



Parks Research Update: 2025 Annual Use Estimates

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Metropolitan Parks and Open Space Commission

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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

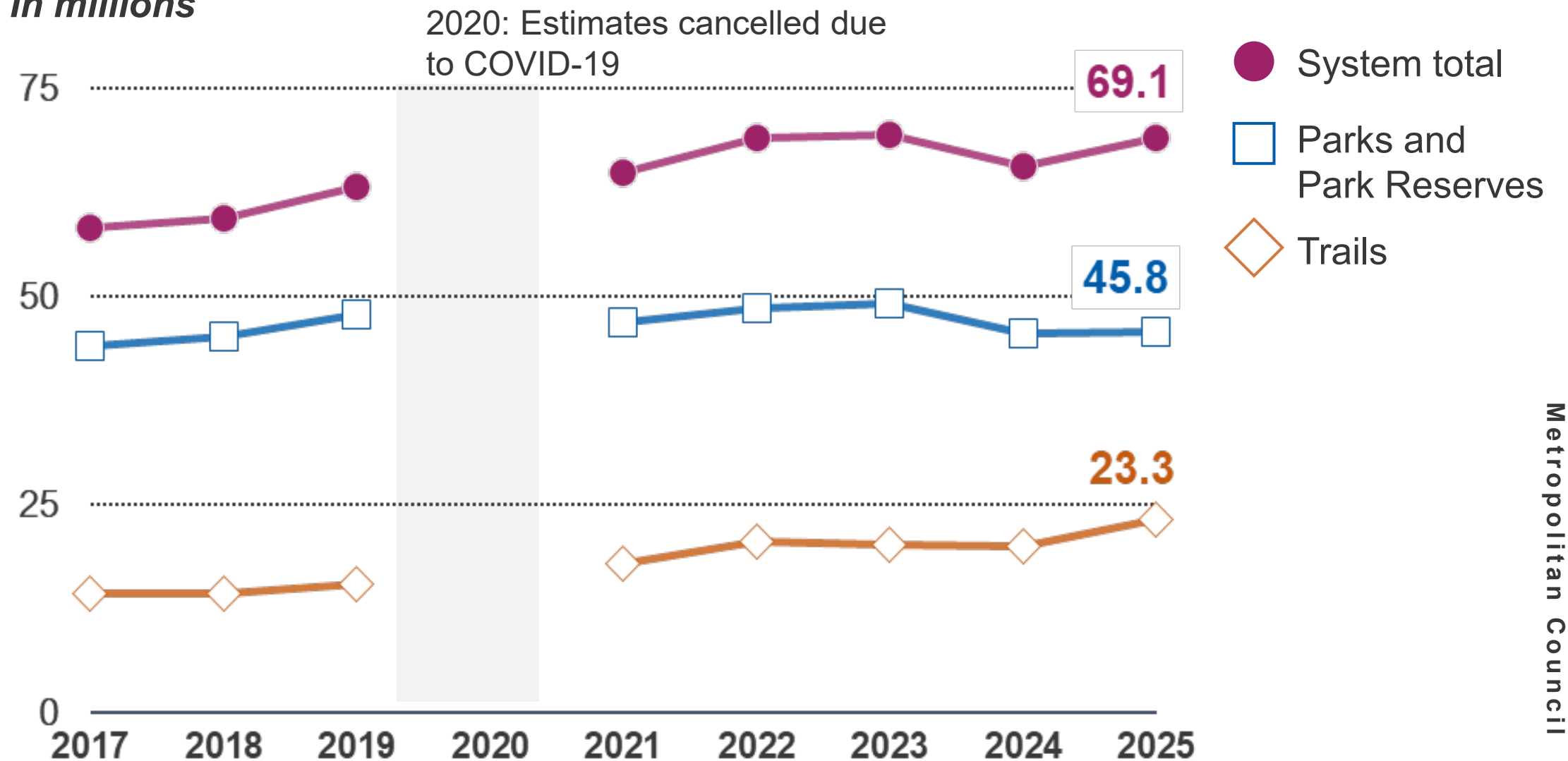
Special Events, Camping

- 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



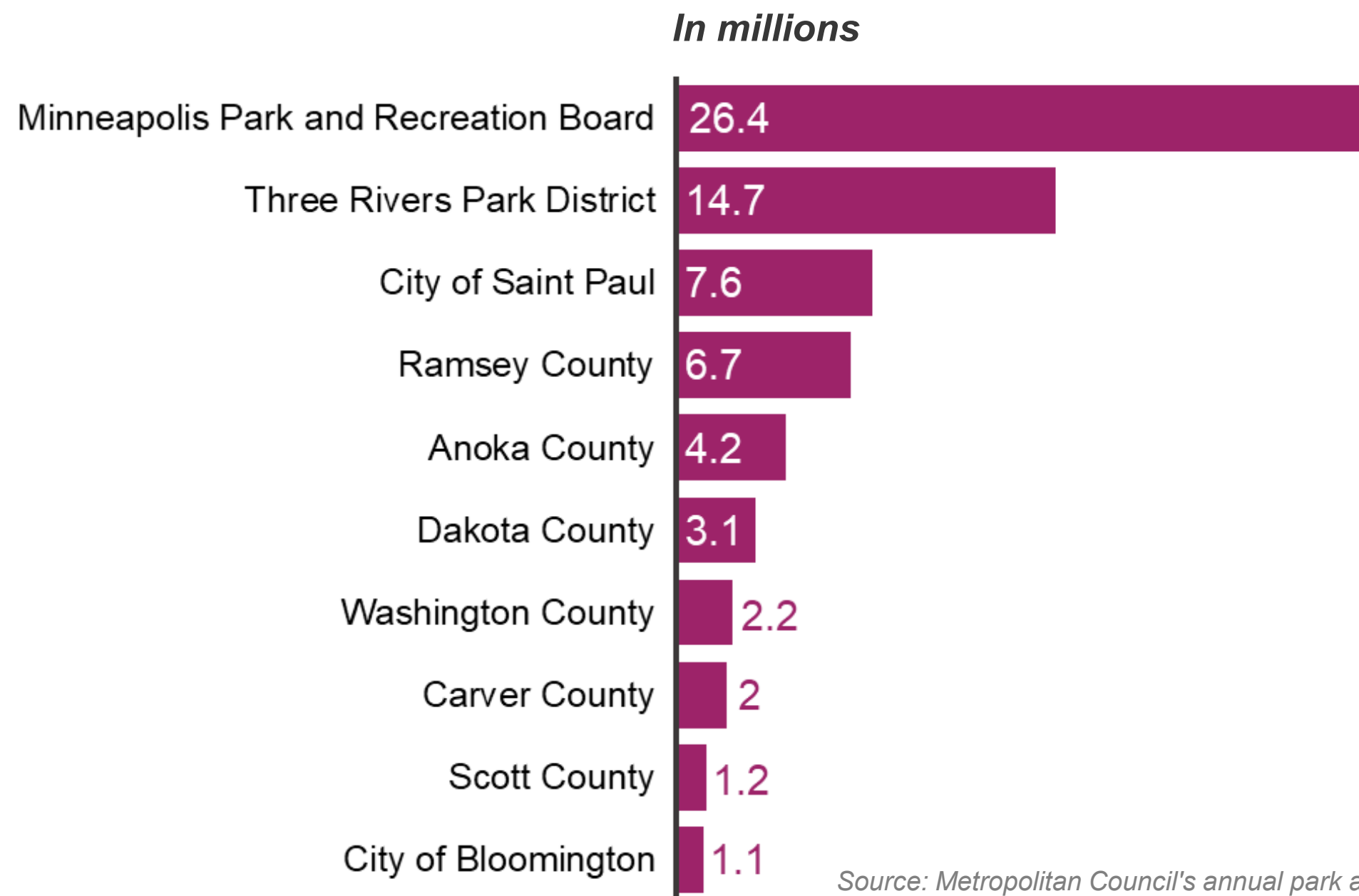
Increased visitation in 2025



Why did visitation increase?

