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May 7, 2024

Dear members of the House Ways and Means Committee,

On behalf of the more than 145 cities, counties, businesses, non-profits, and individuals that comprise the Greater Minnesota Parks and Trails (GMPT) organization, thank you for allowing us to comment on the DE Amendments to H.F. 5220/H.F. 5162. We are writing to express our dismay that the proposal has ignored the local and regional parks and trails of Greater Minnesota.

The importance of parks and trails to healthy communities is well known. 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.

Indeed, the bill authors appear to recognize the importance of parks and trails, as they included \$8 million for Metropolitan Regional Parks and Trails. However, neither the local nor regional parks and trails of Greater Minnesota receive funding under this proposal. Greater Minnesota already receives only half of what the Metro receives from the Legacy funds and 1/20th of what the Metro receives from Lottery-in-Lieu funds. We respectfully request that this disparity be remedied.

Our organization worked with Representative Brand (DFL-St. Peter) and other legislators to introduce legislation (H.F. 4112) that would fund the Department of Natural Resources local grant programs under Minn. Stat. 85.019 which provide matching grants statewide. Governor Walz also included funding for these programs in his proposed bonding bill. We strongly encourage you to include funding for these programs in your proposal as it leaves this committee.

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 increase the amount of funding available to Greater Minnesota so that more Minnesotans can access the great outdoors.

Thank you for your time and consideration.

Sincerely,

A handwritten signature in black ink, appearing to read 'Gina Hugo', with a stylized, flowing script.

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

A handwritten signature in black ink, appearing to read 'Joe Tart', with a stylized, flowing script.

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