

# BEST PRACTICES SUMMIT: A CROSS-AGENCY SUCCESS!

Thanks to the participation and commitment of over 230 people, the Best Practices for Parks and Outdoor Recreation Summit was a resounding success! People from city, county, state and federal agencies, private consultants and educators shared information, exchanged ideas and networked while enjoying the setting of the Minnesota Landscape Arboretum in Chaska, MN on April 4<sup>th</sup> & 5<sup>th</sup>.

The purpose of this report is to summarize the Summit, but more importantly, it is meant to serve as a source of information to help guide the next steps in the Best Practices project. Summit participants were prompted to provide feedback on the summit overall; each session they attended; plus their suggestions and ideas for next steps in the project – regional workshops, the best practices website and other post-summit initiatives.

## SUMMIT OVERVIEW

John VonDeLinde kicked off the two-day event along with Representative Kathy Tingelstad, who was instrumental in securing the support from the Legislative Commission on Minnesota Resources. Next, three diverse speakers shared trends that are impacting parks and outdoor recreation in Minnesota. As opposed to providing all of the answers, their job was to challenge each of us in our daily work to address the hard questions necessary to move our profession forward.

Following the trends speakers, 15 concurrent roundtable discussions convened. The topics were purposefully diverse – from broad topics such as: Serving the Outdoor Needs of Changing Populations and Managing Performance; to the more specific topics of Stormwater Management and Collaborating with Developers. Each session was 90 minutes in length; the first 30 minutes featuring a panel presentation to share some best practices; followed by an hour of moderated discussion exploring challenges people face in the topic area, discussing existing best practices and determining the gaps.

One of the major successes was the open, exploratory, two-way format of the sessions. While it took awhile for panel members and participants alike to break out of “conference mode,” once the switch was made, robust cross-agency, collaborative and exploratory discussions ensued. On the second day, the summit took the collaborative and exploratory approach a step further by throwing an Open Space Event, a process which empowers participants to define and moderate their own discussions.

## OVERALL FEEDBACK ABOUT THE SUMMIT

Participants were asked to complete an evaluation form at the end of the summit commenting on what they found to be most and least valuable, their overall reactions, the priorities they saw emerging from the summit and how those priorities should move forward. An overwhelming majority (93%) said the summit was definitely worthwhile. Fifty percent

said it was a “5” – It was great! Extremely valuable! Forty-three percent said it was a “4” – I am so glad I came! The remaining 7% said it was okay.

Following are some representative comments that touch on the range of comments received:

*“The open space sessions really gathered people of similar interests together and stimulated discussion and idea sharing.”*

*“The marketing breakout was excellent (great speakers). The change in schedule Wed. afternoon was also great because it created more interaction.”*

*[Most valuable] “Networking with some “new” folks, hearing about what others are doing.”*

*[Most valuable]” Various cultures and age groups we may be missing, design trends, talking/sharing ideas with one another.”*

*[Least valuable] “Topics occasionally too broad. Presenters may have taken a bit too much time, may need to take more of a facilitators approach.”*

*[Least valuable]” Talks given during lunch because our networking opportunities were interrupted.”*

*“I really enjoyed the discussions about making outdoors recreation important to more people. I enjoyed the discussion about parks and especially trail planning.”*

*“There was no part of the summit that had no value. This is the best professional meeting I’ve attended in my 31 year career.”*

*[Most valuable] “That a meeting was dedicated toward trying to provide the ‘best’ practices available and that they will hopefully affect the whole state.”*

In response to the questions, “What are the priorities you see emerging out of the summit?,” most of the feedback can be summarized by saying people see a need for continued networking, collaboration, information sharing and coordination.

## WHERE DO WE GO FROM HERE?

Mid-day on the second day of the summit, participants spent about 30 minutes completing a feedback form that enabled them to provide input on shaping the regional workshops, website and the project overall. In regard to the regional workshops, people were asked:

1. *What topics are best suited for a regional workshop?*
2. *Where do you think the workshops should be held? (Please indicate if a particular topic is best suited to a certain location.)*
3. *Would you consider hosting a workshop?*

In reference to the website ([www.bestpracticesmn.org](http://www.bestpracticesmn.org)) participants were asked:

4. *What topics are best suited for the website?*
5. *For what topic(s) would you consider submitting a BP?*
6. *In addition to the website, what other types of communication tools would be valuable to you?*

Last, participants were asked about their vision for the project:

7. *What is your vision for this Best Practices for Parks and Outdoor Recreation initiative? What needs to happen to make this initiative stick past June 2007? What do we all need to do to be more successful as a community of park and outdoor recreation providers?*

Following is a summary of the highlights of the feedback. Please contact Kathy Schoenbauer ([kathys@mnrecpark.org](mailto:kathys@mnrecpark.org)) if you would like a copy of the raw data.

