

21st Century Vision Implementation Engagement Analysis

As the county's population increases and becomes more racially, ethnically and linguistically diverse, gaps are increasing between users and the recreational facilities and services that Parks & Recreation offers. To meet changing community needs and interests, Parks & Recreation developed a new vision for its parks and recreation system:

A dynamic, community-centered system that provides opportunities for our ever-changing community to engage with inclusive and welcoming parks and recreation sites and programming.

To help realize this vision, stakeholders were asked to provide input and ideas to help shape budgeting, planning and community engagement efforts over the next decade. Virtual and online engagements ran from January through June 2021. To center equity and elevate the voices of people traditionally underserved, Parks & Recreation partnered with trusted community members and organizations for some of the virtual engagements.

Key questions about vision implementation began with this statement: Imagine it's five years from now and Parks & Recreation is making great progress on this vision. Thinking about yourself, family and friends in Ramsey County parks, facilities and programs...

1. Where are you going, what are you doing and when?
2. What are you seeing? Hearing?
3. Who else is there?
4. What do you love about this? How does it make you feel?
5. What's different from today?
6. How did those changes happen? Who shaped the decisions?
7. What are 2-3 key actions we can take together to get these changes started?

This analysis looks across the responses to all these questions for themes that deepen understanding of the results and how they may be used to shape future parks and recreation planning and decision making. They are organized into two sets:

- What participants expect from successful vision implementation.
- How they expect it to be achieved.

What participants expect from successful vision implementation

Strong and consistent themes emerged from this engagement, echoing and reflecting the priorities embedded in the vision statement.

Welcoming, multicultural spaces and activities used by everyone

Beyond being created with and for the full spectrum of diversity in the county, participants expect parks and recreation spaces, facilities and opportunities to be used, enjoyed and appreciated by everyone.

Looking to a future where the vision is realized, participants clearly desire – and are willing to help create – welcoming natural spaces and recreational opportunities that serve a diverse range of community members. Most contributions were from people identifying as white or Caucasian, however, there was minimal difference between their ideas on this topic and those of people who identified as Black, Asian, Indigenous, Native Hawaiian or Pacific Islander, or other.

Speaking from their own points of reference and lived experiences, participants anticipate – and in many cases expect or insist on – much more diverse, multicultural and welcoming experiences for themselves and all other users of parks, facilities and programs. The most common meaning of diversity referred to race, but their collective use also encompassed ethnicity, home language, age, geographic location, ability and experience or skills.

There were also expectations that staff and administrators reflect the racial and ethnic diversity of Ramsey County users, and thus be better able to serve, plan with and make decisions in an increasingly multicultural environment.

A clear equity thread ran through the contributions. Community members want to see a broad range of parks and recreation opportunities available throughout the county, from the quietest natural spaces to boisterous group activities. They also urged an inclusive approach to the design and use of spaces, facilities and programs so they work for everyone and can more easily adapt to changing needs, priorities and interests, and as people move in and out of neighborhoods over time.

Access and affordability

Accessibility was an explicit priority, noting the importance of all people being able to benefit from nature and a range of programs and recreational options, as well as disability-friendly facility and program design. Access was further expanded to include good transit to all county parks, opportunities to learn new skills and rent equipment, and quality, easy-to-find connections within and between parks. They also noted the importance of parks access year-round or more hours a day, well-maintained trails, and spaces that are safe for everyone, along with associated amenities that make it easier to enjoy the parks, such as bathrooms, drinking water, benches and signage consisting of universal symbols and educational information.

Community members also commonly merged affordability into the notion of access, pushing for free or low-cost ways to learn new recreational skills and rent the required equipment such as for canoeing, kayaking, golf, ice skating, fishing or skiing.

More, better and different recreational and learning opportunities

Connected to other themes, there is real interest in people from a diverse range of cultures, races, languages and histories learning about and appreciating nature, and recreating together. They want access across cultures and experiences through classes and programs so people can explore new activities.

Participants focused on improved, expanded, different and additional recreational facilities, spaces and trails of all kinds. They want them to be multiuse, high quality, fully connected, well-maintained, and available to more people everywhere in the county.

Looking to the future, community members expect welcoming, varied and multicultural learning and recreational opportunities, information and support. These included culturally relevant events and activities, nature programs at all sites multiple times a month, more cultural education events “like Hmong and Indigenous culture,” places to play and ways to learn about more culturally relevant games, displays such as flags from other countries or decorative benches, and staff and programming to teach and support people to learn and participate more.

