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April 11, 2024

Dear members of the State and Local Government Finance and Policy Committee,

On behalf of the more than 145 cities, counties, businesses, non-profits, and individuals that comprise the Greater Minnesota Parks and Trails organization, thank you for allowing us to comment on HF 5336. Many of our members currently rely on local sales tax (LST) to fund a variety of parks and related work, and many others may seek to do the same in the future. We are concerned that the eligibility requirements to use local sales tax funds for park or trail facilities without special legislative approval will be impossible for any of our members to meet. At a time when the state should be encouraging people to get outdoors, we are concerned that these provisions could be taking away a vital funding stream that makes recreational opportunities more accessible.

Importance of Parks and Trails to Healthy Communities

Lack of activity and time outdoors has been linked to a variety of chronic illnesses in children, and providing access to parks and trails can go a long way toward healthy outcomes. The National Recreation and Park Association has pointed out that children living within two-thirds of a mile of a park with a playground are five times more likely to be a healthy weight. Headwaters Economics has explained that trails can improve public health by increasing physical activity and providing safer transportation routes for pedestrians and cyclists. Moreover, trails encourage increased physical activity, particularly in rural areas and among people with low incomes and the elderly. Finally, parks and trails also promote economic development. Local facilities are indispensable as communities strive to attract younger workers and promote healthy living for all ages.

Proposed Eligibility Requirements Exclude Accessibility Improvements and Misapply Legacy Criteria

The definition for eligible parks and trails is drawn from the criteria established in the Parks and Trails 25-Year Legacy Plan. Although the criteria, when appropriately applied, serve well for distributing funds from the statewide legacy funds, they are too restrictive for purposes of an LST project. It is important to acknowledge that the goal of the Local Tax Advisory Task Force was to make sales tax dollars *easier* to employ for park and trail projects when it included these project types in its list of what might be eligible for LST dollars without first requiring special legislation. However, the Task Force missed the mark when it pointed to the Legacy Plan as its guide for what qualifies as “regional,” and this bill takes the Task Force’s mistake and carries it much further.

For example, the first criterion states that the park must be focused on natural resources. Although some local governments will use LST funding for natural resource-based projects, a popular and important use of LST funding is to improve ADA accessibility or to provide sensory-friendly parks. These types of projects would be excluded.

More importantly, the five criteria were not intended to be applied together. The description of these criteria specifically states that a park or trail must only meet three of the five criteria for parks or trails outside the Metropolitan Area to qualify for Legacy funds. Meeting all five would be difficult, if not impossible, for most projects. For example, the “special features” criterion typically allows a park that may not be as large as others to qualify because of a unique landscape feature or a culturally significant site. Of the 77 regionally designated parks and trails in Greater Minnesota, only 15 qualified as a “special features” park.

As noted above, parks and trails play an essential role in the health and well-being of our communities. Funding to ensure that these parks and trails are accessible to everyone can be challenging to obtain. Therefore, we urge the Committee to modify these requirements so that more Minnesotans can access the great outdoors. We would be happy to work with you to address these issues.

Thank you for your time and consideration.

Sincerely,



Gina Hugo
Chair, Greater Minnesota Parks and Trails
Sherburne County, Parks Director



Joseph Tart
Vice Chair, Greater Minnesota Parks and Trails
Chisago County, Parks Director