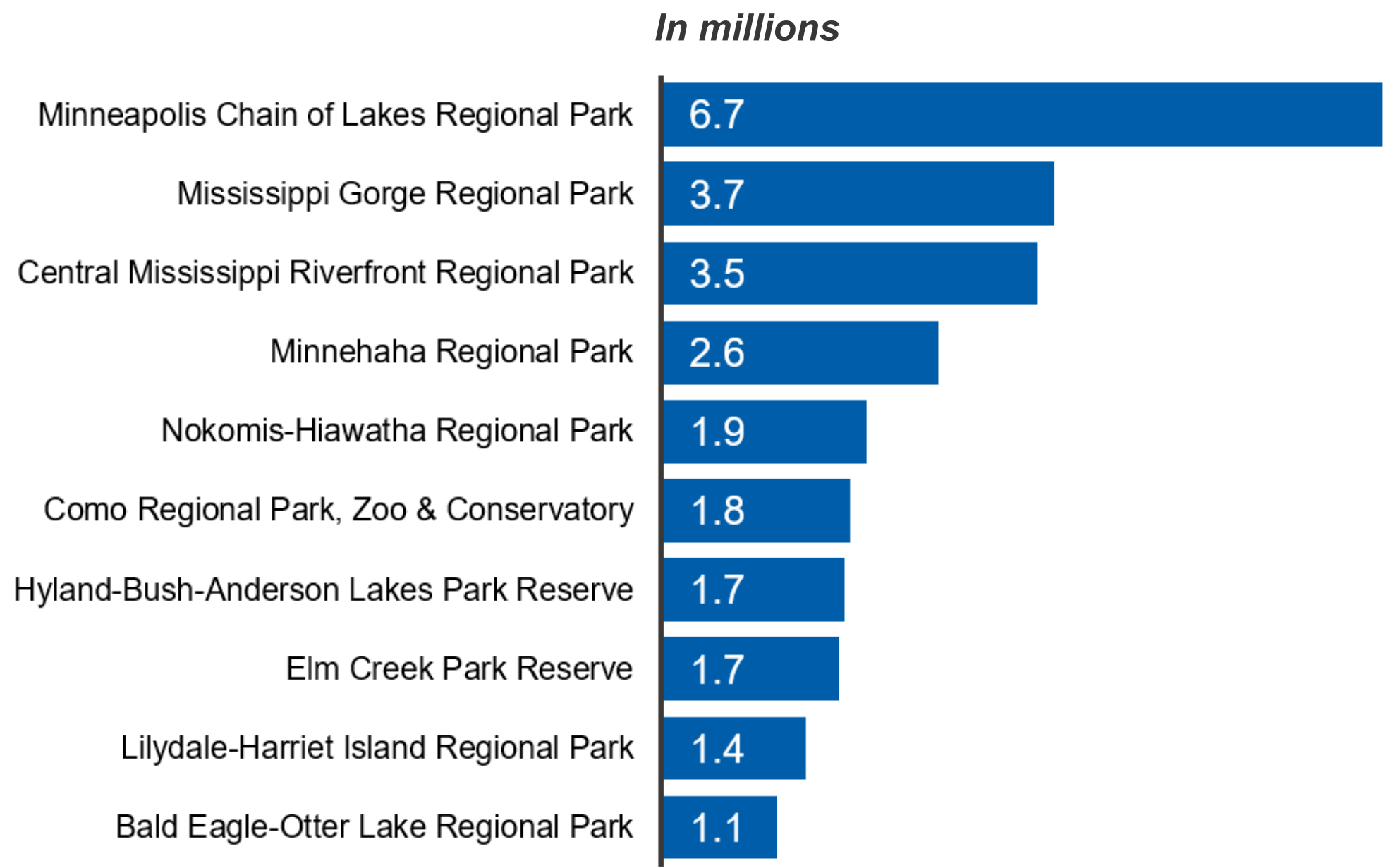
- Typical annual variation
 - in sample counts
 - across agencies; some up, some down
- New units were added to the system
- Nice weather

2025 Visits by Park Agency



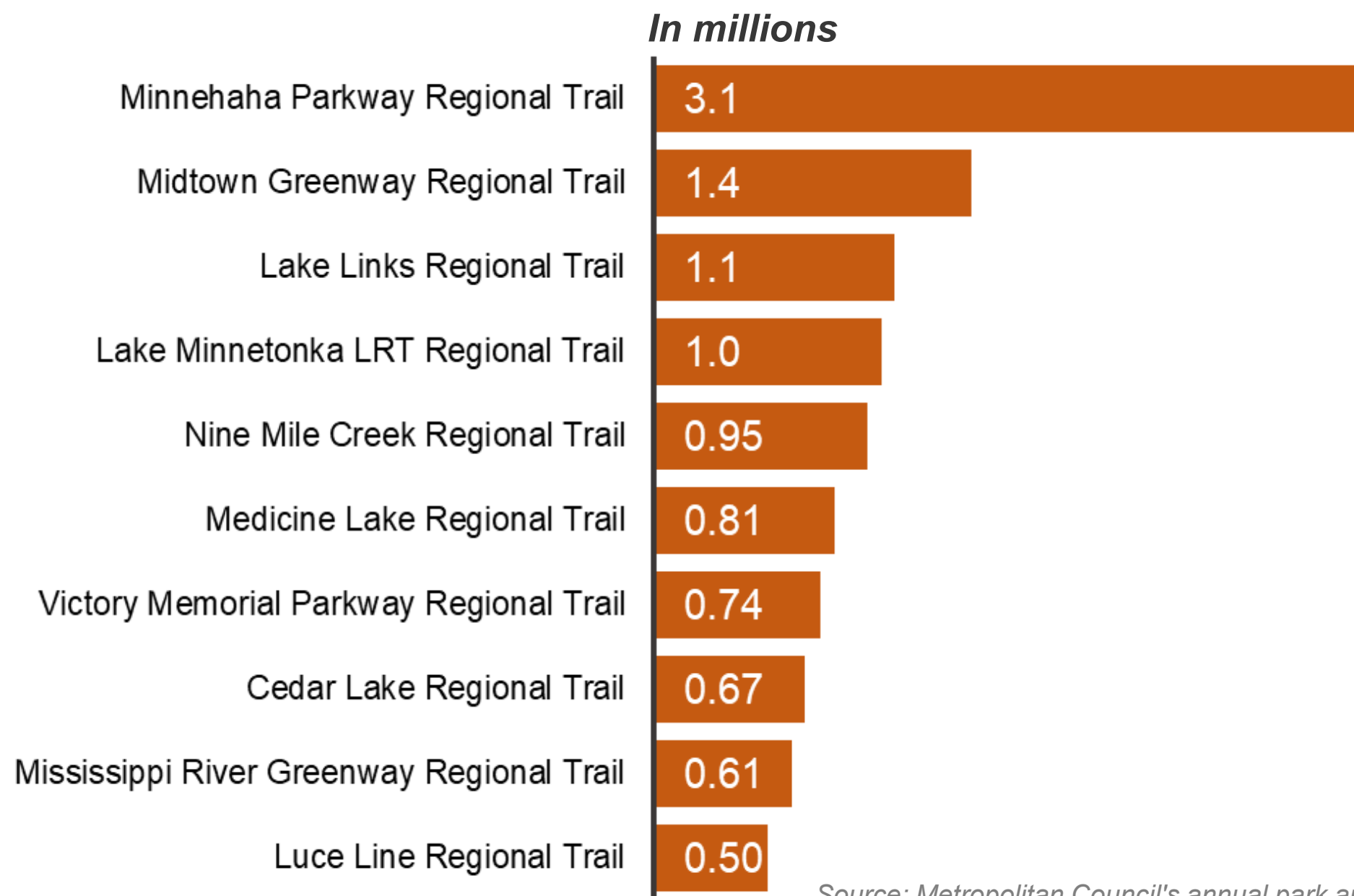
Source: Metropolitan Council's annual park and trail use estimates (June 2025).

