

# 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?

The MPRB's mission, vision, and values inform the Parks for All Comprehensive Plan and the Strategic Directions and Performance Goals. The adopted budget priorities are created within the context of the Comprehensive Plan and the Strategic Directions and Performance Goals. The framework for budget allocations of any organization tangibly shows its moral and material priorities, so I think the Strategic Directions are the right place to start. The following are the 5 Strategic Directions and what they mean to me as organizational priorities.

-Act boldly for our climate future

To me, this means reducing MPRB's carbon footprint and ensuring that 100 percent of MPRB's electricity comes from renewable sources.

-Cultivate each community's place and honor cultural traditions in Minneapolis parks

To me, this means continuing Indigenous Acknowledgement and Reconciliation work with a full-time Indigenous Parks Liaison position to support the Indigenous Parks Council. It also includes a study of treaty rights to ensure MPRB is honoring land stewardship promises that predate MPRB.

-Implement quality youth and intergenerational programs

To me, this means measuring program capacity and enrollment, closing the youth investment gap, and ensuring that blanket Sunday closures of recreation centers around the city are explicitly tailored to preserve Sunday programs that serve communities with higher needs or are historically underserved.

-Care for park assets to meet evolving needs and practices

To me, this means that we should increase the percentage of assets that are within their expected lifespan while balancing the durability of existing park services and program delivery.

-Steward our natural resources

To me, this means ensuring that the MPRB's well-intended stewardship policies don't have unintended negative impacts on low-income and BIPOC communities, like we've recently seen with MPRB's efforts to mitigate EAB and placing regressive taxes and assessments on low-income homeowners to remove ash trees.

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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?

A thoughtful balance must be struck between ecological conservation and athletic fields, which are not the best environmental use of space, but are still necessary for the healthy development of youth.

To a large degree, the missions of ecological conservation and dedicated spaces for sports and structured activities have a natural balance through geographic and seasonal constraints. It is critically important to implement strong conservation methods along the many miles of waterfront along the Mississippi River, Minnehaha Creek, and our numerous lakes. These more linear waterfronts are not suitable for fields, diamonds, and playgrounds. Similarly, much of our urban tree canopy is along linear parkways and boulevards that are simply not shaped for more polygonal land uses like softball and skateparks. Seasonality is another important factor in balancing ecology and sports. The winter pond hockey tournaments on Lake Nokomis, for example, do not detract from water quality and waterfront goals. More importantly, families with young children often cite a lack of recreation opportunities during our long winter seasons as a major difficulty of raising a family here. Swimming opportunities at Phillips Aquatic Center, figure skating and hockey at Parade Ice Garden, and basketball at many of our indoor recreation centers, even if expanded, occupy a relatively small footprint and are not in conflict with prairie restoration, bird sanctuaries, and invasive species removal.

We currently invest too little and too slowly in recreation programs in the field in order to fund growing administrative and planning functions. While administrative and planning functions are obviously a critical part of overall program delivery, this moment requires a rebalancing of priorities. Youth in our city are in crisis, and that crisis requires a bold redeployment of resources into youth recreation, athletics, and positive out-of-school time activities. For example, Rec Plus, pre-school childcare, and adaptive recreation programs for people with disabilities (like the Adaptive Swim lessons I piloted at MPRB in 2019). In a budget of \$155 million, I believe the perceived dichotomy between ecological work and investing in our youth is only one facet of the rebalancing required to successfully make Minneapolis a destination city for young families in a sustainable way. With over 7,000 acres under management, MPRB recreation goals rarely need to be in direct conflict with ecological goals. Each plays an important part in improving the physical and emotional health of Minneapolis residents.

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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.

Allowable property tax levies for MPRB are set alongside the maximum allowable levies for the City of Minneapolis by the Board of Estimates and Taxation (BET), and account for approximately 17.5% of the total allowable 2025 levy. This year, MPRB had requested a higher increase than was approved, and fully utilized the allowable amount for their 2025-2026 budget.

