

# 2017 Minneapolis Parks and Recreation Board Candidate Questionnaire

Due by 11:59 PM Friday, September 8, 2017

**Name and District:** Jono Cowgill, District 4

*The Sierra Club's priorities for Minneapolis Parks include: equity, environmental justice, reduction of carbon emissions, prevention of air and water pollution, protection and expansion of wildlife habitat, and improvement of transit and pedestrian opportunities to and within parks. For more information about Northstar Chapter activities and priorities, please see <http://www.sierraclub.org/minnesota>*

## **1. Why do you want to serve on the Minneapolis Parks and Recreation Board?**

I want to serve on the Minneapolis Park and Recreation Board because I believe I have the skills, passion, and experience to serve my community. I grew up in this park system, I have dedicated my life to bringing underserved community voices into civic processes, and I have demonstrated policy acumen to make real change. As a planner who leads comprehensive plan processes, I believe we need visionary commissioners who understand the urgency of planning for a climate-resilient future. Right now the Park Board needs dedicated, community-oriented commissioners who are ready to work hand in hand with the community--tirelessly--to build safer, more equitable, and sustainable parks.

## **2. What environmental efforts have you undertaken or achieved to improve the Minneapolis Park system or parks within your community?**

I have been a board member of the Lowry Hill East Neighborhood Association for the past two years. There I have been chair of the Open Spaces Committee. I have supported the efforts of the Environmental Committee, co-sponsoring cleanup days at Mueller Park and throughout the neighborhood. I have also coordinated an environmental themed mural installed at the corner of Mueller Park. The design evokes the importance of sustainable lifestyles for preserving the earth, and was designed in partnership with Jefferson School. Also, over the years as a student at Anwatin Middle School and at Kenwood I participated in various volunteer Park Board cleanup efforts.

## **3. What do you see as the most pressing environmental issue facing Minneapolis parks? If you are (re-)elected as Park Commissioner, what specific policies or actions do you propose to address the Sierra Club priorities identified above?**

The most pressing issues to me are combating and adapting to climate change and ensuring the long term sustainability of our waterways. Policies that I support include:

- Adopting a Climate Action Plan
- Championing the Ecological Systems Plan and ensuring that Climate Sequestration technology is a top investment priority.
- Quickly moving towards the expansion of riparian surfaces around our lakes and decreasing the amount of mowable land. I propose a community-based approach that incorporates community gardening, community-installed rain gardens, and community-stewarded grasslands. These tactics can help increase habitat, improve water filtration, and decrease mowable land.
- Adequately addressing major infrastructure challenges in coordination with the watershed districts. We have in some cases 60+ year old water-infrastructure that needs to be reevaluated and invested in.

**4. What steps will you take as a Park Commissioner to expand riverfront parks and to finish riverside pedestrian and bike paths in North and Northeast Minneapolis?**

I want to continue to work with the Minneapolis Parks Foundation in enhancing the connection between north neighborhoods and the riverfront. The Great Northern Greenway Project is a critical step to ensuring easy bike and pedestrian to the river. This is an environmental issue, an equity issue, and a prosperity issue.

**5. When, if ever, is it appropriate to privatize or sell public parkland? What is your position on the Hiawatha Golf Course?**

It is critical that we maintain all of our public park lands as public spaces for all to enjoy in perpetuity.

I support the process that the Park Board took to evaluate, hear from the community, and vote on the future of the Hiawatha Golf Course. Should I be elected to the Park Board and the question of what to do with Hiawatha Golf Course area comes before the Board, I will evaluate the situation as it stands at that time and listen to my constituents to make an informed decision.

**6. What is your position on the use of artificial turf in Minneapolis parks?**

The volatile and semivolatile organic compounds that emanate from artificial turf are concerning for potential human impacts. As I understand it, more research needs to be done to understand how any potential benefits (water saving, ending pesticide use, reducing need for riding mowers throughout the system) weigh with the potential harms (chemicals from synthetic materials, water runoff). I would exercise caution regarding any installation of artificial turf, and refrain from its use if it contains any tire crumb components.

