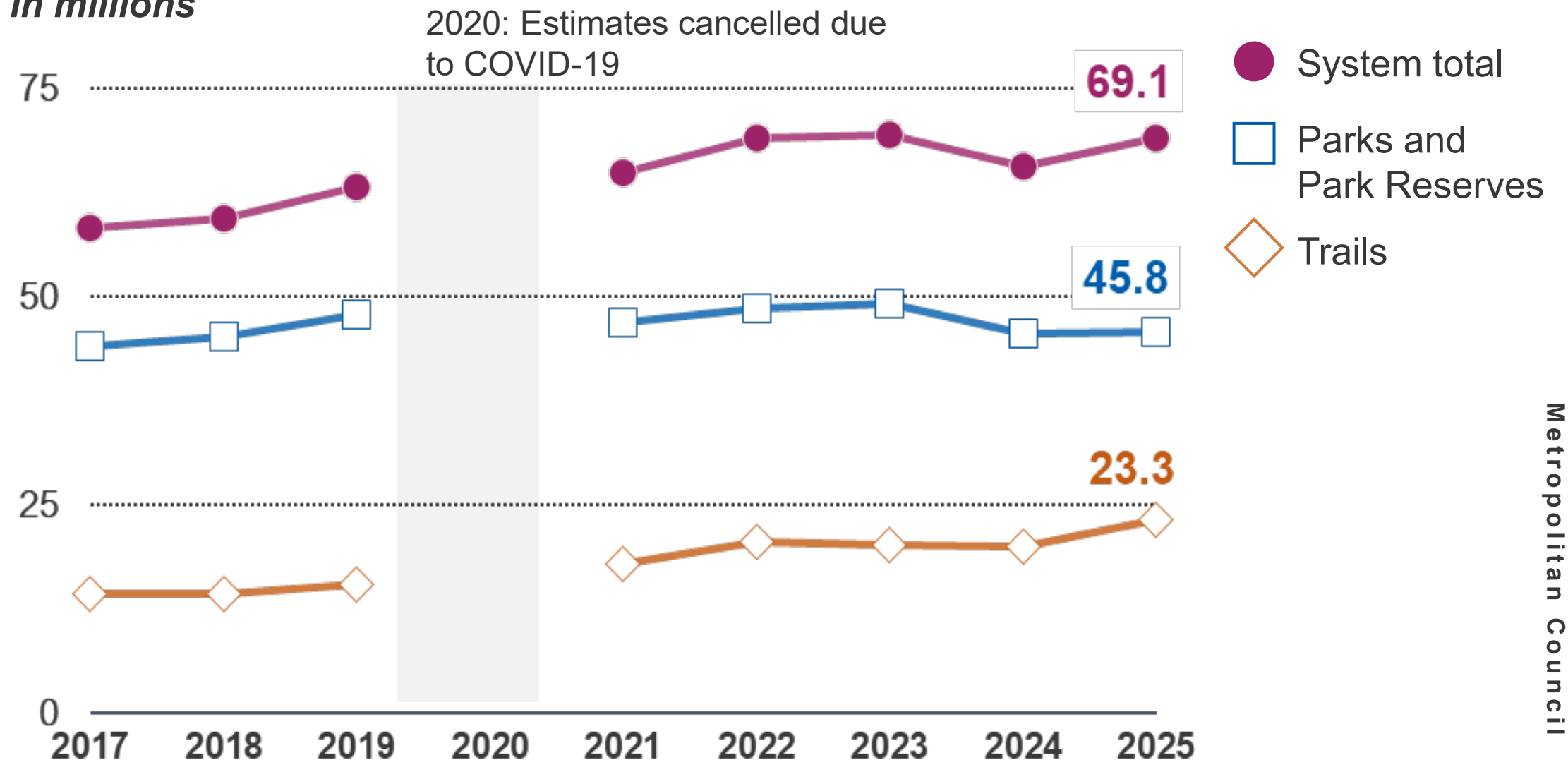
Special Events, Camping

- Agency-submitted special event, camping use is added in
- Estimated non-summer use based on 2021 Visitor Study multipliers

