

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

District 3

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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 Park Board's mission, stated simply, is to protect parkland for future generations for a variety of uses, and that mission encompasses people, plants and wildlife. I take that mission seriously and my short-term and long-term priorities are as follows:

-Protect and activate green spaces by building wildlife and pollinator corridors in the Southside Green Zone, which is wholly located in District 3. This initiative can be co-led by the multigenerational community groups already doing the work on private property. This is an unfulfilled mandate from the 2023 Minneapolis Climate Equity Plan and the Park Board must lead on it. Nature isn't "out there" somewhere in a forest hours away. It's right here in the city, along with endangered pollinator species and plant life, and we are obligated to sustain them because they are integral to having a thriving city, and thriving parks. These initiatives also are low-cost to implement and knit people together in a way few other activities can. I personally have helped build pollinator habitat on an empty lot in Whittier, and have seen friendships grow between the 7 year-olds and the 70 year-olds who show up every week.

-Expand community engagement on park plans to include door-knocking, real-time interpretative services, and flexible arrangements so more people (especially those with kids or caretaking responsibilities) can participate. I also want nearby educators, youth coordinators, religious institutions and businesses involved. While the Park Board has good community engagement, it can be improved, and if we want to talk about preserving and protecting parks for future generations, we need to make sure all voices are heard, from all ages and all backgrounds. In particular I have not seen enough families and immigrant voices in the mix, even though District 3 is home to the largest Somali and Latino populations in the city.

-Concentrate effort on outdoor recreation (especially sports) for children. I've lost track of the number of people who have told me their kids aren't playing outside enough. Physical movement is critical for everyone, and especially young kids, who need a basis for long-term mental and physical health. I also believe team sports encourage collaboration and create long-lasting friendships and mentorship opportunities with adults in the community, but parents in my community have told me of blockers to getting their kids enrolled in sports. These small things knit communities together and yet it seems the parks system is losing ground on this issue. I believe close examination is needed to develop solutions to getting kids outside, and MPRB has a lead role to play.

-Diversify the Park Board's funding for the long-term. The federal funding cuts we are seeing will quickly erode assistance for local governments, and I don't think the Park Board can fully rely on the City or the State. The Park Board also needs to tread lightly on its tax levy requests given the burden it's creating on residents, especially older people on fixed incomes. The Park Board has taken good first steps to improve the situation (namely through the new parks endowment through the Minneapolis Parks Foundation), and I want to continue that work and look at new revenue streams. That said, I will always push for reasonable aid and assistance other government sources. Public parks deserve public dollars and shouldn't be reliant on private sources to provide critical services.

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 am focused on both ecological improvements and outdoor recreation, because District 3 is an epicenter for both. The residents of Whittier and Phillips have long suffered from environmental harms (namely polluted waters, polluted air, and contaminated soils). The families and kids in Cedar Riverside, Powderhorn and Seward need spaces to play outside, learn through team sports, and interact with neighbors.

I don't think these two ideas of natural areas and sports/outdoor activities are mutually exclusive. Natural areas can be used for foraging, gardening and exercising, among many other activities. Hard-surface sports such as basketball, pickleball and tennis should have facilities available throughout the city, and MPRB can thoughtfully plan their placement to protect sensitive natural areas and be readily accessible.

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.

The Park Board requests funding via a property tax levy. For 2025, the Park Board requested a 10% increase, the City (via the mayor) countered with 7%, and ultimately the Park Board received 8%. I think this negotiation is healthy and leads to good outcomes for everyone, as government needs to think holistically about the needs of residents.

That said, families and kids rely on parks as a lifeline. Parks are not a "nice to have"---they're critical services for the mental and physical health of everyone who lives in the city. I can't tell you how many people, especially immigrants and people of color, have told that to me. And I know it myself, as the child of immigrants, and as someone who grew up playing at my local parks and rec centers on a daily basis.

I will advocate for reasonable and prudent tax levies that don't hobble crucial services. At the same time, everyone is aware of the growing burden placed on homeowners as our commercial tax base erodes. There's a dialog to be had internally within MPRB, and externally with the City, BET and residents, about how to make sure our tax dollars go toward the greatest impact for long-term sustainability.

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

Our parkways are connectors and city streets at the end of the day. They need consistent maintenance, and the City of Minneapolis allocates the funds for that maintenance (\$700,000 per year). Beyond basic maintenance of parkways, I would rather see MPRB funds (from whatever source) spent on maintenance of green spaces and staff-provided park services such as rec centers, education, sports. I do support allowing temporary parkway closures for community events.

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

As federal and state funding sources are at risk, I'm worried that even capital funds will not be easy to get in the coming years. But as stated in my top priorities, long-term financial health and diversified revenue streams are critical. Big-ticket new parks and upgrades get a lot of attention, but I will advocate for continued and increased allocations to maintenance, not only of physical assets, but also programs and services. I was dismayed by the 2025 cutback in rec center hours, as I personally know families who were negatively affected by the newly limited hours of operation.

I also believe that good stewardship of parks means doing the basics well (well-staffed services, deep community engagement, well-maintained green spaces and trails). These efforts may seem mundane, but they keep our parks and city whole and healthy and will do more good, for more people, for more time, than splashy new projects. I support well-defined capital investment in underserved areas (especially Park Districts 2 and 3, which cover the Northside and Southside Green Zones), but in my conversations with neighbors and park users in my home of District 3, they principally want the basics done well.

