Chapter 6 | Additional Recommendations to Connect Youth and the Outdoors

Chapter 6 provides a summary of key recommendations to remove obstacles to the outdoors and create inviting park experiences for youth. The chapter focuses on investments of attention, time, and resources for three sectors of the Regional Park System: Implementing Agency administration (funding, policies, and planning), programming and outreach staff, and the Metropolitan Council (convening action, long-term planning approval, research).[1] The recommendations reach toward four outcomes:

- Develop partnerships with affinity groups and constituent-led organizations.
- Develop, adapt, and implement models that overcome obstacles to the youth-park connection.
- Invest in inclusivity through staffing, programming, research, capacity-building and dialogue.
- Develop, adapt, and implement programming and outreach models that value youth visitors' prior experiences.

Seek strategic partnerships with affinity groups and constituent-led organizations

Organizational Connections

The Met Council and Implementing Agencies can connect with youth not only individually but also through organizations. Most productive could be working with organizations focused on a shared identity (affinity group or constituent-led) and/or on shared activities (for example, outdoor recreation, arts, or environment). For this research, such groups were contracted as microconsultants, organizations that were paid a small consultant fee for contributing expertise and efforts at organizing youth to participate in the research. A sample memorandum of understanding (MOU) is included on the Council's Youth & Parks toolkit page. Various youth-serving organizations can offer advice regarding youth engagement, specific programming needs, and raising awareness about the parks and events.

An Organizational Collaborative Model

This model is effective because:

- It overcomes safety concerns. Parents and guardians trust the organizations where their youth spend time. Going in a group creates feelings of safety and safer conditions to try new things.
- It provides opportunity for learning skills. Organizations can help provide the structured environment to support park programming that teaches new skills. Organizations know their youth and their current interests and capacities. Some organizations have leadership staff who can teach outdoor skills in coordination with park staff.
- It provides protection from in-park racism and a source of support for youth. Organizations ensure that youth will not be alone in navigating hostile encounters, can communicate

concerns to park staff, and provide a peer group so youth will less likely feel out of place or alone.

- It raises awareness. Youth-serving organizations, particularly constituent-led organizations, have deep networks in communities that care about youth well-being. Information disseminated through trusted networks is more likely to be heard.

- It reduces transportation and time-priority obstacles. Organizations have structured time with youth and often have vehicles or carpooling arrangements. Guardians and parents trust the priorities set by their organizations more than an unfamiliar government entity.

Figure 20. Troop 100 Scout bus brings visitors to St. Croix Bluffs Regional Park

- Organizations know youth and their background. They are familiar with youth prior experiences, prioritize youth leadership in their community, and can offer their insights when collaborating with outdoor initiatives.

What the collaboration could look like:

- One-on-one meetings with organization youth and supportive adults to find out what they seek from outdoors experiences. (See conversation guide in the toolkit.)

- Follow up and check in about their park experiences. For example, how did the event go? Are there recommendations for next time?

- Supporting the organization with resources, such as free equipment and fee waivers, staff time, stipends.

- Informing organizations of opportunities; grants-seeking with organizations as appropriate.

- Recognizing organizational expertise and compensating for this expertise when appropriate through microconsultancy grants.

- Recognition of how organizations contribute and listening to how an organization would like appreciation expressed (examples public acknowledgement, certificates of completion).

Recommendations for Implementing Agencies

Investments and Conversations

1. *Make programming and outreach staff a high budget priority*. When government agencies grapple with budget limitations, reductions to programming staff will disproportionately affect teens, particularly teens whose park access is impacted by multiple obstacles.[2] Park staff make the youth-park connection happen. As budget decisions are made, outreach, education, and engagement staff throughout the parks needs to be made. A lack of staffing in parks ("no one is around") contributed to feeling unsafe, uncertain, and unwelcomed. Programming creates structured activities for youth to visit parks. Innovative programs such as youth-designed options, cultural events, and conservation opportunities topped youth recommendations.

2. ***Involve youth as leaders and decision-makers.*** For the future support of the park system and the well-being of the region, teen voices can offer valuable collaboration in master planning, program development, and park ambassadorship. Youth in the study eagerly participated in opportunities to give feedback related to park planning. They gave presentations that demonstrated understanding of the regional park system and a desire to influence the future of the system. Teens enjoy activities that involve their peers, and they respond to leadership from their peers. Young people are more likely to respond to invitation from other teens to show-up and participate. At the same time, young people turn to the support and encouragement from adults to help remove obstacles through supportive multigenerational interaction.

Figure 21. Dakota County park educator pauses for youth to take photos

3. ***Pursue locally appropriate initiatives.*** The strategies recommended in this report related to obstacles to park access and the elements that make "a great day in the park." The strategies can serve as a springboard to productive conversations about design policies, facilities, and programming. Each Implementing Agency has a unique context in which to explore opportunities in relation to these findings. They can draw on their respective strengths and examine opportunities to develop new connections between youth and the outdoors.

4. ***Commit to ongoing efforts to understand the context of youth concerns.*** The youth in this research are part the broader community. How is the park system connected to larger contexts and youth lives and how does the range of youth experiences influence connections with the outdoors. How do community events and current issues affect how visitors think about and experience parks? What opportunities are available to engage in listening sessions with the Teen Council and other organizations partnering with youth? Take time to reflect with colleagues about what you're hearing from teens about school, popular culture, health concerns, community trauma, community successes.