Annual Visits to the Regional System



In millions



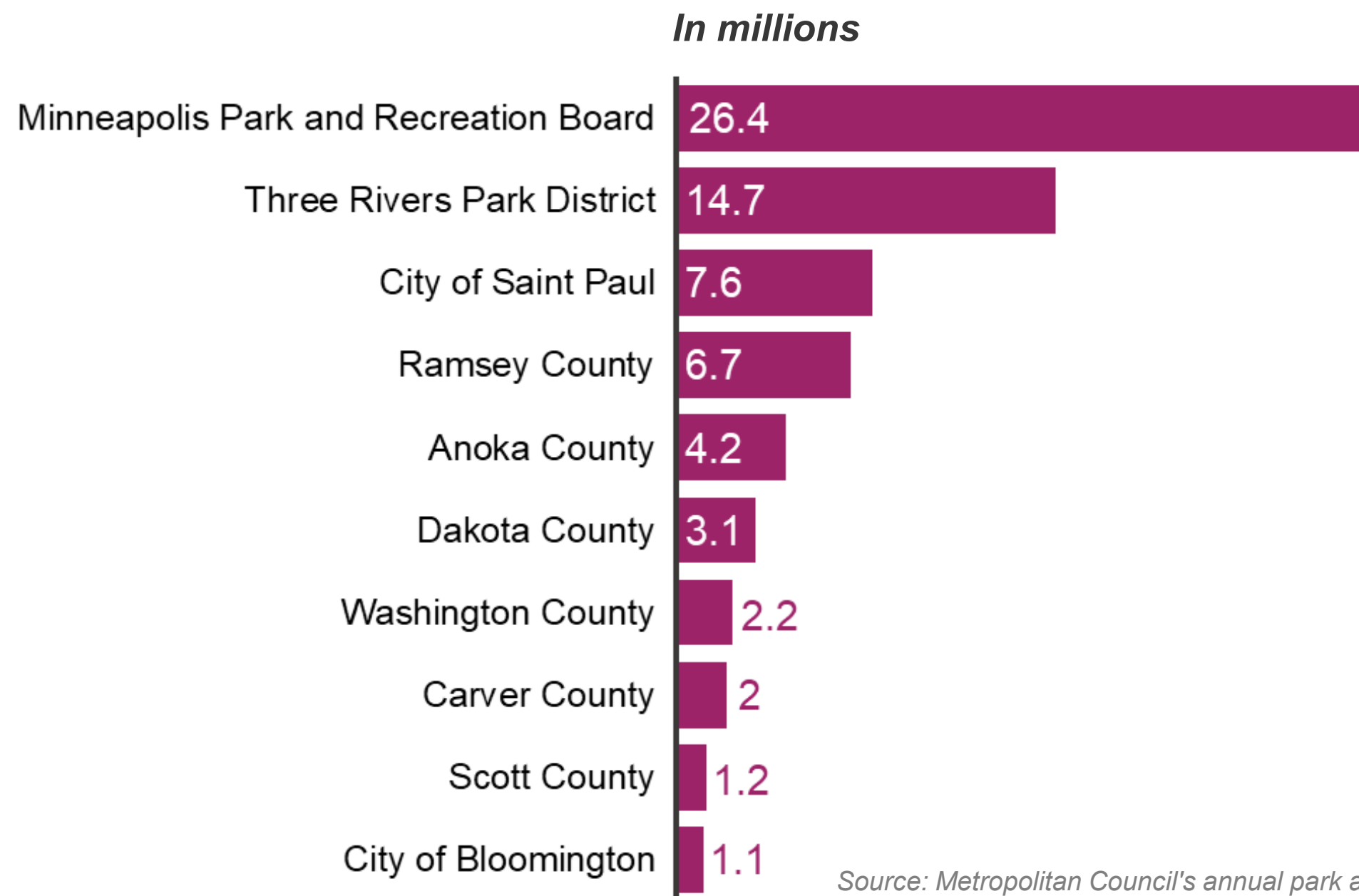
Increased visitation in 2025



Why did visitation increase?