**7. What specific steps will you take if (re-)elected to ensure that access to and quality of parks throughout the city—including upkeep of amenities like playgrounds, wading pools, tables, grills, etc.—are equitable across the city?**

There is an equity matrix being used to allocate the 20 year neighborhood park funds. I believe we should follow the recommendations of this carefully crafted matrix and constantly evaluate fund distribution as it corresponds to concentrated areas of poverty and racially concentrated areas of poverty. This work should be coordinated with a robust community communications plan to explain how funds are being distributed, while asking for community feedback along the way.

**8. The MPRB has a unique budget process. In what ways will you, if (re-)elected, work to bring greater integrity, fairness, and opportunity to the budgeting, procurement, and contracting processes?**

A few ways:

1. Putting the Park Board budget on Open Budget (as used by the City of St Paul) or a similar platform to provide more easily accessible public understanding of the somewhat complex Park Board budget.
2. Reevaluating all no-bid contracts.
3. I propose breaking down our programming budgets park-by-park to allow for greater flexibility in spending.
4. I propose piloting participatory budgeting around the city to empower community-based parks decision making.
5. Regarding contracting, I propose the Park Board be directed to develop relationships with minority and women owned businesses and directly encourage these businesses to apply for contracts.
6. Explore the viability of enhanced DBE preferences in all contracting.

**9. How will you ensure that parks are well-connected to the city's bikeways?**

I will ensure that the planning department is continuing to coordinate with the 2011 Minneapolis Bicycle Master Plan, so that trail upgrades take into account transitions to the greater Minneapolis bicycle network.

**10. What is your position on Crown Hydro?**

I echo Congressman Ellison's concerns about Crown Hydro given last year's Environmental Impact Statement. I do not currently believe that Crown Hydro has a compelling reason for their proposed site at St Anthony Falls. The environmental risks and direct conflict with the RiverFirst initiative (Water Works in particular) are enough to greatly outweigh any vague potential energy benefits.

**11. Minneapolis parks include hundreds of miles of shoreline. How do you propose to improve litter collection in our parks to ensure that less trash pollutes our lakes and rivers?**

A sustainable, clean park system is a community effort. It takes planning, education, coordination, and commitment. A few concrete possibilities:

1. Coordinate with Minneapolis' Climate Action Plan goals, which includes education and advertising around reducing the overall carbon footprint of the city.
2. Coordinate with neighborhood organizations. Many neighborhood organizations have a yearly, or twice-yearly, neighborhood cleanup. These cleanup events should be coordinated with the Park Board. This could best be achieved by investing in our neighborhood park staff to ensure each park has a staff liaison to the local neighborhood organization.
3. Make it easier to volunteer. Currently volunteers need to pass a background check to pull out weeds or clean up litter on behalf of the park board. Volunteering is centralized at the main park board offices. I propose we streamline volunteering opportunities by allowing community members to sign-up to volunteer at their local park.
4. Expand composting disposal options at park sites.

**12. If you are (re-)elected, how will you develop stronger partnerships and collaboration with schools? Include ideas for coordination on after school access and programming, as well as partnering on environmental education opportunities, if applicable.**

The recent MOU with between MPS and MPRB is a great step in creating better mutually beneficial coordination between our parks and schools. There is a fantastic opportunity to coordinate on a variety of initiatives:

1. Urban food and healthy eating. The Farm to School program gets kids healthy lunches one day a week right now. Using the Urban Agriculture Plan, the Park Board and School Board are poised to be able to move quickly in implementing community gardens adjacent to schools throughout the city. These gardens can be student-tended and incorporated into curricula in the sciences, health, and history.
2. Coordinating Park and School sports teams for elementary and middle school. There is currently overlap in park and school sports provided to our city's youth. With the competition of club sports, it is important we find ways to coordinate resources for our youth teams. This will strengthen communities through recreation sports and provide youth more valuable experiences.
3. Remove ID requirements to sign up for park board activities and after school programs.

**13. What should the role of the Park Police be?**

Park Police should make everybody in our communities feel safe. True community policing models give officers a wealth of non-punitive, non-threatening tools to ensure that our parks feel safe for everybody. I think the MPRB can be leaders in investing in more mental health professionals on patrols. I also think we should move forward on investigating whether there is truly a need for our police force to carry firearms.