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March 9, 2021

Representative Rick Hansen, chair
Members, House Environment Committee
Via email

RE: HF1874 (Acomb) Regional parks and trails funding provided, and money appropriated

Dear Honorable Chair Hansen and members of the House Environment committee,

The Legacy of Nature Alliance (LONA) brings together organizations and individuals from across the metro region with a unifying mission, "to ensure ecosystems are restored and preserved within the metropolitan regional parks system and throughout the entire region to provide high-quality habitat for wildlife, and year-round Nature-based opportunities to inspire the next generation of environmental stewards." LONA is comprised of 15 organizations and numerous individuals with thousands of others on mailing and contact lists.

It is our understanding that the \$38M requested in HF 1874 is to compensate for an Operations and Maintenance (O&M) funding gap. Legislative funding appropriated to the metro regional park system under Minnesota Statutes 473.351 has remained level for decades at roughly \$8 million per year, rather than keeping up with 40% of the park agencies' costs. Considering the annual cost of O&M has escalated to over \$100M annually, this, on the surface, appears to be a concerning gap.

If you look beyond the surface, the increase in expenses can be largely attributed to the increase in new "amenities" that continue to be constructed throughout our Nature-based parks. Each time a new amenity is constructed, the annual cost for O&M increases. This trend is unsustainable both financially and environmentally and, even more troubling because the funding for these construction projects is derived largely from Legacy monies.

For the past six to seven years members of LONA have been observing the distribution and spending of the metro portion of Legacy Parks and Trails funds to the ten regional park agencies. We have observed a number of anomalies in the dispensation of these taxpayer dollars including a lack of accountability to the natural resource base of the metro regional parks. HF1874 will allow the persistent new construction, ironically funded largely with Legacy dollars, and ongoing negligence to stewardship of the natural resources base of the metro regional parks to continue.

The legislatively mandated and citizen-developed 25-year Legacy Parks & Trails plan calls for “taking care of what we have”, including natural resources. Investments in natural resource restoration and ongoing management would result in decreases in annual O&M over time. However, this investment is being neglected while the park agencies continue to advance capital projects requiring more funding to maintain, escalating O&M costs.

Until the metro Parks and Trails Legacy dollars are invested in a manner consistent with the 25-year Parks & Trails Legacy plan and, better meet citizens’ expectations for Legacy dollars, we are opposed to state or regional funding which allows ongoing lack of accountability to the natural resource base of the metro Regional Park System to continue. This bill will do just that and as such we ask that you vote NO to HF1874.

Sincerely,

Catherine Zimmer & Holly Jenkins, Coordinators
The Legacy of Nature Alliance