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

Last year's MPOSC

Last year, commissioners raised two questions we have been exploring:

- Can the estimates be made statistically significant/accurate at the unit level?
- How accurate are our winter visitation estimates?

Statistical Significance Using Sensors

Statistical significance means data **95% confidence interval** and less than a **10% margin of error**

At a Unit Level:

As of March 2026, there were a total of 1822 reported entrances in the Region. To get statistically significant information for each unit we would need to install **~1,321 sensors** approximately 70-72% of all entrances.

Types of Visitors:

Pedestrians, Skaters, Bikes, Scooters, Horses, Cars, Buses and Boats

Sensors that can track these visitors cost ~\$6,000 (except for boats)

The Use of Sensors for significant results

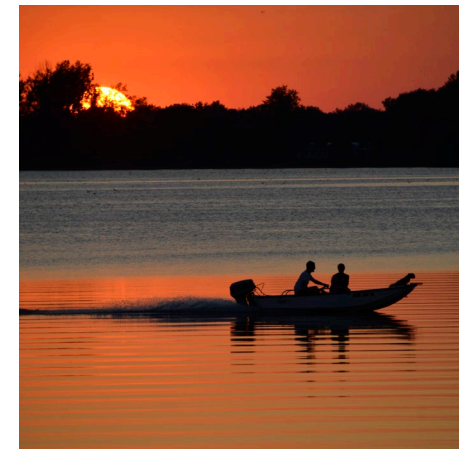
At a Unit level:

Benefits

- Sensors are always active, Automatic counts
- Recognition of pedestrians, cars, bicycles etc.
- Statistically significant results,
- Met Council would not schedule counts
- No seasonal multipliers

Drawbacks

- Min ~\$7.9 M upfront, ~\$950 k a year
- Can not compare/relate to past years,
- Less jobs for people,
- Car multipliers and methodology on expansion of numbers will remain,
- Will not change the proportion of visitation per agency
- Exclusion of Boaters



Winter Estimates Accuracy



- We compared estimated winter visitation based on the Annual Use Estimates and TRPD Winter Study for 17 units (Data from Dec 2021- Jan Feb 2022)
- Winter data accounts for ~15% of the total annual use

We Found that:

- The Annual Use Estimates overestimates winter visitation in a range from 18-20% when compared to TRPD totals.
- These percentage changes would account for **less than 3.4%** on total annual use estimation for those 17 parks

Winter Estimates Comparison



What This Means for Winter Visitation

- This comparison was based on 17 TRPD parks; but we will continue monitoring as/if more data becomes available
- The less than 3.4% difference between winter counts in the total of annual estimation is a positive indicator that our methodology and winter multiplier produce reliable results at the system and agency level
- Accurate winter and shoulder season estimates would require a separate dedicated study outside the Annual Use Estimates methodology

Looking Ahead



Items we will continue to monitor

- 2026 Park and Trail Visitor Study data collection; new multipliers
- Winter and shoulder season visitation: explore a methodology and feasibility of a study
- Sensor viability: will continue monitoring options as technology and costs evolve



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