We are facing a looming crisis of local government funding, largely due to overreliance on property taxes, and MPRB can't solve this problem alone. On the local level, that means collaboration with the City Council, Mayor, and BET to pursue a diversified revenue strategy that ensures the maintenance of our park system, our community services, and the quality of life for our park staff. On the state level, that means advocating for expansion of local taxing authority for the City of Minneapolis, and expansion of the state income tax on higher-income individuals to stabilize the state budget and open the potential to increase Local Government Aid. We need to pursue a sustainable path forward that doesn't leave working families and retirees alone to shoulder the burden, and avoids the urge to commodify public spaces through privatization and greenwashing schemes.

The BET is often overlooked as an important leg on the stool of Minneapolis government, and the MPRB President has one of the six important seats on the BET. In recent years, especially since the elimination of the Library Board's seat, the MPRB seat on the BET has had the potential to be critically important in passing a sustainable levy that meets the goals of residents and the city. At times, the park board's representatives on the BET have not taken active leadership within this important body. That leaves the Park Board flat-footed in our ability to advocate and negotiate for park needs. If elected, I plan to do everything I can to ensure that the BET remains an important convening place for the city council, park board, mayor, and our community representatives to come together to discuss our common needs.

I feel compelled to add that we have one of, if not the, top municipal park system in the country, while our public school system is emerging from years of lower enrollment and budgetary struggles. Minneapolis families with children who attend both public schools and park programs are right to be perplexed when there is such a disjunction between the health of local government agencies that are as closely linked as MPS and MPRB. I believe MPRB has a role to play in making Minneapolis an excellent place to raise a family. MPRB can and should strengthen and expand youth programs like Rec Plus and preschool childcare options. Investing in youth programs and being a strong partner with MPS will help MPS become a destination district for attracting and retaining young families. The downstream economic impact of this will likely help stabilize the tax base and increase local economic activity. This would be the ideal economic environment to ensure that we can continue to fund MPRB's mission.

At the end of the day, I believe that public assets are most likely to serve the public interest when they are publicly funded. While I'll encourage philanthropy in the parks, millionaires and wealthier property owners shouldn't get to pick and choose what park resources they fund and what they don't. This type of thinking is what has led, in part, to years of imbalanced investments in parks that the park board is trying to address now. Funding public assets through private capital within endowment funds or from market speculation may look attractive, pragmatic, and lucrative on the ledger sheet, but we are seeing increasingly harmful results

around the country from this urge to protect public assets with outside money that has less accountability to democratic controls.

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

Right now, we are at a decade's low point of total crime in Minneapolis, but vehicular homicide, reckless driving, and speeding are a serious problem on all roads here, including parkways.

There are proven tools to promote safer use of all roads through improvements in their design. I advocate for these traffic calming measures on parkways, such as bumpouts, speed bumps, or roundabouts. It is apparent that many cars dangerously exceed the 20 mph speed limit on parkways, actively endangering park users and creating a fatal barrier to park access. My vision for our parkways is not as a place for cars going 35mph, detoured from their highway commute. Instead, I would like our parkways to be routes that prioritize the healthiest modes of transportation for residents and our environment. This includes walking, biking, and busing.

For years, MPRB has rejected efforts to have buses on parkways. Keeping buses off the parkways makes our parks less accessible for community members who rely on mass transit. Some have expressed concerns that the infrastructure of parkways is not currently sufficient to allow buses. I'll work with the Met Council and MPRB planning staff to find solutions to include parkways on bus routes. This will reduce traffic, make parks more accessible, and create safer environments for pedestrians and bikers.

All of us have a duty to play our part in Minnesota's commitment to a 20% reduction in vehicle miles traveled (VMT) by 2050. I am excited to help our city and state reach this goal through the transparent democratic process of long-term planning and cooperation with partner agencies.

