

MPLS Park Board Questionnaire

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

At-Large

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

I think a top long-term priority for the Park Board, and every governing body in the world, is climate action. It is the one issue that encompasses everything we state in our mission. It's the one issue that, if unresolved, will negate efforts we make towards our other priorities. For me, climate action means that we seek out initiatives that reduce carbon, that when we have a tough vote, we vote for the option that is better for the climate. It has been a guiding principle of mine over my first term.

Continuing our indigenous reconciliation/action (name is still a work in progress) plan is another clear priority when you consider our mission. The goal of this plan is to take on what is perhaps our institution's foundational inequity. It is about truly grappling with the fact that our wonderful parks are rooted in the seizure and industrial transformation of Dakota land. We are starting some great initiatives, like renaming problematic names or creating exciting partnerships like Owamniyomni Okhodayapi, but where this plan takes us is still up in the air. I think it's very important, and I'm excited to continue this work.

Improving the quality of our natural environment is a constant priority. In particular increasing greenspace, improving tree coverage, and improving water quality. For the first, we have made efforts in our guiding plans to increase green space where possible. This is on top of our efforts to design parks that center green space when we acquire new land, mostly along the Mississippi. For instance, at the new Graco park I voted with my colleagues to rewild Hall's island. We have successfully increased our tree canopy coverage in recent years, but we still have further to go, finding new funding sources is critical here.

Lastly, I think we need to find a way to eliminate all barriers for youth recreation, including the cost barrier. In my work at the legislature, I've seen how effective universal programming like the free school meals law is. We have started a new pricing program, and it seems to be on the right track, but I don't think we can be satisfied until we know every single kid in our city who wants to use our recreation services. This is likely a longer-term priority.

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?

I think the MPRB has done a pretty good job of this so far, it's one of the reasons we are the #1 system in the nation. I think the epitome of our balanced ethos, and how I plan to maintain this balance, is in our action on Hiawatha. This was a very clear situation where our recreation needs were in direct conflict with ecological needs. I was happy to support the strong compromise option which maintains significant recreation opportunities – in some ways increasing it – while creating an ecological future that brings us closer into harmony with nature. We will have cleaner water, more green space, more refuge for wildlife, and still have plenty of joyous human activity.

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.

If I'm being a bit honest, there doesn't seem to be a true balance. We are highly reliant on the city, and moreso, the whims of the mayor. In recent years this has been a bit of a struggle. If it weren't for our parks being so incredibly popular – we have done polling that shows a majority of residents are willing to pay more for our parks – we would see our system neglected. I recognize Minneapolis is in a very tough situation right now, covid changed everything, and it'll take time for our city to evolve. That said, the value of our independence is in these hard times. As a commissioner I will use this independence to safekeep this wonderful system and ensure that we maintain a vibrant and thriving park system, no matter the future turmoil our city may face.

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

One of the main reasons I ran in 2021 is because I was enamored with the Park Board's open parkways initiative during covid. Pedestrianized streets/promenades are a key feature of the many great cities I've visited in my life. Seeing that recreated in Minneapolis was revelatory. I ran on increasing open parkways and I found many of our neighbors shared my vision of that future. The benefits of reduced vehicle traffic are very real and very important; reduced carbon emissions, reduced water pollution, reduced wear on our roads, reduced noise pollution, increased safety, increased accessibility. The benefits of more pedestrian space are also very real; increased physical activity, better accessibility, improved social connections, improved place making/creating a place worth visiting and remembering. All of these benefits help us create a park system that is more people centered, climate friendly and forward looking.

Now, a key theme in my first term as a commissioner, and a key theme in my future term should I be reelected, is balance. There will always be a place for our parkways to serve in their current role. While I believe a large part of creating a city where its residents can age in place means creating spaces where it's preferable to walk/roll/stroll and use transit, I recognise that we aren't completely there yet. But, we can get there, and should try. Cities that are truly walkable/pedestrian friendly encourage active habits so we can continue them later into our lives. These cities also create infrastructure where you can get around no matter your ability or reliance on mobility devices. Car centrality means we become less mobile as we age at accelerated rates, and due to the infrastructure, more isolated. So I understand completely how many of my constituents are concerned when I talk about pedestrianized parkways. We need to evolve, but we can't leave anyone behind.

My vision for our parkways is to recapture some of the covid-era pedestrianization magic in certain sections, at certain times of day and times of week so we can learn what works and what doesn't. We can optimize the positive benefits, and minimize the negatives. We can have predictable times so that people don't have headaches around the pedestrianization. We can study and learn about what it means to have access to our parks, how much this inhibits access (or doesn't) and what we can do to alleviate that. There is a lot of merit to the idea of pedestrianizing our parkways, and if we approach it correctly, I know that it can benefit every single one of our residents, no matter who they are.

