**PROJECT TITLE:** Creating welcoming environments at Minnesota State Parks

**I. PROJECT STATEMENT**

This project provides Minnesota State Park and Trail (PAT) visitors with an integrated, next-generation information system that creates a positive, safe, and welcoming experience for all users. Minnesota state parks and trails are more popular than ever (10M visitors in 2016), providing a statewide outdoor recreation system to visitors with a wide variety of backgrounds, some of whom are familiar with the system and others who have never before visited. Based on a 2014 Metropolitan Council study on Regional Park use, some of the barriers for new users to visiting parks are fear/safety issues, challenges with maps, and lack of awareness of parks. With an increase in new users and changes in the needs and expectations that come with them, establishing an integrated public information package (orientation, kiosks and wayfinding signage) will increase system continuity and provide improved public safety as well as self-direction and wayfinding. Also, by providing clear and concise information and wayfinding signage, visitors will experience more welcoming and understandable information to help them access and connect to all of Minnesota’s outdoor recreation system.

This project will improve the orientation and wayfinding information system for 10-15 rustic state park and recreation areas throughout the state. Rustic parks and recreation areas, as defined by the Minnesota State Parks and Trails System Plan (2015), offer basic amenities, including picnic tables, fire rings, and orientation signage. Rustic parks rely on self-directed services such as self-guided interpretation and self-registration. Many park visitors prefer these types of rustic opportunities because they offer a quiet, natural experience.

Creating a welcoming environment is a key aspect of bringing new and under-served audiences into Minnesota’s state parks. Under-represented audiences report two key barriers to park visitation: 1) fear of “wild” places and navigating through them (i.e., wayfinding); and 2) lack of knowledge about what to do when they get there. In addition, a survey found that more than 30% of all vehicles that pass through the entrance gate of state parks do so without paying for the required vehicle permit. Our point-of-arrival pilot project has identified needed improvements to state parks to: reduce visitor confusion; provide clear wayfinding signage to help newcomers feel safer and more secure at our parks; and reduce failure to pay fees, which will improve the health of the state park revenue account.

This project proposes to invest in critical site-level improvements that will welcome new visitors and under-served populations into Minnesota’s outdoor recreation system by:

1. Creating consistent, easy-to-follow guidance for visitors to orient themselves to the state park experience;
2. Replacing dilapidated, ineffective signage with consistently easy-to-find, plain-language wayfinding that follows national best management practices and enhances visitor connectedness and satisfaction; and
3. Installing user-friendly, secure electronic pay stations at state park entrances that will make compliance with fee requirements fast and easy.

**II. PROJECT ACTIVITIES AND OUTCOMES**

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| **Activity 1: Planning and design of a welcoming environment****Description:** *Building on a recent continuous improvement project, DNR will engage visitors in discussions and planning for a more welcoming and consistent orientation and wayfinding information system for 10-15 geographically dispersed rustic state parks and recreation areas.***ENRTF BUDGET: $282,168** |  |
| **Outcome** | **Completion Date** |
| *1. Engage new visitors in design of improved orientation/wayfinding approach* | *Dec 1, 2020* |
| *2. Develop consistent orientation/wayfinding standards and templates* | *Mar 31, 2021* |
| *3. Develop site plans for each project location* | *Oct 31, 2021* |

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| **Activity 2: Implement new orientation/wayfinding plans at 10-15 state parks and recreation areas****Description:** *Install orientation and wayfinding information systems so that visitors will be greeted with information that helps them feel welcome, safe and ready to experience their parks.***ENRTF BUDGET: $2,282,999** |  |
| **Outcome** | **Completion Date** |
| 1. *Develop and fabricate information systems*
 | *Dec 30, 2022* |
| 1. *Install information systems*
 | *Jun 30, 2022* |
| 1. *Evaluate information systems*
 | *Jun 30, 2023* |

**III. PROJECT PARTNERS AND COLLABORATORS:**

The project team consists of DNR Parks and Trails staff. Staff from park units dispersed throughout the state will contribute expertise and time to the success of this project. Only DNR will be receiving project funds. Project staff will include our visitor services supervisor; exhibit specialist; cartographer; and state park consultant. These staff would be responsible for the integrated project design. Several park naturalists and unit supervisors will be responsible for providing site-specific content and coordinating projects on site.

**IV. LONG-TERM IMPLEMENTATION AND FUNDING:**

Connecting people to the outdoors means breaking down barriers that inhibit them. Recreational research demonstrates that people who are new to outdoor recreational pursuits need re-assurance to feel comfortable in the great outdoors. DNR has initiated an effort to establish a consistent self-direction, orientation, wayfinding, and interpretive public information program with a pilot project at our newest state park: Lake Vermilion-Soudan Underground Mine. With this proposal, PAT will expand the learnings from that pilot visual standard to 10-15 additional parks and trails sites. Future plans are to implement these standards statewide. This proposal is an innovative approach to implementing a well-integrated public information system that will benefit all visitors, regardless of background, ability or previous outdoor recreation experience. This project will help DNR meet a long-term goal that State Parks visitation will match the state’s changing demographics by creating welcoming environments that will encourage deeper connections to some of Minnesota’s most inspiring natural landscapes and outdoor recreation activities.

**V. SEE ADDITIONAL PROPOSAL COMPONENTS:**

**A. Proposal Budget Spreadsheet**

**B. Map of Investment Groups from the Minnesota State Parks and Trails System Plan**

**C. Project Manager Qualifications and Organization Description**