### Regional Workshop Ideas

As one might imagine, the ideas for workshop topics and locations were wide-ranging. Some people indicated that each of the 15 topics that served as the basis for roundtable discussions should be expanded into regional workshops. Others' perspectives were narrower and based upon their specific area of interest. Bottom-line is that we received a variety of excellent ideas. Following is a non-prioritized "laundry list" of ideas for workshop topics. The more frequently mentioned workshop topics include:

- Engaging non-traditional communities/diverse populations; and non-users
- New marketing strategies for outdoor recreation (e.g., how-to create marketing strategies; ensuring we send a common marketing message)
- Cross-agency mentoring program (concern about the looming boomer retirements)
- DNR trails manual
- Trail planning & collaboration
- Green park care
- Park and trail design and management (esp. addressing environmentally and fiscally sustainable objectives)
- Educating the public about practices (e.g., prescribed burns)
- Legislative issues; political will; working with political decision-makers
- Health & wellness & parks
- Maintenance practices & BPs
- System planning – for all types of communities (large and small – particular need in smaller communities with limited staff)
- Working with special interest groups
- Surface and stormwater management
- Innovative financing approaches; funding alternatives
- Natural resource management and protection
- Advocacy and volunteer groups
- Connecting with youth and young adults
- Outdoor education
- Collaboration – across agencies and public and private & at a regional level

- Performance management 101 for entry-level supervisors
- Research and evaluation; research consortium
- Sustaining outdoor recreation facilities; asset management
- Technology
- Trends – what’s coming down the pike that could impact us?
- Sustainable waterside development (e.g., water accesses, shore fishing, etc.)
- Strategic planning – what it is, how to do it and why
- Issues important to those outside the metro

In addition to the workshop ideas, numerous participants expressed willingness to host a workshop. In terms of location for the summit, many people praised the Arboretum. However, there were a number of comments stating that it is important to have workshops throughout the state; that in some ways the summit was a bit metro-centric. We plan to use a two-prong approach in identifying workshops – topic-driven and geography-driven.

### Website Ideas

The ideas for the Best Practices website were wide-ranging. In general, people want the website to be a source of best practices, links to other resources and an opportunity to network with others involved in parks and outdoor recreation. Of those that completed the “Where Do We Go From Here?” form, roughly half listed topics for which they would consider submitting a best practice. Many acknowledged the challenge is in getting people to submit best practices and accustomed to using the website on a fairly regular basis.

The website ideas provided by summit participants are too wide-ranging to capture here. Following is a partial “laundry list” of some of the topics mentioned:

- Map of all existing and planned trails in the state
- List of all contact people for all trail efforts
- Post sample forms – e.g., liability waivers, joint powers agreements, contracts, concession agreements, etc.
- Create a MapQuest for trails
- Clearinghouse for information about projects that are completed each year
- Resources to help educate developers to better conservation design concepts
- Add a how-to on strategic planning to the website
- Data/research/info exchange – post survey instruments, links, do’s and don’ts
- Post policies, procedures, funding aids
- Natural resources – prescribed burning techniques, land owner contact, deer info, invasive species
- O & M templates and standards
- Post an inventory of how/what technology is used by organizations along with a Consumer Reports type evaluation for each application.
- Health resources
- Funding resources
- Any technical topic
- Case studies
- Green product successes

- Fee issues – fee schedules, collection methods, etc.
- Park system and trail system planning models
- Budget practices
- Surface and storm water research and case studies
- Who to contact about parks, recreation, and trails in your area

***Your best practices are needed!*** We know that each of you has a number of best practices that will benefit park and outdoor recreation professionals from throughout the state. ***The Best Practices website will be as valuable as you make it.*** It takes just a few minutes to contribute your best practices to the collective knowledge and value of all. Click on: [www.bestpracticesmn.org](http://www.bestpracticesmn.org) to find out how easy it is!

### Vision for the Project

People were very forthcoming with their vision for the project. There were many good ideas/suggestions to ensure the success of the 18-month project. Not surprisingly, few people were able to articulate how to make the initiative stick past June 2007.

Of note, one individual set forth a challenge for all of us:

*“Open the discussion to further more participation of all stakeholders. Get together with everyone across the state. I volunteer for organizations who have never heard of Minnesota Recreation and Park Association!!! [In order to be recognized as] the voice of outdoor recreation you will need to have greater awareness and participation [from outside the industry].”*

### SUMMARY

The project team is now in the process of analyzing participant feedback. This feedback, along with input from the project advisory board, will be used to help shape future regional workshops and the best practices website.

Please direct your ideas and comments for the workshops and website to:  
Kathy Schoenbauer, Project Manager, MRPA, [kathys@mnrecpark.org](mailto:kathys@mnrecpark.org) 763.571.1305 x. 105.  
Emmett Mullin, DNR Staff, [emmett.mullin@dnr.state.mn.us](mailto:emmett.mullin@dnr.state.mn.us). 651.259.5566.

*Thanks to all of you who contributed to a great summit!*

Submitted by: Kathy Schoenbauer, Project Manager

*Please contact me ([kathys@mnrecpark.org](mailto:kathys@mnrecpark.org)) if you are interested in reading through the actual feedback forms.*