



# 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?**

This case was written by Yuan Daniel Cheng and Brooke Dirtzu, of the Humphrey School of Public Affairs at the University of Minnesota. It was a winning case in E-PARCC's 2019-2020 Competition for Collaborative Public Management, Governance, and Problem-Solving Teaching Materials. The case is intended for classroom discussion and not to suggest either effective or ineffective responses to the situation depicted. It may be copied as many times as needed, provided that the authors and E-PARCC are given full credit. E-PARCC is a project of the Collaborative Governance Initiative, Program for the Advancement of Research on Conflict and Collaboration- a research, teaching and practice center within Syracuse University's Maxwell School of Citizenship and Public Affairs.

## **Role Description: Twin Cities Metropolitan Council**

### **Who We Are**

The Metropolitan Council is the regional policy-making body, planning agency, and essential services provider for the Twin Cities metropolitan area. The Council provides essential services and infrastructure such as the Metro Transit's bus and rail system, Metro Mobility, Transit Link, wastewater treatment services, regional parks, planning, affordable housing, and more. These services support communities and businesses and ensure a high quality of life for Twin Cities residents. The Council is charged by the state to oversee the acquisition and development of regional parks and trails. However, partnering cities, counties, and special districts, like the Minneapolis Park and Recreation Board, operate the parks. Within the Council, the Community Development Committee addresses issues involving the development and implementation of regional park plans and grants.

### **Our Mission**

*The Council's mission is to foster efficient and economic growth for a prosperous region.*

### **Summary of Position on Racial Equity and Minneapolis Parks and Recreation Board**

Metropolitan Council focuses on equity for the *park user*. The main goal is to strengthen *equitable usage* of regional parks and trails by all regional residents, across age, race, ethnicity, income, national origin, and ability. Equitable usage is measurable and should be representative of the composition of the community. For example, if 19% of our regional population identifies as African American, then 19% of park users should identify as African American.

### **Documented Involvement with on Racial Equity and Minneapolis Parks and Recreation Board**

The Metropolitan Council's Community Development Committee 2014 study, *Regional Park Use Among Select Communities of Color*, 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.” This study sparked the Council to engage park managers and advocates in designing a *Park Equity Toolkit* in 2016. The toolkit would gauge partners’ progress toward more equitable park use. Now, grantees, including the Minneapolis Parks and Recreation Board, must identify gaps in service to underserved communities. For example, grantees must dedicate five percent of funds to engage with communities of color to understand and improve disparities in service to receive the Council’s funds.

## **Role Description: Minneapolis Park & Recreation Board**

### **Who We Are**

The Minneapolis Park and Recreation Board is a democratically elected body that governs 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. The Board appoints a Superintendent who guides the vision and direction to the Park Board's service areas and implements Board policy. The Board divides its \$90 million operating budget between two different categories of parks: regional parks and neighborhood parks. Regional parks draw visitors from inside and outside of Minneapolis. These parks receive funding from the state and public agencies to develop and maintain park amenities. Minneapolis' 160 smaller neighborhood parks are scattered across the city, serving mostly neighborhood residents. These parks rely on local tax dollars. Per the Park Board's website, "For many years, the Minneapolis Park and Recreation Board has focused on making capital, recreation, maintenance, and operations investments in parks that are in racially diverse and low-income neighborhoods."

### **Mission**

*To permanently preserve, protect, maintain, improve, and enhance its natural resources, parkland, and recreational opportunities for current and future generations. The Minneapolis Park and Recreation Board exists to provide places and recreation opportunities for all people to gather, celebrate, contemplate, and engage in activities that promote health, wellbeing, community, and the environment.*

### **Summary of Position on Racial Equity and Minneapolis Parks Board**

Over the past twenty years, cultural and racial demographics have shifted in Minneapolis. Now that the city is more diverse regarding age, race, and ethnicity, so too are the recreational needs of its residents. *Parks play a vital role in the health and wellbeing of community members as well as the livability of our cities. Historically disadvantaged*

*communities, including immigrants, experience poorer general health and shorter life spans than white community members. Research shows that the number one prescription for healing health and educational disparities is to provide access to parks and open space.* Enhanced culturally informed programming with a focus on large community events will draw in more community members from diverse communities.

### **Documented Involvement with Racial Equity and Minneapolis Parks Board**

Recognizing past organizational issues with racial bias, the Park Board drafted a *Racial Equity Action Plan* in 2016 that introduced an agency-wide strategy to address inequities. This plan was developed through the Board's participation in a yearlong training led by Government Alliance on Race and Equity (GARE). GARE is a national network of governments working to achieve racial equity and advance opportunities for all. This organization had previously worked with city, county, and state government agencies, such as the City of Seattle in Washington, Milwaukee County in Wisconsin, and the New York State Department of Health. Minneapolis Parks and Recreation Board was the GARE's first park systems entity. Making the Minneapolis Park and Recreation Board poised to be one of the first U.S. city park systems to address structural racial bias.