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

This is a very poignant question. The way I have tried to balance this is by focusing my efforts as the chair of the intergovernmental committee on improving our lobbying efforts to receive state funding for regional park maintenance. The fact is that we can not maintain our current assets alone, and there are state laws which mandate we receive more state funding than we currently do. It's imperative that we get our fair share so we can maintain what we have without cutting critical services. Second, the majority of our bonding projects are to replace assets that have reached the end of their lifespan, and where further maintenance is actually more costly than creating something new. The one bonding project we have that is actively creating a new asset is our efforts to complete the grand rounds missing link. This is a unique new asset that completes a decades long vision, those are the types of new projects I will prioritize.

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

I will and I have. I voted with my colleagues to levy a small fee to begin the overhaul of our stormwater systems, this will help us better clean our water bodies. If we can create a modern system we can avoid sending the dangerous phosphates from plant debris and fertilizers from entering our most vulnerable lakes. I already mentioned the Hiawatha plan, but it is perhaps the single biggest step the Park Board has taken to improve water quality in recent years. I've fought for reduced asphalt so we have less runoff and less salt go into our lakes. I've advocated for more rain gardens/infiltration systems in all new park plans to further help in that regard. I've also supported a new bonding project that would re-naturalize large portions of Minnehaha Creek; this would reduce soil erosion and eutrophication and create stronger habitats for aquatic species. Finally, I voted to increase our partnerships with the Minnehaha Watershed District and Friends of Minnehaha Creek. This is an exciting new endeavor that is set to transform our precious watershed.

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?

This is a tough question, as there is no obvious great answer to increase our canopy. I will say that our current budget fully maintains our canopy, so we are not and will not take any steps back. But, we need new funding sources to fill the gaps we have. Unfortunately, I don't think our current carbon credit initiative is the right path forward. I have serious concerns that it is not sufficiently additional and is largely greenwashing; enabling large corporations to pollute without committing to greenhouse reduction. On top of that, it has not proven to raise a significant amount of funds.

I think we need to look for new ways to generate revenue for carbon sequestration programs like tree planting. I think New York City's smashing success with congestion pricing is one potential opportunity. We could easily charge a small fee for folks who commute through Minneapolis during peak rush hour times. Not only would this reduce pollution that our residents have to breathe, it would provide a stable source of income for us to pursue a number of carbon sequestration efforts. We could also look at charging fees for flights that come through MSP. I know this was looked at briefly and the Metropolitan Airport Commission was not too receptive. But if we unite with our intergovernmental partners I think we could make something happen. If we just added a dollar to each flight to and from MSP we could solve this problem for as long as commercial flights are a common mode of transportation.

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?

Before my first term I served on the Community Environmental Advisory Committee in Minneapolis. This balance is difficult and I've found that many of us on the board will go back and forth on this if we particularly identify with one issue or another. What I have found is that our staff are incredibly insightful, dedicated, and have great expertise when it comes to making a thriving park system. Throughout our history park commissioners have come and gone, but the ethos we have built with our staff has stayed, and that has proven valuable. But, no organization is infallible and there are times when it's clear that the community's needs are not being met. Most recently this was revealed with our staff driven effort to centralize sports registration. The merits of this from a staff time and resource allocation perspective was obvious, but it became very clear, very quickly, that staff had overlooked, or discounted, the needs of community teams that register together. This led to an eruption in community action where the community clearly laid out their needs and how our new system would disenfranchise them. I along with a few other commissioners sympathized with this, and a couple in particular (Menz and Rucker,) worked with and persuaded staff to amend this reform to keep a space for these teams.

Ultimately a lot of these staff/community decisions come to a gut check, where you rely on a mixture of your past experience, park board stated goals and values, staff input, and community input to chart what you think is the best way forward. It's why this job is so difficult at times. We deal with nuance and gray areas and there are times where you might not be around to see if you were ultimately correct or not. The main thing is to not be afraid to do what you think is right. There are times when I've made the community angry, there are times when I've made staff angry. I just try to take it all in stride and deal with the next issue as objectively as any human really can.

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

I'd be happy to learn more about this topic as it's not something that has been brought up to me before. However, on the face of it I would say no. We have clear environmental goals and values and our planning department has done a good job of implementing those. For instance, the new Graco Park development is our greenest development yet and a lot of the green features came from the planning department. To mandate a new department be involved in all planning would bog down an already slow process and create hundreds of additional work hours that could lead to the need for more FTEs, something we just don't have the budget for. If our plans were consistently harmful to the environment or failed to be ecologically ambitious enough I might consider this. But at this point I haven't seen evidence to that. But, as I said at the start, I would be happy to learn more about the other side of the coin on this one.

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?

Something that has been made clear to me in my conversation with MPRB workers is that many of our workers are fairly dissatisfied with their work environment. So I'm very sensitive to their needs at the moment. A big part of worker satisfaction is the potential for advancement, so that's not something I'm willing to limit. However, we could increase the compensation and benefits of park directors so more of our staff will be satisfied with keeping that position for longer. We also need to work on repairing relationships after the strike which has brought trust to new lows. If we can create an environment where every park director feels heard and valued we will lose fewer to attrition and benefit the community. This is much easier said than done though, commissioners and management staff have a lot of work to do to make things better.

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