They also made clear that as newcomers to this country, to Minnesota, or simply to being outdoors and in nature, they want the chance to experience, learn and feel welcome doing new things.

The great outdoors

Throughout the contributions is strong awareness and appreciation of nature and natural areas, environmental stewardship and sustainability.

Community members understand that these parks are meant to be used and can (and must) maintain high environmental standards. Those included no invasive species, clean air and water, no traffic noise, recycling bins, people picking up litter and pet waste, and providing protected areas. That attention to taking care of the environment also extended to good maintenance of parks and trails. There were also clear expectations that the county improve the ecosystem, move quickly to combat climate change, and help lead local changes in policies and practices.

They also connected stewardship and access, noting that people learn to appreciate and protect the natural environment when they have opportunities for more and a wider variety of outdoor experiences. Those may include the chance to forage sustainably, learn about plants from other cultures, and benefit from better integrated natural spaces.

For those experiences in nature, participants embraced the notion of delighted children and adults having fun. Some may be boisterous and loud, while others have fun in quieter and uncrowded spaces without traffic noise – and all enhance their quality of life and understanding of nature.

How participants expect the vision to be achieved

The thousands of ideas about how to achieve the vision varied considerably, while maintaining a strong and sincere commitment to the vision's aspirational outcomes.

Partnerships, collaboration and volunteers

Participants suggested partnerships and connections with local nonprofits, advocacy and activity-specific groups, "friends" groups, K-12 and post-secondary schools and education systems, other counties, cities and state agencies. Examples of purposes and results included:

- Deliver new, expanded and different programming that appeals to the full spectrum of Ramsey County residents.
- Expose more people to nature and outdoor activities to benefit themselves and the community at large.
- Finish and promote trail connections and related opportunities.
- Ensure parks and programs are affordable and accessible.
- Help fund major projects.

Community members also pushed for intentional collaborations with community organizations, groups, partners and community leaders to contribute ideas and for outreach, convening and engagement. And they expect this work to include meaningful, sustained relationship-building with groups "who are not likely to be the dominant voices..."

With the Twin Cities repeatedly leading the nation in rates of volunteerism, it was no surprise to hear strong support for expanding and deepening volunteer and advocacy networks to work with staff in a multitude of ways:

- Improve and extend user experiences.
- Provide education.
- Maintain the parks.
- Offer more opportunities.
- Build relationships.
- Push for more funding and support.
- Acquire more park land.
- Provide information.
- Protect flora and fauna.
- Improve access.
- Make parks and programs more welcoming.

Partnerships, collaborations and volunteers were also expected to strengthen awareness and support for county parks and recreation opportunities, and ensure they are welcoming, multicultural and accessible to all.

Participants noted numerous opportunities for community partnerships to support locally organized events, programs and activities, as well as ongoing and in-depth consultation for parks and recreation planning and programming.

Inclusive activism, engagement and change

Participants know that achieving the vision requires thoughtful planning and high-quality decisions. There was a clear focus on inclusive planning, such as consulting with a diverse range of community members early in planning processes and through to decisions, continually listening and learning, and staying focused on key priorities.

Whether referenced generally as community or specifically as park and recreation users, kids and youth, people of color, multigenerational families, activists, volunteers, and similar, participants overwhelmingly made clear that community *must* shape the decisions. There was an explicit focus on engaging and listening to diverse voices – “the people of the community who live there and need recreational activities to flourish” – making sure they are heard and listened to, and that a variety of cultural and ethnic communities and leaders are welcomed into decision-making spaces.

Participants made explicit connections between community contributions, the work done by professional staff, and decisions made by senior staff and elected officials. Most recognized and respected each group’s roles and responsibilities, with some calling out critical staff knowledge and expertise and a few acknowledging the competing priorities and limited resources that elected officials must juggle. At the same time, they explicitly insisted the vision will be achieved only by intentionally and inclusively involving community in the decisions. They made clear they expected staff – in collaboration with others – to create opportunities and then ensure meaningful and substantive public contributions from the full range of stakeholders.

Community members pointedly noted that they expect Parks & Recreation to listen to what they have to say. They didn’t expect to always get their way, but they insisted that recommendations reflect community priorities, and that elected officials (and senior staff) listen sincerely, learn and change, and overtly prioritize parks and recreation as they make decisions about investments in the county’s future.

