

Information Item

Metropolitan Parks and Open Space Commission



Meeting date: December 04, 2025

Topic

Parks Ambassador Update: Parks Ambassador Program & Art + Policy Visioning Frameworks

District(s), member(s): All
Policy/legal reference: 2050 Regional Parks and Trails Policy Plan, Section 8, Action 2
Staff prepared/presented: Thony Thao, Parks Ambassador Manager (651-602-1310)
Division/department: Community Development / Regional Planning

Proposed Action

Information item; no action is proposed at this time.

Background

The Parks Ambassador Program was created in response to the Metropolitan Council's 2014 qualitative study on park use among communities of color, which identified barriers such as lack of awareness, safety concerns, and limited access. Guided by the equity commitments in Thrive MSP 2040 and the 2040 Regional Parks and Trails Policy Plan, the program launched in 2017 to build stronger, culturally relevant connections between underrepresented communities and the Regional Parks System. Since then, it has evolved from a traditional outreach effort into a systemwide equity initiative - supporting co-created programming, community listening, evaluation, and deeper collaboration with the ten regional park implementing agencies. This priority was reinforced during the Imagine 2050 Regional Development Guide work, identifying equity as one of the Council's four core values.

Art-related efforts within the Parks Ambassador Program began in 2019 with projects such as the Art Shanty collaboration and the Ramsey County signage project. These early initiatives laid the groundwork for the launch of the Art + Policy initiative in 2023 as part of the Imagine 2050 work.

The Parks Ambassador Program and the Art + Policy Visioning Framework build on this evolution by advancing a more strategic, systems-oriented approach to strengthening equitable use. Together, they integrate culturally informed engagement with creative expression and community-driven arts practices to inform policy, foster belonging, elevate cultural visibility, and improve equitable access across parks and trails. These frameworks provide aligned direction for future investments, partnerships, and policy development that support the Council's long-term equity goals for the Regional Parks System.

Rationale

The Imagine 2050 Regional Parks and Trails Policy Plan, Section 7 - Recreation, Facilities, and Programming policy and actions, and Section 8, Action 2, which directs the Metropolitan Council to improve equitable use of the Regional Parks and Trails System through a variety of approaches.

Exhibit List

Exhibit 1: Parks Ambassador Visioning Framework

Exhibit 2: Art + Policy Visioning Framework

Exhibit 1: Parks Ambassador Visioning Framework

Parks Ambassador Program Visioning Framework

Strategic Goal: To strengthen equitable use and belonging in the Regional Parks and Trails System among all residents -- across race, ethnicity, age, income, culture, and ability -- by supporting implementing agencies in their outreach and engagement efforts, elevating community voice in regional planning, and fostering trusted relationships between the Met Council, agencies, and historically underrepresented communities.

Our Role: We do not operate regional parks and trails. Instead, we serve as a regional equity connector, convener, and supporter -- helping the implementing agencies and community partners strengthen inclusive engagement across the system. We bring forward new ideas, build relationships across boundaries, and ensure that community perspectives inform long-range planning and agency practice.

How We Work: Our work can be understood in three overlapping umbrellas -- Awareness, Support, and Initiatives -- which together make up the program's impact. Key strategies and examples below:

1. **Awareness:** Activities that bring visibility and accessibility to the Regional Parks and Trails System.
2. Adventure Guides of regional parks/trails
3. Parks map
4. Tabling at events
5. Social media storytelling and outreach
6. **Support:** Ways we strengthen the capacity of implementing agencies and support their role as frontline connectors to parks and trails.
7. Connect agency leaders and outreach staff through partner meetings, 1:1s, and cross-agency convenings to align priorities and share practices.
8. Equity grant program
9. **Initiatives:** Creative and equity-focused projects that often combine awareness and support, piloted in partnership with implementing agencies and centered around marginalized communities.
10. Equity grant program
11. Art + Policy Program: Innovative emerging program that centers artists and creative practices to increase welcoming and belonging across the regional parks and trails system.
12. Imagine 2050
13. Metro Transit: Park policy-themes art at five bus stops (2025-26)
14. Environmental Services: Sacred Waters Shared Future – Art Shanty (2025-26)
15. Monthly Regional Park agencies outreach meetings
16. Cultural community connector: a project that raises awareness of our regional parks system, our transit system and a neighborhood's cultural assets, while participants have fun, get outdoors, and build a stronger community

Guiding Principles

17. We are not frontline providers of parks programming. Our role is to work outside of the box, complementing agency-led work.
18. Our programming is partnership-driven -- co-created with agencies, community-based organizations, and cultural leaders.
19. We center marginalized communities who have historically not felt welcomed in the regional system.
20. We actively look for gaps and opportunities to connect, amplify, or innovate.



