E-PARCC
COLLABORATIVE GOVERNANCE INITIATIVE

Syracuse University
Maxwell School of Citizenship and Public Affairs
Program for the Advancement of Research on Conflict and Collaboration

Advancing Racial Equity in the Minneapolis Park System:
How Could Organizations with Divergent Goals Work Together?

Minneapolis Park System in Context

Although the Twin Cities metro area is known for its bitter winters, leisure options are plentiful. The Minneapolis park system has been ranked the "Best in the Nation" by The Trust for Public Land's ParkScore Index every year from 2013 to 2018. Also known as the City of Lakes, 14.9% of Minneapolis' 34,543 acres of land is parkland that encircles the city's thirteen lakes, adjoins the river's edge, and preserves historically or ecologically significant areas.[1] Urban parks are abundant; there are 189 parks in Minneapolis. This number of parks amounts to 4.6

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[1] Harnik, P., Martin, A., & Treat, M. (2016). 2016 City Park Facts. San Francisco, CA: The Trust for Public Land. Pg 5.

parks per 10,000 residents.[2] One of the city's 37 regional parks, the Minneapolis Chain of Lakes Regional Park, is among the most visited city parks in the nation, with 5,476,400 visitors annually.[3]

The Minneapolis Park and Recreation Board is a democratically elected body governing over the city's park system. Every four years, Minneapolis voters elect nine commissioners: one from each of the six park districts, and three that serve at-large. Regional parks receive funding from state and public agencies to develop and maintain park amenities. Minneapolis' 160 smaller neighborhood parks are scattered across the city and rely on local tax dollars.[4] In 2016, Minneapolis spent $90,488,104 on parks and recreation, $186 operating spending per resident, $36 in capital spending per resident, for a total of $222 per resident.[5]

Structural Racism in Minneapolis Parks

Despite the #1 ranking for its parks, racial disparities permeate the Park Board and disadvantage the Twin Cities' fastest-growing population: racial and ethnic minorities. In Minneapolis, minority populations constitute nearly 40 percent of the city; however, they only represent 3 percent of regional park-users. One of the leading explanations asserted by leisure scholars is that disparities in park usage by race is due to minorities' lack of physical access to parks. However, all Minneapolis residents have high physical access to parks. The Metropolitan Council, the regional planning agency, found in a 2016 park visitors study that 94% of all Minneapolis residents live within a 10-minute walk from a park.[6] According to another study by the Council, white residents averaged 60 visit parks per year, and racial minority residents averaged 36 park visits.[7] These findings point to obstacles beyond physical access and expose potential structural elements within the park system that lead to social constraints.

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[2] Harnik, P., Martin, A., & Treat, M. (2016). 2016 City Park Facts. San Francisco, CA: The Trust for Public Land. Pg 12.
[3] Harnik, P., Martin, A., & Treat, M. (2016). 2016 City Park Facts. San Francisco, CA: The Trust for Public Land. Pg 30.
[4] Minneapolis Park & Recreation Board: Parks & Lakes. (n.d.). Retrieved March 17, 2018, from https://www.minneapolisparks.org/parks__destinations/parks__lakes/
[5] Harnik, P., Martin, A., & Treat, M. (2016). 2016 City Park Facts. San Francisco, CA: The Trust for Public Land. Pg 16.
[6] Das, Fan, & French, 2016, p. 319.
[7] Information Specialists Groups, 2009, p. 24.

The Metropolitan Council's *Park Use Among Communities of Color* study also sheds light on how structural racism may be impacting residents' visitation rates in Twin Cities metro. Black park goers named "getting jumped or shot" as a prominent barrier to park usage.[8] While White respondents reported that they had no safety concerns during their park visits in the same study. Also, during a Metropolitan Council focus group for communities of color, an African American participant was skeptical about regional parks' willingness to accommodate the cultural preferences of Black park users. She stated, "Sometimes I wonder if people feel like the parks are culturally friendly. Like I know for me, the one thing I don't like is that they took the noise—the noise ordinance that they passed for the parks, like the ability to have music and play music in the park…So, if I want to do a celebration at the park, I don't feel like it's culturally friendly for some of the things that me as a culture would like to do at the park."[9] In the Twin Cities, racial and ethnic minorities are the fastest-growing population and will be the future decision-makers on prioritizing public funds. Many park managers are aware that if park systems are not relevant to these populations, parks may lose funding, and some may cease to exist.