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

Clean water and a thriving watershed (principally the Mississippi River Watershed in the case of District 3) are core focuses of my campaign. District 3 has long been polluted by heavy industries. The ground underneath many sites in the Southside Green Zone contains various toxins (such as arsenic from an accidental spill in the 1960s under the Roof Depot site, or perchloroethylene contamination which is spreading throughout my Whittier community from a former dry cleaner). These toxins and pollutants can and will spread into the watershed without safeguards and mitigations, and MPRB can do its part.

To keep our waters clean, we need a multi-pronged approach. At the Park Board, I will push for porous surfaces and rain gardens on dry land, to reduce stormwater runoff spreading polluted water into our streams, rivers and lakes.

Within the lakes and waterways themselves, I will continue to promote invasive species removal and native species reintroduction (especially mussels that filter and clean water---this has proven successful most recently in the Chicago River).

I will also insist on close partnership with entities such as the Mississippi Watershed Management Organization, the Minnehaha Creek Watershed District, the Minnesota Board of Water and Soil Resources, the MPCA, and the City of Minneapolis.

The good news is that most of Minneapolis's lakes have seen good water quality over the last decade, according to the latest annual water resources report for MPRB. Lake Hiawatha and Lake Nokomis, however, see declining water quality trends and need attention. We can't rest on our laurels when it comes to water quality.

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?

In addition to regularly applying for, and acquiring monies for tree plantings and tree health from other government agencies, I want to focus on diversifying the species we plant on parklands on city-owned boulevards. Through mixed messaging, I've seen the city and park board reject fruit trees, and instead rely on more "charismatic" trees that provide extensive canopy cover and aesthetic value, but also run the risk of decline via invasive species or diseases such as oak wilt.

To have a truly robust and thriving tree, plant and wildlife ecosystem, we need a wider variety of trees planted in a wider variety of places.

I will explore other outside funding sources for tree plantings (such as private foundations), and for tree inoculation in the case of threatened species. I will ask the state to reestablish successful, but limited, programs such as the Tree Preservation and Restoration Levy, and the DNR's shade tree bonding grants. Lastly, I want to revive talks to implement a minimal "tree fee" with the Metropolitan Airports Commission, which partially operates on MPRB land. These are ideas two current commissioners have explored, and are worth another push. Lastly, the jury is out on the Green Cities Accord climate offset program (wherein private entities fund MPRB tree plantings in exchange for carbon offsets); without a single tree planted yet, it's unclear to me that it's an effective program, and there are legitimate concerns about greenwashing, though I want to see initial planting data (expected later in 2025) before making any judgments.

I also want to bring residents into the discussion, as I've seen my neighbors personally care for trees on boulevards and not just their own properties. Similarly, people buy trees and happily plant them on their own property; could MPRB develop a more extensive "sponsor a tree" program to encourage public participation? It already has a tax-deductible tree dedication program but I have never heard of it being used, so maybe there's a marketing problem to be solved. I know most of my neighbors, and nearby schools and businesses, would be happy to contribute and donate. I say this with confidence because I have heard this message time and again as a Whittier Alliance board member while speaking with the community.

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 serve as a board member of Whittier Alliance, my local neighborhood organization. In the past, I also served on the board of Compassionate Action for Animals, which until recently was also based in Whittier, and has seen steady growth since its founding in 1998.

I see a board member's role as two-fold: provide strategic direction and expertise to the organization, and when needed, work with staff to resolve issues in the community.

As a Park Board commissioner, I will proactively and regularly engage staff to understand the projects they're working on, provide input based on community feedback, and also introduce staff to residents and interested parties.

Proactive and continuous engagement is a central theme of my campaign, especially for District 3, which is home to the largest Latino, Somali and Native American communities in the city. I am the child of immigrants, I speak Spanish, I'm learning Somali, and already in Whittier (which has large Somali and Latino populations) neighbors seek me out to discuss issues because they see me as approachable, and because I have built trust with them. That means I get insights that professional staff might not, and I see and hear things that staff might not otherwise know about.

It is an honor to serve my community and I will make sure that the voices of my neighbors are heard.

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

The term "environmental stewardship" encompasses many concepts and I've seen planning department staff "think green" on projects from the get-go; the actual Environmental Stewardship department can then offer insights in collaborative consultation, as opposed to being a bureaucratic step. In general I have seen MPRB planning staff present thoughtful, ecological designs and as a commissioner I would ask for continued focus in that regard (such as expanding porous surfaces and native plantings, and reducing cement). That said, the planning process also involves community engagement, finance, regulatory processes, inter-agency approvals, construction management, and considerations for ongoing maintenance. Environmental stewardship is one important piece of the planning process, and the department should offer consultative guidance as needed.

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?

It takes time for staff and park directors to grow into a community and a new role, make connections and build relationships. I would hope that anyone MPRB hires or promotes into a park director role would stay in that role long enough to lay groundwork and/or maintain continuity in a given community. As a commissioner, I would encourage MPRB managers to be careful to not disrupt communities that need stability and continuity.

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