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FORUM: GMPT 2027 Legislative Policies & Agenda Overview

This article was created by AI summarizing key points discussed. AI makes mistakes, so for full details and context, please refer to the video of the full meeting.

Quick recap

Elizabeth Wefel, lobbyist for Greater Minnesota Parks and Trails, conducted a legislative policy forum to discuss proposed policies and priorities for the upcoming legislative session. She outlined the political landscape ahead of the November 3rd elections, noting that all 201 legislative seats are up for reelection with close margins expected in both the House and Senate. The organization's top priority emerged from member feedback regarding protecting Greater Minnesota's share of legacy funds, particularly addressing new geographic restrictions on Conservation Partners Legacy Grants that were unexpectedly imposed during the previous session's final hours, limiting eligibility to only metro areas and cities over 50,000 population. Elizabeth presented proposed policy changes including reauthorization of the legacy amendment, updated language supporting the Commission's grant recommendations, and new agenda items focusing on outdoor heritage funding and e-bike issues. The group discussed concerns about grant administration fees and the importance of supporting legislation that allocates 20% of Parks and Trails Fund to Greater Minnesota.

Next steps

Collaboration

- All Attendees: Register for the annual meeting in Duluth if not already done.
- All Attendees: Start or refresh relationships with legislators, especially if they are new.
- All Attendees: Engage with local city and county elected officials on these issues.
- All Attendees: Follow Greater Minnesota Parks and Trails on Facebook and read monthly newsletters for updates.
- All Attendees: Inform Elizabeth and the board about local community issues to inform legislative work.

Summary

2027 Legislative Policies Planning Meeting

Elizabeth led a meeting where she was waiting for additional participants to join before beginning the discussion. She shared a link to the clean version of proposed legislative policies and agenda for 2027. The meeting appeared to be informal, with Elizabeth offering to meet with Marianne for coffee in Saint Paul next time she visits for a workshop.

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Legislative Session and Election Implications

Elizabeth Wefel, the lobbyist for Greater Minnesota Parks and Trails, discussed the upcoming legislative session and election implications. She noted that all 201 legislative seats are up for reelection, with both major parties confident about potential victories, though the DFL may have a slight edge. Elizabeth explained that regardless of party control, the organization will need to establish relationships with new committee leaders, particularly in environment and legacy committees, as committee membership details typically won't be released until later in December. She also highlighted that the legislative session will focus on budget passage by June 30th, though the state budget remains "wobbly" due to reduced federal support, especially affecting counties.

Legislative Session Planning Discussion

Elizabeth discussed the upcoming legislative session starting January 12th, noting that while a legacy bill is expected to pass, a bonding bill is unlikely this year due to limited debt capacity. She outlined the organization's legislative priorities based on a recent survey, with key focuses including protecting Greater Minnesota's share of legacy funds, addressing the recent restriction of Conservation Partners Legacy Grants to the metropolitan area and Duluth/Rochester, and considering e-bike funding. Elizabeth also mentioned the need to monitor Wilderness Inquiry funding within the parks and trails budget, as it may conflict with statutory language.

Legacy Amendment Reauthorization Policies

Elizabeth discussed changes to policies, focusing on pushing for reauthorization of the legacy amendment, which does not need reauthorization until 2033 but requires early preparation. She emphasized the importance of a clean reauthorization to secure funding for parks and trails in Greater Minnesota. The group also discussed removing specific grant names from the policies to focus on increasing funding through available sources like the DNR, with plans to continue working on programs such as community grants for trail maintenance.

Policy Consolidation and E-Bike Plans

Elizabeth explained plans to consolidate three policies into one to streamline language and better align with the commission's current practices, noting that the commission has successfully distributed funding more equitably statewide. She introduced two new policy items: restoring outdoor heritage funding availability statewide and addressing e-bike usage challenges, with the latter focusing on supporting legal e-bike use while addressing safety concerns through increased enforcement.

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Priority Changes and Funding Updates

Elizabeth discussed changes to priorities, mentioning support for engaged organizations like the Bicycle Alliance. Trevor expressed approval of the new focus, particularly for Crow Wing County. Jessica asked for clarification on CPL funds and access for Greater Minnesota, which Elizabeth explained was related to budget allocations and political developments during the 2025 session and recent committee hearings.

Geographic Restrictions on Conservation Grants

Elizabeth explained that a geographic restriction was added to the Conservation Partners Legacy Grant Program during legislative negotiations, limiting eligibility to only cities and counties in the metro area and cities in greater Minnesota with populations over 50,000. This change affected cities like Duluth, Rochester, and St. Cloud while excluding other cities and counties, leading to opposition from conservation groups and deer hunters. Jessica raised concerns about the commission's role in awarding grants and shared past experiences with political interference in LCCMR funding decisions.

Parks and Trails Legislative Priorities

The meeting focused on discussing legislative priorities for parks and trails funding. Elizabeth outlined four key agenda items: supporting legislation to allocate 20% of the Parks and Trails Fund to Greater Minnesota, addressing concerns about state grant administration fees, supporting park extensions, and advocating for funding in the LCCMR bill. The group discussed strategies for protecting grant funding from political interference and the importance of building relationships with legislators. Next steps include attending the upcoming annual meeting in Duluth, building relationships with legislators, engaging with local elected officials, and following the organization's social media channels for updates.