Lack of Representation and Disinvestment in Parks in Communities of Color

During public debates regarding racial inequities in the Minneapolis park systems, members from communities of color expressed the following concerns to reporters: the need for electoral representation to achieve racial equity and the need to correct how past disinvestments in parks in majority communities of color negatively impacted property values. Communities of color were indeed underrepresented on the Park Board. In 2016, eight of the nine Commissioners were white. One African American resident said this of the almost all-white Park Board, "We look around the table, and every single one of you is white, how can you effectively represent the people of the city of Minneapolis when we're not at the table?" Lack of representation was magnified at public meetings in 2016 when Park Board commissioners

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[8] Salk, R. (2014). Regional Park Use Among Select Communities of Color: A Qualitative Investigation (pp. 1-19, Publication). Saint Paul, MN: Metropolitan Council. P. 7.
[9] Salk, R. (2014). Regional Park Use Among Select Communities of Color: A Qualitative Investigation (pp. 1-19, Publication). Saint Paul, MN: Metropolitan Council. P. 7.

had members of the NAACP arrested when they voiced concerns over potential job losses due to privatization of Theodore Wirth Park services.[10] Protesters continued to show up to meetings to voice their concerns over job losses that mostly impacted minority staff. However, the Commissioners took a "we know best" stance and suppressed community members from expressing concerns by having them arrested. These exchanges were particularly symbolic as Wirth Park is a community asset in North Minneapolis, a traditionally African American neighborhood. Additionally, the local government previously created mistrust with North residents when officials ignored the community's input and built a highway between the park and the neighborhood. The lack of representation of persons of color on the Park Board may be a root cause of social injustices committed at Park Board public meetings and thereby impeding equitable community input and creating distrust.

In response to community concerns regarding disinvestment in parks located in communities of color, a Minneapolis Park and Recreation Commissioner explained to Minnesota Public Radio that the Board consistently equally distributes funds, and therefore, are in compliance with their political responsibilities.[11] Sandra Richardson, of the African American Legacy Council in the Twin Cities, summed up her perspective of the Boards' claim of equality, "If people (Park Board Commissioners) say parks are all equal, the way I've heard it put is that equal is giving everyone a pair of shoes. Equity is making sure all the shoes fit."[12]

Multiple Approaches for Park Equity Action

Local park equity advocate groups, such as the Minneapolis Chapter of the National Association for the Advancement of Colored People (NAACP) and Parks and Power, have been critical in creating a platform for racially equitable policies within the Park Board. In 2016, then Minneapolis Chapter NAACP president, Nekima Levy Armstrong (formerly Levy-Pounds),

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[10] Best, E. (2016). Park Board moves forward with Wirth sports center despite union concerns. Retrieved March 31, 2017, from http://www.southwestjournal.com/news/parks/2016/09/park-board-moves-forward-with-wirth-sports-center-despite-union-concerns/

[11] Tim Nelson. (July 20, 2016). Racial issues forcing change in Minneapolis parks leadership. Retrieved February 27, 2017, from https://www.mprnews.org/story/2016/07/19/racial-issues-force-change-minneapolis-parks-leaders

[12] Boarini, C. (2016, August 18). Years of inequities lead to 'extremely rare' racial lens. Retrieved February 27, 2017, from http://www.tcdailyplanet.net%2fyears-of-inequities-lead-to-extremely-rare-racial-lens-applied-to-minneapolis-parks-planning%2f&p=DevEx,5063.1

reopened an earlier investigation into wrongful termination complaints filed by 60 employees and 100 park users regarding unequal discipline and "outright racial humiliation" by Minneapolis Park Board staff. The reopened investigation prompted Levy Armstrong and other advocates to start regularly attending Park Board meetings. The NAACP's consistent requests for the Park Board to address racial equity issues culminated in a heated exchange between Levy Armstrong and then Park Board president, Liz Wielinski. This exchange went viral on social media and became a prominent local news story. During the exchange, Wielinski lost her temper when Levy Armstrong tried to make a statement outside of public comment time. The then board president and called Levy Armstrong a "rude interrupting individual," to which Levy Armstrong replied, "don't talk to me like a slave." This event increased media coverage of the NAACP's involvement regarding inequitable park staffing policies and served as a call for the public support of racial equity in the parks.