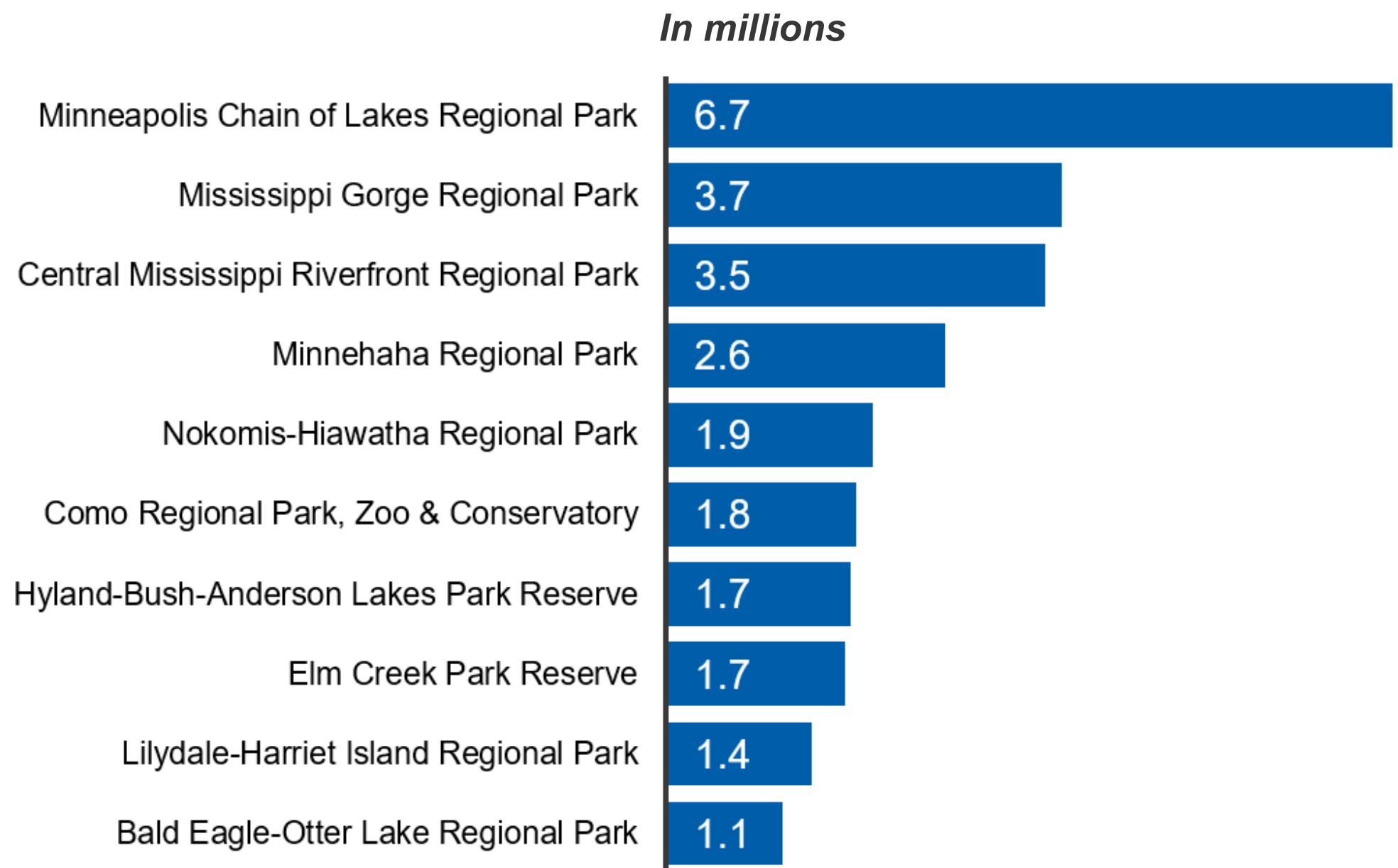
- Typical annual variation
 - in sample counts
 - across agencies; some up, some down
- New units were added to the system
- Nice weather