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

The NPP20 plan was a grand compromise between the City and the Park Board to help address deferred maintenance. At the time, the MPRB considered pursuing a public referendum for funding maintenance needs. In the interest of compromise, the Park Board had to leave some of its needs on the table. That agreement is set to expire in approximately 10 years, and I would like to revisit this. The Trust for Public Land's polling indicated a high likelihood of a maintenance referendum passing. I still believe this to be true. In 2024, we saw a 10-year tech levy pass for Minneapolis Public Schools. This tech levy not only indicates political will for such a park maintenance levy, but the MPS tech levy will sunset serendipitously at the expiration of NPP20 so that a deferred maintenance levy would not overlap with this other tax burden.

Along with philanthropic donations, I was glad to see MPRB reallocate \$10.3 million in 2024 from the Capital Improvement Program funds to the North Commons Park Improvement Project. I was deeply involved in North Commons Water Park aquatic programs from 2018-2021 and know that the series of repairs to the waterpark over recent years have not been durable enough to endure ground shifts and have ultimately resulted in waterpark closures and disruption to operations. I know not all upkeep, maintenance, and asset preservation work can be funded by this kind of reallocation from the Capital Improvement Program fund or philanthropy, but I am in favor of exploring when and how we can do reallocations like this to fund valuable existing park resources with existing funds, especially in neighborhoods that have historically seen under-investment.

I think some maintenance funds could be cultivated through strategic expansion in vendor contracts on park property. Enterprises like Sea Salt and Painted Turtle are popular and successful revenue sources, and I think we can get creative by engaging with food trucks and ice cream trucks to have a formal relationship with MPRB for mutual benefit. Initiatives like "Parks On Tap in Philadelphia could serve us here in Minneapolis as well. It is also common for ice cream trucks, for example, to sell ice cream on park property at beaches and other summer destinations. This occurs outside of the approved set of vendor relationships, but trying to stop all ice cream trucks from selling cool treats to children in the summer is simply not a practicable or popular solution. Therefore, I would support a more clear and robust vendor relationship that helps finance the maintenance of popular park destinations.

As mentioned above, I advocate for the expansion of local taxing authority for the City of Minneapolis. I recognize that there does not appear to be a silver bullet to resolve the tension between capital funds and maintenance funds, but I am interested in exploring creative options that can keep our park assets accountable and working for the people of Minneapolis.

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

My experience in MPRB Aquatics programs on our lakes, including swim lessons, log rolling, sailing, and open swim club, has brought water quality issues close to my heart. A year before the Covid-19 pandemic, I learned how to do extensive contact tracing among Aquatics staff at Lake Nokomis to identify possible exposure to an E. coli outbreak. Acute outbreaks like this, and the more systemic de-oxygenation caused by runoff and excessive phosphorus (leading to algae blooms), pose a serious threat to both aquatic wildlife and treasured recreational opportunities here in the city of lakes.

I have seen the MPRB Open Swim Club explode in participants over the years, and I see potential in engaging this group of over 1,300 swimmers as well as the sailing community with education and connection to the Adopt-a-Drain program, for example. I think many users of our public waters want to do their part in our collective efforts to protect our lakes and would want to help keep our waterways clean by adopting a storm drain and cleaning it regularly.

Beyond individual volunteer opportunities, MPRB should continue to be a stronger intergovernmental partner in regional water quality efforts. I will advocate for continued strategic reduction in fertilizers and winter road salt usage. I will also support the conservation efforts of the Minnehaha Creek Watershed District and advocate for a zero-waste vision in our parks. The chain of lakes is one of the city's biggest stormwater treatment tools. Pesticides used in parks and private homes all end up in the rivers and lakes, so I would support a pesticide ban along the chain of lakes.