## **Role Description: National Association for the Advancement of Colored People (NAACP) of Minneapolis**

### **Who We Are**

The National Association for the Advancement of Colored People (NAACP) was founded in 1909 as a nonpartisan civil rights organization. The NAACP is a nationwide member organization with a constitution that each branch accepts when incorporated. This constitution outlines objectives that focus on equality for all citizens through democratic and legal processes. The Minneapolis NAACP Branch is a local advocate for civil rights aimed at achieving justice and dismantling white supremacy.

### **Mission**

*The mission of the National Association for the Advancement of Colored People is to ensure the political, educational, social, and economic equality of rights of all persons and to eliminate race-based discrimination.*

### **Summary of position on Racial Equity and Minneapolis Parks Board**

As a legal-focused organization, NAACP representatives are concerned about fairness and representation in the democratic process and park staffing. They feel the need for bold action to address racist structures built into the park systems, which only benefit those with privilege. Bold action includes boycotting the park system until their members feel heard. In addition, the organization has advocated for fairness in the Minneapolis Parks and Recreation staffing, in particular for black staff members. Many black staff members reported being demoted or let go without reason or documentation. Organization members take issues with a lack of diverse staff on the frontlines in parks, which does not represent the surrounding community. Members have asserted that racial equity can be achieved by rectifying past injustices as well as securing fair processes in the future.

## **Documented Involvement with Racial Equity and Minneapolis Parks Board**

In 2011, the Minneapolis NAACP received over 160 complaints from park employees and users concerning racial discrimination; complaint topics ranged from “wrongful termination” to “outright racial humiliation of employees and customers.” The Minneapolis NAACP continued receiving numerous complaints of the unfair discipline of Black employees and other discriminatory concerns in 2012 and wrote an open letter to then Minneapolis Parks and Recreation Board Superintendent Jayne Miller. Park Superintendent Miller conceded to inconsistent treatment of employees and racial issues. In 2016, Levy Armstrong reopened the investigations into unfair staffing processes in the Minneapolis Parks and Recreation Board and began disrupting meetings when the Board did not address racial bias in the park system.

## **Role Description: Parks and Power**

### **Who We Are**

Parks and Power is a grassroots movement that aims to advance racial equity within the Minneapolis Parks and Recreation system “by engaging everyday people to come together and articulate common values, find common ground and build solutions together.” Concerned with equitable investments and participation, Parks and Power focused on shifting power dynamics across the municipal government. Parks and Power organizers work on the ground with community members and at the policy level to address racial equity in Minneapolis Parks.

### **Stated Mission**

*The work of our campaign is to build power with low wealth communities around Minneapolis Parks through popular education and local political action. Our aim is to bring the policies to the people and the people’s policies to the seat of power.*

### **Summary of Position on Racial Equity and Minneapolis Parks Board**

Parks and Power, a grassroots organization, believes “parks can be centers of neighborhood power.” They view the Minneapolis Park and Recreation Board as an entry point into local public and political life, which is a training ground for grassroots leaders and race-conscious public policy. They believe that Minneapolis Park and Recreation Board leadership should own up to the racist structures and disproportionate capital investments in parks situated in majority communities of color. The lack of investments by the Park Board has economically disadvantaged these communities. For example, park asset losses accumulated over time and contributed to the devaluation of a neighborhood, such as housing values. Past interactions with Minneapolis Parks have left the community of color feeling marginalized within the park system. Programming alone to increase park usage will not solve park equity disparities. The Park Board’s commitment to racial equity can be demonstrated by their direct investment in communities of color.

## **Documented Involvement with Racial Equity and Minneapolis Parks Board**

Parks and Power grew out of the work of Hope Community in Minneapolis to address residents' concerns about Peavey Park around 2005. Parks and Power training cohorts investigated and discovered disparities in resources between parks in affluent and low wealth neighbors in Minneapolis. The cohorts presented their findings in a report to the Minneapolis Parks and Recreation Board called "The Broken Promise." In 2013, Parks and Power organizers hosted a forum focused on racial equity for park commissioner candidates in the Phillips neighborhood. Over 250 people gathered for the forum, which aimed to communicate to candidates that "Communities of Color will no longer accept being an afterthought of policymakers." In 2014, Parks and Power partnered with the Land Stewardship Project, to incorporate and implement racial justice goals into the Park Board's Urban Agriculture Master Plan. Finally, in 2015, organizers worked with Voices for Racial Justice and Park Board Staff on a listening project to inform Minneapolis Parks and Recreation Board's "Rec Quest" evaluation of recreation centers and programs across the system.