2025 Visits by Park Agency



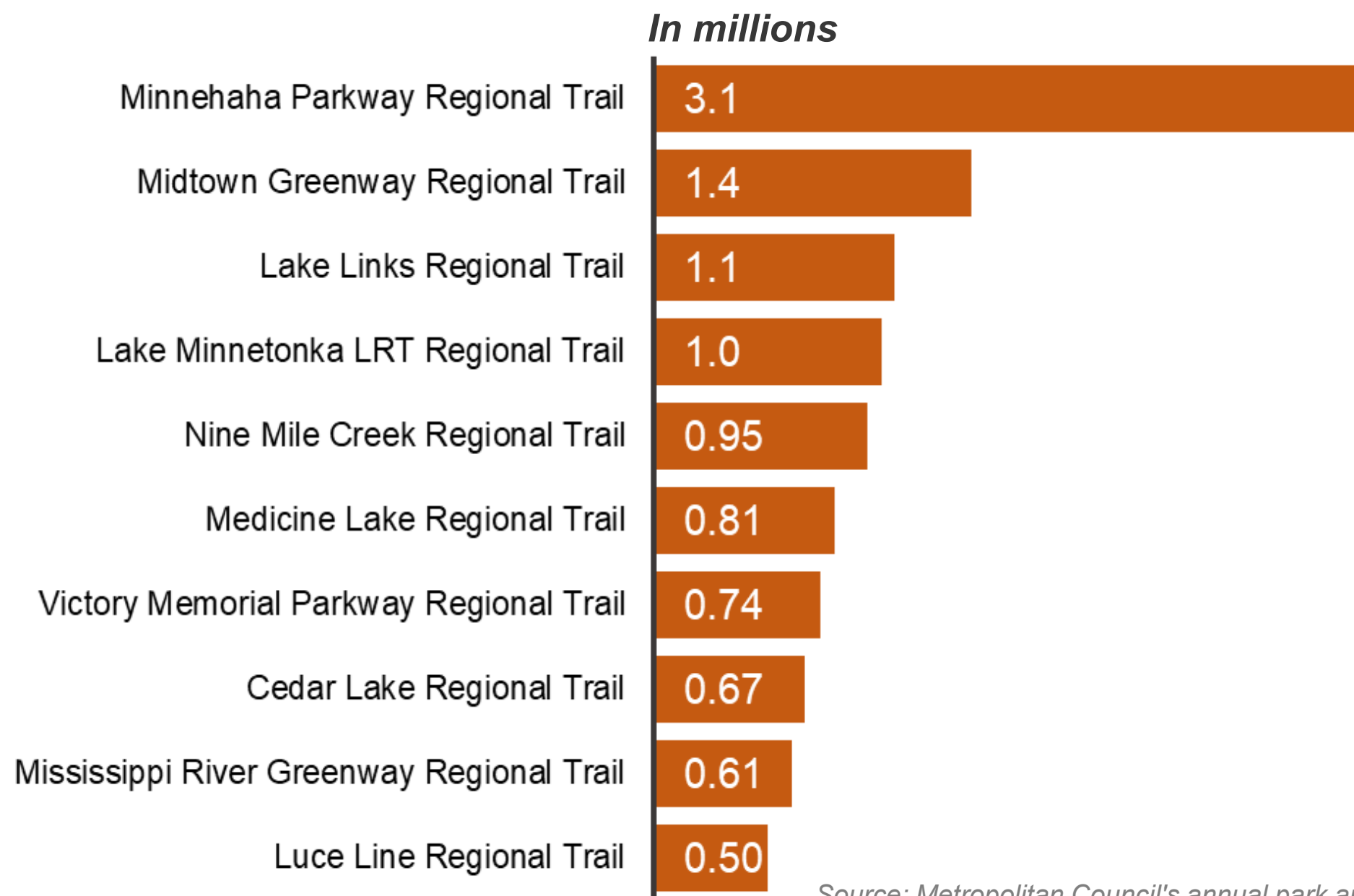
Source: Metropolitan Council's annual park and trail use estimates (June 2025).

2025 Most Visited Parks in the System



Source: Metropolitan Council's annual park and trail use estimates (June 2025).

2025 Most Visited Trails in the System



Source: Metropolitan Council's annual park and trail use estimates (June 2025).

Visitor Study Purpose



- Help inform planning, policy, and management
- Evaluate and strengthen equitable usage of regional parks and trails in accordance with *Imagine 2050* and the *Parks and Trails Policy Plan*
- Update data in funding formulas to help determine where funding goes for parks and trails

2026 Visitor Survey Update

Data collection
Summer 2026
(May 18th)

Focus Groups
Fall 2026

Data analysis and
workshops with
IAs, new
multipliers
Fall - Winter 2026

Completed study
publication
Spring 2027



Ismael Ramirez, PhD

Principal Researcher

ismael.ramirez@metc.state.mn.us