Most of this city was once a wetland, and a balance must be struck between developed land use and habitat restoration. The debate around the Hiawatha golf course is an example of where recreation and ecological goals have experienced conflict. Balancing these important missions should, and I believe has been, explored through the democratic process. I will resist the urge to recreate the entire Hiawatha golf course debate on this questionnaire, but I believe the long-term plan for a 9-hole golf course goes a long way to meet the needs and interests of diverse stakeholders. The seemingly “messy” democratic process that led to the long-term plan has taken years of community engagement and thoughtful study by engineers, historians, community leaders, and other experts. To be transparent, I am of many minds on this issue, but I tend to be moved by the costly environmental damage that has been, and is being, done to Lake Hiawatha. The democratic process, however, is what is most sacred to me. Like many of us, I have learned so much through the debates on this issue and the best way to navigate conflicts like this are to learn, engage, and dialogue, so that all parties can move forward with fuller contexts, more compassion for our neighbors and ancestors, and more open hearts with the understanding that we all share the common intent to improve the health and wellbeing of our community.

My experience fighting pollution in East Phillips opened my eyes to the arsenic triangle, where there is a significant amount of arsenic in the groundwater. I envision an MPRB that is a strong voice to prevent these kinds of environmental harms from ever happening again. The health of our water table is connected to everything that we do here in the city of lakes, and it is a priority for me to prevent harm and improve water quality. The conservation group “American Rivers” recently named the Mississippi River #1 on their list of most endangered rivers in 2025. Our position as the northernmost major city along the Mississippi means



that the downstream impacts of our commitment to water quality will be felt not only regionally but also nationally.

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## 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?

I advocate that we increase the survivability of newly planted trees by watering them for 3 years after planting. Previously, MPRB would water newly planted trees for 3 years, which is an industry best practice. In recent years, however, MPRB has only watered newly planted trees for 1 year, which has resulted in lower survivability rates. Improving the survival rate of newly planted trees not only helps grow our urban tree canopy but is also a more efficient use of labor than having staff plant more and more trees that are doomed to have lower survival rates.

Some MPRB candidates will argue that MPRB should expand its urban tree canopy by relying on the speculative carbon offset credit market. MPRB's Carbon Pricing Program was piloted in 2022 and allows companies to buy offset credits based on the carbon sequestering power of trees. Industry best practice is that only additional trees being planted should be eligible for carbon offset credits. No such criteria exist for MPRB's Carbon Pricing Program, so the monetization of our trees is based on the assumption that we would be planting zero trees without the carbon credit market. While I find this to be a dubious assumption, I am even more skeptical of providing a mechanism that enables the continued reckless emission of carbon by some of the purchasing companies. Centerpoint Energy, Nordson, Xcel Energy, and others greenwash their image by buying these carbon credits. Winslow Capital, an investment advisor and large buyer of these credits, provides these credits to its investment partners. I would like more transparent public buy-in before we enable the practices of some of these companies.

Green Cities Accord brokers public-private partnerships for these sales and gets a 10% cut of each sale. City Forest Credits is the third-party certifier of these credits and is incentivized with \$1,500 application fees for purchasers and \$4 for each credit. Sophisticated analyses of over half a million dollars in co-benefits and quantified ecosystem services from last year's Carbon Pricing Program look attractive. But my skepticism continued to increase last summer when MPRB's Liuna 363 foresters and arborists (the ones who plant, prune, water, and maintain the trees) were being told that there just weren't enough funds for them to have a wage that keeps up with inflation. MPRB's Carbon Pricing Program is riddled with moral hazards and dubious assumptions, and bypasses the workers who are actually creating the value in this new carbon offset market.

I am open to a more direct sponsorship program where entities can sponsor a tree and simply pay a set amount that goes toward urban tree care. I also believe that the sophisticated quantification of ecosystem benefits from the carbon sequestration of our mature tree canopy should be used while lobbying for increased state aid. Most importantly, I understand that the stability and growth of our tree canopy starts with healthy and stable workers in arboriculture, and that our tree canopy will always be more valuable to the people who live, work, and love in Minneapolis than a speculative market could quantify.

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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?

I was elected to serve on the Steering Committee of Twin Cities DSA in 2023 and am proud of the impact I had in scaling up the organization during a period of growing political power and membership. This was not a traditional organizational board, however, and the horizontal structure of DSA is much different from the hierarchy within MPRB. But any organization, from DSA to MPRB, benefits when board members and leadership have strong communication and connectivity to frontline organizational stakeholders from the ground up.