The Minneapolis Chapter of the NAACP was not the only advocacy group creating external pressure to address racial equity in the Minneapolis Park System. At the same time, Parks and Power began mounting protests of the Park Board with claims of racially biased park policies. Parks and Power is a grassroots movement aimed to build power with low wealth communities in Minneapolis through popular education and local political action. They believe parks are centers of neighborhood power.[13] To them, Minneapolis Park and Recreation Board's lack of racial equity policies was a "tangible, challenging, entry point into local public and political life to training ground for grassroots leaders and a petri dish for people-driven, race-conscious public policy."[14]

Taking a different angle on park equity than the NAACP, Parks and Power organizers were vocal about the Park Board's lack of a racial equity evaluation metrics to guide infrastructure investments. The Minneapolis Park Board based their park assessment on whether an asset, bench or playground equipment, "exceeded its useful life."[15] Grassroots advocates wanted the assessment to consider the overall condition of the equipment. Summing

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[13] (Parks and Power, 2019)
[14] (Virden, 2015)
[15] (Brandt, 2016)

up one advocate, a playground slide with bullet holes in it should be replaced even if it "technically" is structurally sound.[16] Jake Virden of Parks and Power was hopeful when Superintendent Jayne Miller, announced that the park board would add a metric to consider levels of poverty concentration and population density when allocating money, even though race was not explicitly mentioned. Virden remarked that "It's the most race-conscious language that the Park Board has ever used."[17] Parks and Power continued to press on with activities, including hosting community trainings and organizing grassroots leaders to take political action in the parks.

Finally, the Twin Cities Metropolitan Council, the regional planning agency and major Minneapolis Park and Recreation Board funder, made their ongoing requests for park agencies to identify and address racial park usage gaps into a formal requirement to receive funding. One catalyst for this decision was a 2014 study completed by the Council's Community Development Committee. The *Regional Park Use Among Select Communities of Color*[18] report confirmed that communities of color experienced challenges to visiting parks and trail systems. In particular, the study revealed that "regional parks and trails visitors do not represent the overall population makeup of the region, specifically for communities of color."[19] This study sparked the Council to create a Park Equity Toolkit in 2016 that would formally gauge partners' progress toward more equitable park use.[20]

During meetings to develop the toolkit, tensions were high among regional park managers and park equity advocates. Some park managers resisted adding equity metrics being tied to park funding and explained away communities of color lower participation rates as a matter of cultural preference. In other words, some managers argued that communities of color did not go to parks because they would rather do something else in their free time. One grassroots park advocate pointed out that these explanations did not account for potential discrimination, nor did they address issues due to underlying structural racism that may prevent

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[16] (Brandt, 2016)
[17] (Brandt, 2016)
[18] (Salk, 2014)
[19] (Metropolitan Council, 2016)
[20] (The Metropolitan Council, 2019)

communities of color from enjoying the outdoors. Park equity advocate groups insisted that these metrics did not go far enough. At one point, the Parks and Power representative stood up and called the meeting participants "racists." Despite park managers' pushback, the Metropolitan Council moved to require that park partners, including the Minneapolis Parks and Recreation Board, identify gaps in service to underserved communities to receive the Council's funds. In addition, funding recipients must also dedicate five percent of funds to engage with communities of color to understand and improve disparities in service.

Next steps

The Minneapolis Parks and Recreation Board is aware that carrying out a racial equity plan by itself is not likely to succeed as so many organizations take stake in this issue. However, organizations that have a key stake in this issue seem to have very different understandings about what racial equity means and how the problem should be solved. Now, as the representatives of the four key organizations involved in this issue (Twin Cities Metropolitan Council, Minneapolis Park & Recreation Board, National Association for the Advancement of Colored People of Minneapolis, Parks and Power), you are expected to stand by the position of your organization and address the following questions:

1. Define the core problem of racial equity in the Minneapolis Parks System. What are some of the structural elements underneath this issue?

2. What are the areas of consensus between your organization and other organizations? How can you build a consensus and common goal for this collaboration?

3. Should your organization collaborate with other organizations to address the racial equity problem in the Minneapolis Park System? If no, why not? What are your strategies to engage in addressing the racial equity problem in the Minneapolis Park System?

4. If you do decide to collaborate with each other, what should be the roles of each organization? What processes and rules should you follow for collaborative problem solving and decision-making?

