

DFL Senior Caucus 2025

MPLS Park Board Questionnaire

Submit answers to these questions online at:

<https://forms.gle/ZyQ6himURE5fkihx5>

Introduction:

Our population is aging, both in Minneapolis and nationwide. People over 60 now comprise more than 25% of the Minneapolis population, and people over 65 comprise nearly 11%. As part of this significant demographic, the Minneapolis DFL Senior Caucus is concerned about issues that affect the general community as well as issues that pertain specifically to them.

District Sought, or At-Large: Park Board Commissioner at large

Candidate Name: Meg Forney...oldest elected official in the City of Minneapolis

Candidate Email: [meg@megforney.org](mailto:meg@megforney.org)

Candidate Phone: 612-926-7707

Manager: Meg Forney

Manager email: [meg@megforney.org](mailto:meg@megforney.org)

Manager phone: 612-926-7707

1. Based on the mission of the Park Board, what are three to five long- and short-term priorities for the Park Board?

Q1 Answer: The strategic directions of MPRB are on our website: Act boldly for our climate future, Cultivate each community's place and honor traditions in Minneapolis parks, Implement quality youth and intergenerational programs, Care for park assets to meet evolving needs and practices, and Steward our natural resources. However, each new board sets their own strategic directions. My goals for the next term are:

- Making parks more accessible for all Minneapolis families
  - Too many residents of our city have limited access to our natural areas. Our System Equity Investment is focused on developing access in areas that have historically been underserved. Most recently has been the activation along the Mississippi Riverfront, above the falls. Other areas needing connections are at Bassett Creek, Midtown Greenway, Missing Link.
- Improving the environment and community well-being
  - Broaden our tree canopy in areas of concentrated poverty, where there are high health disparities with heat islands and poor air quality.

- Diversifying revenue sources to ease the property tax burden on our residents
- With 81% of our Park Budget dependent on our Minneapolis real estate tax payers, hold the State accountable to statutory obligations for our Operations and Maintenance, levy the Airport Commission for 40+ acres of parkland that the airport sits on, balance the Local Government Aid shared with the City of Minneapolis.

2. Natural areas are important ecologically and for the physical and emotional health of city residents. Sports and other activities are important for all ages, providing healthy activities. How would you balance these important missions?

Q2 Answer: Environmental Stewardship is our largest division and with 15% of the City being parkland and water, natural areas are the highest priority. Yet, integrating our natural spaces with activities for all ages is both challenging and fulfilling. I am proud of our staff's imaginative ways to provide healthy activities for all ages. In my tenure, we have expanded activities for all ages with the addition of our Spark'd Studios, bocce, pickleball and clay courts, trishaw: cycling without age, pump track skills trail, and expanding the walking paths during Covid. Combining the two departments creative minds, environmental stewardship and recreation, has been met with the highest success.

3. Describe how taxation is balanced between the city and the park board and how you would protect the park board's ability to fund its mission.

Q3 Answer: In my tenure, seven different revenue sources have been established to take the burden off our taxpayer. With 81% of our Park budget dependent on real estate taxes, it has been my goal to diversify revenue sources. But the City needs to advocate for our funding as well. During my tenure as President, "educating" the Mayor of the severe underfunding "took hold." Rigorous lobbying in partnership with the City is critical to change this outcome.

The revenue sources added in my tenure are:

- 1) Parkland Dedication Fee, known as the Dibble-Hornstein Fund to honor two legislators who were instrumental in its enactment—generating over \$60 million dollars since 2013 for new parks adjacent to new development.
- 2) Neighborhood Park Plan for 20 years to fund the maintenance, rehab and capital investments in our neighborhood parks.

- 3) Closing the Gap in Youth Funding—additional 2.6 million dollars each year—substantially investing in the most vulnerable young people in the City.
- 4) Carbon Offset Credits program to double the amount of trees we plant each year. These trees store increasing amounts of carbon as they grow, and play a key role in mitigating the effects of climate change on urban residents. Caring for these trees for 25 years, at least, is our obligation.
- 5) Stormwater Utility Charge on our Minneapolis Water Bill, creating sustainable, funding to support the MPRB's management of MPRB-owned stormwater infrastructure on park properties with a Joint Powers Agreement.
- 6) Parkway Pavement Funding improving 55 Miles with Pavement Condition Index equivalent to the City of Minneapolis', requesting the City of Minneapolis increase parkway funding with a Joint Powers Agreement.
- 7) Endowment established in collaboration with the Minneapolis Parks Foundation for three underfunded categories: green spaces, historical sites, and trails

4. What is your vision for the future use of our parkways?

Q4 Answer: Thinking outside the box is critical in all areas. The one way single lanes around Lake of the Isles and Lake Harriet was truly novel. We need to continue to advocate for broader uses, in varied formats, with equitable access. I served on a Citizen Advisory Committee to evaluate inconsistencies in the system. For example, on the east side of Bde Maka Ska there is a stop sign at every road, yet, on the west side there are none from Lake Street to Xerxes—clocking speeds are over 35 miles per hour. This is not only unsafe but limits full access by all.

5. It's easier to get capital funds than maintenance funding. How would you balance preserving existing park assets versus new projects?

Q5 Answer: A first ever use of a racial equity matrix was established in 2017 utilizing community characteristics such as diversity, health, SNAP use, youth and senior population, vehicle access, crimes against people, median household income. Residents who live in poverty or other disadvantaged areas often have less access to a variety of open space and recreation options and are more likely to experience various chronic health problems, some of which are impacted by their physical environment. In addition, communities of color and areas of concentrated poverty often experience a lack of public and private investment relative to other areas. In building a more equitable park system, it is important for the MPRB to target investment of public funds into parks in racially diverse and low-income neighborhoods. 33 parks are in racially concentrated areas of poverty.