I have experience implementing aquatics programs throughout the city, scheduling hundreds of seasonal MPRB staff, operating a Zamboni, and working the front desk at recreation centers and water parks. I organized MPRB's first lifeguard union in 2021, and I continue to recreate in our parks on a daily basis. I believe I am coming into this role with strong frontline experience and community connections. My career in grant management has familiarized me with government and philanthropic funding mechanisms and organizational structures from nonprofits to the University of Minnesota School of Public Health.

I also have experience practicing collaborative democratic processes in political advocacy coalitions. At the end of the day, MPRB is a democratic government agency, and the role of commissioners is to manifest the public will. None of us can do democracy alone, and the valuable skills and perspectives of professional staff are a key piece of sound stewardship. However, staff expertise alone is not equivalent to a democratic process. I believe expecting professional staff to make political decisions is an undue burden on those staff members, creating opacity and uncertainty between staff and community members. There is always a balance that must be struck between Park Board commissioners' micro-managing programs versus a hands-off approach to governance. There are some areas where I have noticed that reliance on professional staff has put us out of balance. During the Liuna 363 strike last summer, for example, it was apparent that some very political choices were being made at the bargaining table without the knowledge or understanding of most of the democratically elected board. This caused uncertainty and damaged relations with community members, staff, and intergovernmental partners.

There are incredibly smart and capable professional staff at MPRB whose role in the stewardship of our public assets is invaluable. But when it comes to practicing democracy and political decisions that are made, the buck stops with Park Board Commissioners. And it is the role of elected commissioners to put all our staff in a position for success within the wider context of the democratic and political will of the people in Minneapolis.

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

Proper care and maintenance of our parks, both as a natural resource and an integral part of our city's built infrastructure, are central to the mission of the MPRB. The Environmental Stewardship Department has expertise in this, but is currently more of an asset management department. I think that we should ensure that we have sustainability priorities built into our conceptual design, facility design, and program design decisions, regardless of what department those staff are housed in. I believe there is room for operations and maintenance experts within the environmental stewardship department to be more involved in planning. It is those staff who provide the day-to-day care of new amenities. Webber Natural Swimming Pool is an example of maintenance staff not having sufficient involvement in the design of the pool. It's a world-class amenity, but it is difficult to operate and has had growing pains as the regeneration pond vegetation matures and maintenance staff bridge gaps in understanding with Planning, Environmental Stewardship, and Aquatics staff.

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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?

There is a high turnover of frontline staff, especially part-time and/or seasonal staff, while upper management staff experience high retention rates. I think residents would like for there to be staff members who they know and recognize working at their Rec Center long-term. These kinds of community relationships can include Park Directors, but could be Childcare Specialists, Recreation Specialists, a Head Lifeguard, etc. I know there is a Forester, for example, who is so recognized in the community where he works that neighbors will come over and greet him by name because their relationship has grown over decades. I think this is at least a part of what many community members are hoping for. I think park worker stability is community stability. Public-facing jobs at MPRB should be careers where public servants can thrive over the course of their lives. Too many of these public-facing jobs do not have pay and benefits that allow someone to live decently in the city where they work. Many youth who transition from program participants to seasonal staff members will quickly transition away from MPRB because it is not a stable job.

Top-heavy staff investment places an undue burden on Directors to be the only ones retained long enough to build institutional knowledge and relationships that I believe community members yearn for. Moving recreation center directors every 3-4 years does give them a more diverse experience that prepares them to advance at MPRB or elsewhere. There is value in this, and I am reluctant to entertain any barrier to career advancement. Perhaps instead of shuffling directors around, a more transparent career path progression could be developed such that directors retain certain duties in a community along the arc of their career path.

Overall, I am in favor of investing in MPRB staff in a more equitable way, so that younger frontline staff and middle management can feel like they and their families can thrive while doing public service. This would allow them to stay and build those valuable relationships with community members for the long haul.

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# Google Forms