Why It Matters: The Regional Parks and Trails System belongs to everyone, but not everyone has felt welcomed, seen, or heard. This program helps close that gap by ensuring that underrepresented voices and innovative partnerships shape the future of our shared regional system.

Looking Ahead: As we evolve, key questions guide us: How do we grow this work into a sustainable program that continues to support implementing agencies, engage communities, and advance equity across the system? How do we bring more value to the implementing park agencies?

Exhibit 2: Art + Policy Visioning Framework

Art + Policy Program Visioning Framework

Strategic Goal: Use art and creative practices as a catalyst to make policy and public engagement more inclusive, imaginative, and human-centered -- while also fostering creative collaborations that enhance public spaces, cultural identity, and community connections throughout the region. We aim to connect communities to decision-making and place-making, inspiring shared ownership of our region's future.

Our Role:

- **Catalyst for creative engagement:** We bridge art, policy, and public spaces to create opportunities where community voices and creativity shape regional outcomes.
- **Connector & collaborator:** We partner with artists, divisions, implementing agencies, community groups, and policymakers to co-create projects that reflect diverse experiences and cultural identities.
- **Advocate for inclusive creativity:** We promote and support creative practices that improve policy engagement, as well as physical environments, through public art and artist-created signage, and design elements that foster welcoming, equitable, and culturally rich spaces.

How We Work:

- **Community-centered & equitable:** Prioritize lifting underrepresented voices and making participation accessible to all.
- **Collaborative & cross-sector:** Work across departments, divisions and with external partners to embed art into policy and placemaking efforts.
- **Flexible & innovative:** Embrace diverse artistic mediums and formats -- from storytelling and performance to environmental design. Tailoring approaches to the needs of each community and project.
- **Iterative & responsive:** Incorporate feedback and evaluation to continually improve our strategies and outcomes.
- **Public-Facing Differently:** Seek visible, creative approaches to raise awareness of the Met Council's work and make it feel more approachable to the public.

Why It Matters:

- **Builds inclusive regional futures:** By integrating art and artists into policy and place-making, we make government processes and public spaces more welcoming, equitable, and reflective of all communities.
- **Strengthens community connections:** Art activates public spaces and policy conversations, creating deeper engagement and shared ownership of the region's growth and stewardship.
- **Enhances regional identity & experience:** Creative collaborations enrich parks, trails, signage, public transportation, and civic spaces, fostering pride, social connection, and cultural recognition.
- **Innovates public engagement:** We position the Metropolitan Council as a leader in human-centered, creative governance -- expanding how residents participate in shaping their region.
- **Sustains Impact Beyond Individuals:** Embeds art and artists within the Met Council culture so it remains a core practice no matter who is here in the future.



What We Are Not:

- We do not run standalone art events or manage arts programming independent of policy, planning, or public engagement goals.
- We do not replace or duplicate the arts, cultural, or engagement work led by the 10 implementing agencies.
- We do not function as a grant program solely to install artwork. Art is used as a method and approach, not just a product.
- We do not do last-minute decoration or beautification of a project.

Past Projects:

- **Water Bus at Aquatennial Parade** – Downtown Minneapolis
 - Artist: Kao Lee Thao marched with her art-wrapped water-themed bus in the Aquatennial Parade
- **Public Art + Public Policy in the Park** - Lebanon Hills Regional Park
 - Artists: James Everest (Sound Garden); Melodee Strong (mural painting); Peter Haakon Thompson (flag-making); Racquel Banaszak (Sun Print Making), Metro Transit art buses and artists: Rock Martinez, Philipo Dyauli and Xena.
- **Youth City Planning Workshop – MN History Center *GIRLHOOD (It's Complicated)* exhibit opening**
 - Artist: Corrin Wendel
- **Art Shanty - Government Game Night**
 - Artists (Shanty wrap): Kao Lee Thao, Rock Martinez, Philipo Dyauli, Xena
 - Go Policy Game (Artists: Amanda Lovelee, Ellie Hohulin) + bus art wrap.
- **Earth Week Water Party** – Malcolm Yards, Minneapolis
 - Artists: Luis Fitch (silk screen printing); CRICE (United Crushers projection); Sarah Nessef (watercolors & felted flowers); Brittany Smith (sound bath).

Looking 3–5 Years Ahead:

- Artists are integrated into Council projects from the outset, not as a last-minute addition.
- Creative practices become a routine part of policy development and engagement work across divisions.
- Residents recognize the Met Council as an innovative, public-facing partner doing things differently.
- New forms of public art and design elements across the region reflect the cultures, stories, and dreams of the communities who use them.