Programming and Outreach Staff

1. ***Encourage and trust staff innovation.*** Staff reported the best outcomes happened when they were given the freedom to reach out to new audiences and figure out appropriate initiatives, even though they may not produce revenue in return. When staff time and budget are allocated to community outreach, success follows.

2. ***Make space for staff to bring their authentic, whole selves to work.*** Staff create connections when they acknowledge their own prior experiences. In doing so, they can create connections with the youth and adults who visiting the parks.

3. ***Foster cultural competency.*** Knowledge and understanding of diverse cultural backgrounds can promote a more equitable park system through education, interaction, and participation of individuals and groups from diverse communities. Staff who consider themselves members of those communities and staff who are composition that is diverse in

terms of race/ and ethnicity, gender, and ability create a welcoming context for all visitors. Staff with language and cultural competency skills created successful connections for youth in the park where they serve. When applicant pools lack these qualifications, increased efforts to recruit and build diverse staffing pipelines help send the message to youth that people like them belong in the park.

4. When staff showed a desire to connect and listen to youth, youth researchers responded with enthusiasm, sharing, and enjoyment. The "people person" abilities that staff demonstrated in connecting youth with the outdoors seemed partly talent and partly skills developed over time and experience. Park staff were able to assess how youth talked about a range of experiences, including environmental knowledge, family, community, prior outdoors experience, recent events, and cultural references.

Park and Trail Planning and Design

1. *New models to understand user experience*. Park engagement and planning professionals can work together to understand the youth relationships to parks and trails. All youth users bring experiences as they engage with parks, and they use these experiences to consider how to engage with the outdoors. Master planning processes learn about the prior experiences that inform what people want from their park system.

2. *Include youth in all master planning engagement processes*. Youth can provide planners with critical information to help envision what parks and trails could be in the future. Consultants and agency planners can use the tools provided in the Council's online tool kit as well as locally created and other tools to engage with youth.

3. *Draw on already existing engagement with youth*. Check-ins at the beginning of programming and listening during programming are great opportunities to learn about and acknowledge experiences that inform what users want from parks.

4. *Prioritize accurate and inclusive historical and cultural information*. Youth want expansive and more accurate telling of the region's history in the parks, as well as culturally specific programming. Youth and adults in the research expressed excitement in learning history and a desire for better, less ethnocentric historical narratives. This includes pre-settlement and immigration histories, artists from around the world, how species in Minnesota are the same or different from those other continents where youth may trace their community's origins.

Figure 22. Checking out fungi on a trail walk

Recommendations for the Metropolitan Council

As a regional policy-making body, planning agency, and provider of essential services for the Twin Cities metropolitan region, the Council can continue to emphasize that the connection of youth to parks is essential to achieving the Regional Park Policy Plan goals of strengthening equitable usage, conserving high-quality natural resources, and providing a comprehensive regional park and trail system. The system needs young people, even as young people need access to nature-based parks and trails. If young people feel welcomed in the parks, they are more likely to support the parks in the future. As the Council addresses issues related to regional park policies, plans, and grants, the research team offers the following recommendations.

Investments and Convening Efforts

1. Expand the commitment to youth-focused equity work through diversifying the Council's park staff and membership of the Metropolitan Parks and Open Space Commission. of interns, urban scholars, and research associates (entry-level positions accessible to recent college graduates).

2. Investigate and pursue innovative ways to connect public transit to the Regional Park system. Prioritize investment by Metro Transit to connect residents to the park system.

3. Identify ways that Council Members and staff unit of the Council can support the parks program in Community Development in connecting youth with parks (for example, connections with Environmental Services activities in parks, transit connections, attention to youth recreation needs in comprehensive planning).

4. Develop resources for consultants and staff of Implementing Agencies to enhance youth access to community engagement for planning as well as programming and outreach.

Outreach and Research

1. Invest in expanding research through engagement with youth-serving organizations that provide insight about outdoor access for youth who are African American, Indigenous, girls, LGBTQ+, gender nonconforming, disabled, and youth who live in rural areas, and youth experiencing homelessness or poverty.

2. Respond to youth researchers' calls for more inclusive historical accounts and cultural information.

3. Direct efforts of parks ambassadors toward youth-serving organizations, teens, and their families.

4. Collect and analyze youth data in upcoming visitor studies. Invest in research associates and interns to analyze these data. Provide funding for activities with youth-serving organizations for youth to analyze and evaluate the findings.

5. Develop accountability metrics to measure improved access of youth to the regional parks and trails.

Master Planning and Policy

1. Establish and implement a requirement for Implementing Agencies to conduct an equity analysis in their master plans.

2. Direct Legacy funding toward microconsultancies and noncompetitive grants that build community empowerment and support innovative collaboration between Implementing Agencies and communities.

3. Develop resources to connect programming and outreach with master planning processes.

ENDNOTES

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[1] The Metropolitan Council is the regional policy-making body, planning agency, and provider of essential services for the Twin Cities metropolitan region. The Council addresses issues related to regional park policies, plans and grants.

[2] Ibid.