In 2017, I was a lead commissioner in securing the funding for our Neighborhood Park Plan for 20 Years (NPP20), which was the first ever agency to utilize an equity-based criteria matrix. This initiative confirmed critical funding needs for rehabilitation of our neighborhood parks and recreation centers. In 2017, we expanded our work force to accelerate maintenance cycles and undertake a higher volume of rehab in our neighborhood parks (regional parks are not a part of this funding—those funds come via the Met Council).

We are underfunded at the State level in the Operations and Maintenance fund with less than 9% allocated and 40% is required by statute. Local Government Aid funding has been stagnant for over a decade.

Our System Equity Investment strategy is based on the fact that there are still areas of the city that are under-parked with limited access to our natural resources and park amenities. Safety and security increase when there is activation and increased usage of parks.

6. Will you make clean water a priority? What must be done to stop lake eutrophication and keep our creeks and the river clean?

Q6 Answer: The City and MPRB are co-permittees of a NPDES (National Pollutant Discharge Elimination System) stormwater permit via the EPA. Enacted by the current Board of Commissioners, beginning January, 2024, each city water bill has a Stormwater Park Board Fee collected to regulate discharges of pollutants from the urbanization of stormwater runoff into surface waters and then to implement approved stormwater management activities. This joint permit has been held since 2001 but the primary effort was only regarding conveyance of stormwater by the City, as well as an annual report regarding monitoring the flow through storm sewer pipes and best management practices such as stormwater ponds, grit-chambers, that was done by MPRB through automated samplers to collect samples for laboratory analysis. With the City's inaction, the Park Board is now taking action to collect funds to, first, map where are the pipes and where do they flow and to then implement approved stormwater management such as treatment of wetlands and ponds, by percolating stormwater through natural filters so pollutants/sediment can settle out before reaching a water body.

7. What can the Park Board do to maintain existing tree canopy and increase the total canopy, alone and in partnership with the City, County and Met Council?

Q7 Answer: With the ash tree levy expiring and all public ash removed due to Emerald Ash Bore devastation, my colleague Commissioner Musich and I have embarked on numerous strategies to fund increasing our tree canopy. Our first endeavor was to be paid for the utilization of park property by the Metropolitan Airport Commission. MPRB owns over 40 acres there and, yet, are not paid in any way for the usage. We proposed a “fee” on each passenger coming in or out of the airport and each poundage the same—\$1 or even one penny each. We will continue to “lobby” for some compensation.

Another strategy is to sell carbon offset credits for trees. With our ash tree levy, we were required to plant trees. That having expired, this program is designed to sell carbon credits for trees that are added to the urban tree canopy in Minneapolis. This is known as additionality. The carbon credits are sold to companies that have publicly pledged to reduce their carbon emissions. And a third party verifies the planting of each tree. MPRB, the owner of the trees, will use funds from the sale of those credits exclusively to plant new trees and replace trees that die, prioritizing the city’s major heat islands as well as adding to the tree canopy across environmentally disadvantaged parts of the city. This program has doubled the amount of trees planted in a single year.

Frankly, two barriers to widening our tree canopy is stump grinding and watering new trees in areas with heat islands, health disparities, diminished air quality. The first is a hazardous job needing specialized equipment and difficult to do in urban areas due to street limitations. The simple phrase *Adopt A Tree* needs stewards like the many newly established Safety Walk groups, especially in areas economically challenged.

8. Have you served as a board member in any organization previously? How do you balance a board member’s oversight role and community advocacy versus letting professional staff manage the organization?

Q8 Answer: I have served on numerous boards including People for Parks as chair, Committee on Urban Environment chair, original board member of the Midtown Greenway Coalition, Above the Falls Citizen Advisory Committee chair, League of Women Voters development chair, East and West Calhoun neighborhood boards in leadership positions, Lake Harriet Bandstand Fundraising chair, SWLRT community appointee. This extensive engagement with community has given me a strong footing in oversight for our community’s advocacy and balance with any professional park staff oversight. The role of a commissioner is to set policy

through their direction and vision and measure performance of the execution by our professional staff and not to supervise their operations.

9. Should the Park Board's Environmental Stewardship Department be included in all stages of planning?

Q9 Answer: Indeed it should and I have seen each department get out of its "silo" and doing more collaborative work under this Superintendent's tenure. It shows most in our interactive maps such as for drinking fountains, beaches, pools, ice rinks, and snow removal. Having transparent, readily accessible information for staff as well as the public has "unveiled" the "divisions," particularly with environmental stewardship operations and planning implementation. Our administrative staff meet twice weekly to further engage the best inter-departmental operations and execution. Specifically, we have internal stakeholder meetings when there is a new project and Environmental Stewardship provides a staff on that committee.

10. Some residents complain that the MPRB moves park directors too often. How will you balance the community's wishes with promotional opportunities for recreational staff?

Q10 Answer: The majority of staffing changes are made by staff themselves, letting their supervisors know of their willingness and desire to move up or for new challenges. It is equally important to tell the community when we move someone and let them know the person's background and why they will be great for their community. There have been times when it is best for the park board, community and the staff to have a change in staff at a site to spark new creativity into the community. We let the community know of the change, but we do not involve them in the decision making.