Appendix: Minneapolis Background

Minnesota is a place of opportunity. The state has had a strong economy driven by innovation that attracts and retains an educated workforce. Jobs are abundant in the metropolitan area surrounding Minneapolis; Target, U.S. Bancorp, General Mills, 3M, and Medtronic are headquartered in the Twin Cities.[21] Minnesota ranks 3rd in highest educational attainment in the United States;[22] 92.6 % of adults in Minnesota have completed at least a high school education.[23]

On the other hand, Minnesota is a land of exclusion; nationally, the state is ranked second-worst in racial disparities according to a study done by 24/7 Wallstreet.[24] Take, for example, the adverse outcomes of structural racism for black Minnesotans, a population that is concentrated in the metropolitan area. The median income of a black household is $30,306 compared to $66,979 of a white household.[25] The unemployment rate for black Minnesotans (8.8%) was more than twice the rate of white (3.0%) and Hispanic (3.5%) Minnesotans.[26] Black Minnesotans' homeownership rate (21.7%) is over three times lower than white Minnesotans' rate (76.5%).[27] Worse yet, in 2017, black Minnesotans were more likely to die from premature death than any other racial or ethnic group in the state besides American Indians.[28] Although blacks account for 18.9% of Minneapolis residents, they make up less than three percent of the regional park and trail users.[29] In Minnesota, racial disparities are significant and permeate in

[21] Minnesota Compass: Economy Overview. (n.d.). Retrieved April 11, 2018, from http://www.mncompass.org/economy/overview

[22] Forbes. (2017, November). Minnesota. Retrieved April 11, 2018, from https://www.forbes.com/places/mn/

[23] QuickFacts. (n.d.). Retrieved April 11, 2018, from https://www.census.gov/quickfacts/fact/table/MN/PST045216#viewtop

[24] Sauter, M. B. (2018, March 29). Black and White Inequality in All 50 States. Retrieved April 11, 2018, from https://247wallst.com/special-report/2017/08/18/black-and-white-inequality-in-all-50-states-2/11/

[25] Sauter, M. B. (2018, March 29). Black and White Inequality in All 50 States. Retrieved April 11, 2018, from https://247wallst.com/special-report/2017/08/18/black-and-white-inequality-in-all-50-states-2/11/

[26] Sauter, M. B. (2018, March 29). Black and White Inequality in All 50 States. Retrieved April 11, 2018, from https://247wallst.com/special-report/2017/08/18/black-and-white-inequality-in-all-50-states-2/11/

[27] Minnesota Compass (2). (n.d.). Retrieved April 11, 2018, from http://www.mncompass.org/demographics/race#1-5523-g

[28] Minnesota Department of Health. (2017). 2017 Minnesota Statewide Health Assessment. Produced in collaboration with the Healthy Minnesota Partnership. St. Paul, MN.

[29] Peterson, D. (2016, June 19). Racially equitable use of parks is the goal, with big dollars at stake. Retrieved from http://www.startribune.com/racially-equitable-use-of-parks-is-the-goal-with-big-dollars-at-stake/383496171/

the state's major institutions, disadvantaging the fastest growing population, racial and ethnic minorities.[30] Unaddressed and persistent historical experiences of oppression and exclusion, known as structural racism, are the source of these disparities.

The City of Minneapolis' population is relatively diverse and will become more diverse as persons of color continue to grow into the largest groups of the City's population. Presently, among the 411,452 Minneapolis residents, 18.9% are Black (77,778), 1.2% are American Indian and Alaskan Native (24,892), and 6% are Asian (24,892), per the American Community Survey.[31] Persons of color make up about 36% of the City's population.[32] White residents compose 63.9% of the City's population, compared to 84.1% of all Minnesota residents who identify as white.[33] Among the total population in Minneapolis, 40,147 individuals identify as Hispanic or Latino (of any race). Population growth trends in communities of color become apparent when population data is disaggregated by race and age; about 60% of Minneapolis' youngest residents (0-5) are of color while about 21% of residents 65 and up are of color.[34]

[30] Minnesota Compass (2). (n.d.). Retrieved April 11, 2018, from
http://www.mncompass.org/demographics/race#1-5523-g
[31] U.S. Census Bureau, 2013-2017 American Community Survey 5-Year Estimates
[32] U.S. Census Bureau, 2013-2017 American Community Survey 5-Year Estimates
[33] U.S. Census Bureau, 2013-2017 American Community Survey 5-Year Estimates
[34] U.S. Census Bureau, 2013-2017 American Community Survey 5-Year Estimates