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March 25, 2021

TO: Rep. Lillie and House Legacy Finance Committee via email

RE: HF1079, Omnibus Legacy Finance Bill | Article 3, Section 4
Parks and Trails Legacy Fund, Metropolitan Council
\$21,698,000 for FY2022 and \$22,130,000 for FY2023

Dear Chair Lillie and members of the House Legacy Committee,

The Legacy of Nature Alliance (LONA) brings together organizations and individuals with a uniting 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 20 organizations from across the metro region with thousands of others on mailing and contact lists.

We strongly support the regional parks system as the “State Parks of the Metro” as they are often called. We believe that by properly managing these parks which provide critical habitat for pollinators, birds and other wildlife, help to mitigate the impacts of climate change, and also provide high-quality Nature-based opportunities for recreation and education, we can protect these areas for future generations.

With that vision, LONA members have followed the process and spending of the metro region’s 40% share of the Legacy Parks and Trails funds; there is growing opposition to how these funds are used. Much of this opposition stems from the lack of a transparent, unbiased project approval process as well as the ongoing imbalance of spending for capital development and neglect to natural resource stewardship.

Additionally, this is the only Legacy fund distributed in a non-competitive process. This process allows the agencies who are seeking the funds to be, in essence, the same people awarding the funds. Also, the projects are not vetted in a meaningful public process.

HF 1079 allows this to continue:

Article 3 Sec. 4 (a) continues to allocate the Parks and Trails funds based on a distribution formula which was determined prior to completion of the 25-year Parks and Trails Legacy Plan. This Plan was developed in accordance with a legislative mandate, and it states that funds should not be distributed by a formula. We hope you agree that a Plan mandated by the legislature should not be disregarded, yet that is what this section allows for.

A statutory amendment is needed to amend the distribution formula which improve consistency with the 25-year plan and better meet the expectations citizens had when they voted to support the Legacy Amendment.

Article 3 Sec. 4 (b) states “Money appropriated under this section and distributed to implementing agencies must be used only to fund the list of projects approved by the elected representatives of each of the metropolitan parks implementing agencies.” In practice this allows funding to be appropriated for projects that have yet seen any daylight or public engagement.

Until there is transparency built into the process for how these Legacy dollars are spent these funds should not be appropriated.

Article 3 Sec. 4 (b) states “any money remaining after completing the listed projects may be spent by the implementing agencies on projects to support parks and trails.” This furthers the lack of transparency for how these tax dollars are being spent.

We request the language be deleted or revised to state that any money remaining be returned to the Parks and Trails fund for future appropriation.

Until this flawed process is corrected to better align with the 25-year Parks and Trails Legacy Plan, and citizens expectations for the Legacy Amendment, we cannot support the '22-'23 metro projects proposal.

We respectfully request that you oppose this appropriation to the Metropolitan Council and work with us to correct this process.

Sincerely,

The Legacy of Nature Alliance