Strong planning, standards and expectations

Even as participants in this engagement effort firmly supported Parks & Recreation’s commitment to actively engaging community members in future planning to shape decisions, they understood the importance of professional and technical expertise and the role of staff and elected officials in the final decisions. Participants recognized and respected the talents of Parks & Recreation staff and also expected them to learn from other park systems, research successful models, and combine good data and analysis with community perspectives. Further, they highlighted the importance of “human-centered” and “inclusive” design that will result in welcoming, accessible, varied, multiuse places and spaces that meet changing needs over time.

Community members assume that achieving the vision requires transparent, ongoing and clear communications and engaging community in all stages of planning and decision making. They expected the county to communicate more information about Parks & Recreation opportunities and chances to help shape decisions, to more people throughout the county, in collaboration with others, and using a variety of traditional and innovative mechanisms. They insist that the county be open and transparent; ensure people are informed about both participation process and content; provide information that is relevant and understandable; and share data, ideas, drafts and options.

These perspectives were tied to high standards and expectations, which included holding everyone accountable

for doing the right thing and doing it well. This meant park users, parks and maintenance staff, elected officials, and partners, and applied to those groups being active and wise stewards of the natural environment, responding to community priorities, leveraging partnership and relationships, thinking long term, meeting high/contemporary design standards, and ensuring equitable funding and investments.

Thoughtful, informed decisions

Although there was occasional confusion about the elected officials who govern county parks (a few references to city councils and the state), there was clear direction to listen to all voices (not just dominant voices) and balance economic realities with ecological, cultural, geographic and demographic needs, as well as changes over time.

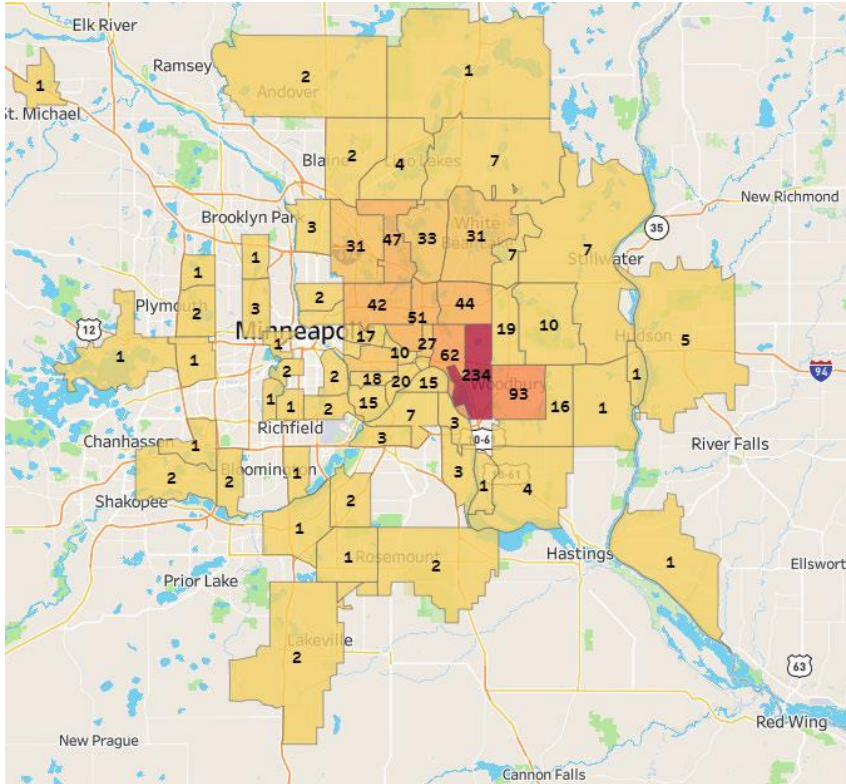
Participants expect the county to deliver transparent planning and decision-making, and widely share how community helped shape decisions. Decisions by senior staff or elected officials should be considered and at the same time be action-oriented. They should be informed by a blend of community perspectives and professional expertise, and anchored in core principles such as inclusion, affordability and accessibility, along with environmental stewardship, recreation and public health.

Decisions should also recognize parks and recreation as a public value in its own right, not in competition with other important investments, uses or services. Participants believe it is possible to achieve the vision when the county expands partnerships and collaborations, inclusively engages and listens to all communities, and builds parks and recreation use, appreciation and support across the entire community.

Demographics

Home ZIP code

Home ZIP codes were required for online respondents and requested for virtual participants. The map below shows the 998 valid ZIP codes provided, except for eight that were well outside the Twin Cities Metro Area.



Race

Responses to this question were optional; 968 responded to the question about race.

