

Parks and Recreation Division Report

August 2026

PROGRAMMING

55+ Programs

A variety of 55+ Activity Clubs meet weekly in community centers year-round. Mahjong continues to grow in popularity. About 24 people meet every Wednesday at Evergreen to play. Cribbage is also popular, gathering around 30 people on Saturdays and Tuesdays at Evergreen.

Special thanks to the Evergreen Senior Board, which sponsored a summer picnic at Evergreen Senior Center on July 14. Volunteers served lunch to 50 people, who then stayed to play bingo.



Stand-Up Paddleboarding Programs

June and July were full of paddle opportunities along the shores of the St. Louis River. Most notably we are excited to partner with North Shore SUP to offer free paddle nights several times this summer out at Chambers Grove. North Shore SUP provides all the gear and instruction to get people out on the water whether you are an experienced paddler or new to the sport. These evenings have been a huge hit with many people joining. A huge thanks to North Shore SUP for a fun opportunity to be on the water in one of our amazing parks!



Athletics

Parks & Recreation's adult pickleball league wrapped up its first session in early July, with 25 participants joining. The second session runs through August and has 21 participants playing pickleball at Wheeler Athletic Complex weekly.

Summer usage of our athletic fields, diamonds, and courts has been flourishing this summer. In addition to weekly league play at the Wheeler Athletic Complex, we have hosted several tournaments as well. Below is a group photo of some of the teams at the Duluth Fastpitch Zmackdown tournament that took place July 24-26.



Music in the Park

Tuesday nights have had a string of beautiful weather, perfect for the Music in the Park concert series. This year, all concerts have been held at Lincoln Park from 6:30-8pm, with crowds of 400-500+ people each night. One highlight of hosting concerts at Lincoln Park is the amount of people who utilize the paved pathway through the park for an evening walk, then stay for a while to enjoy some music!



Youth Programs

Summer is a busy time for youth programming! Parks & Recreation plans and leads a wide variety of programs that get kids outside to explore Duluth, try new activities, and spend time together with other kids. Activities so far this summer included fishing, mountain biking, hiking, and more! Outside of our public Parks & Recreation programs, we also provide high-quality outdoor experiences for local groups and organizations such as Denfeld High School, Duluth Community Schools Collaborative at Lincoln Park Middle School and Myers-Wilkins Elementary School, Family Freedom Center, Valley Youth Center, Neighborhood Youth Services, and The Boys & Girls Club.

Story & Play

It has been another successful year of our partner program with the Duluth Public Library: Story & Play. Visiting a new park each Monday morning, we regularly see 150-250 people join us for a storytime with the Library and play time with Parks & Recreation. This is a great program to kick off the week with grandparents, parents, caretakers, and kids.



Pop-Up Splash Pads

This partner program with the Duluth Fire Department has been more popular than ever this year. The first two splash pads, at Grant Park and Keene Creek Park, both saw more than 500 people stop by to cool off on a summer day. We have had great community support for these events, including from Whole Foods Co-Op bringing bananas and Jonny Pops for attendees. The final Pop-Up Splash Pad of the summer was on Thursday, August 6 at Morgan Park.



Fishing Programs

Gone Fishin' sessions focus on education: how to fish, what baits to use, how to tie fishing knots, information on invasive species, and more. This program is supported by the Minnesota DNR with fishing license waivers for adults and lead-free lures provided by the Minnesota Pollution Control Agency. The final Gone Fishin' program is on Monday, August 10 at Twin Ponds.

Fishing Club sessions focus on providing fishing opportunities along the shoreline of the St. Louis River. While there is no formal education during this program, all equipment is provided and Parks & Recreation staff are available to provide guidance. This program started out with an average of 6-10 participants, but interest has grown! The past two sessions have had 18 and 30 participants respectively. The final Fishing Club program is on Wednesday, August 19.

Hiking the Superior Hiking Trail: The Duluth Edition

On June 23, Parks & Recreation kicked off the annual ten-part hiking series along the Duluth portion of the Superior Hiking Trail, starting in Fond du Lac. The Parks & Recreation van meets hikers at the end of the hike section and shuttles them to the start of the hike, where they hike back to their vehicles. Many participants are returners from previous years, but there are new folks that join every summer. The final hike of the series will take place on August 25 and end the Duluth portion of the Superior Hiking Trail at the Martin Road Trailhead.



OPERATIONS

Social Media Growth

Facebook audience size over the past three years has experienced steady growth. Yearly new followers have increased year over year.

Time Period	Total New Facebook Followers	Average New Followers Per Day
July 2023 – June 2024	1,776	4.8
July 2024 – June 2025	2,201	6
July 2025 – June 2026	2,892	7.9

Over these three years, while the Parks Facebook page also lost followers at an average rate of 1.3 followers per day, we have found that when unfollows happen, it leaves us with a more engaged audience. This is normal and healthy for a social media page and could be for a variety of reasons:

- Life changes happen and 12% of Americans move each year.
- Some followers find us through viral posts like the pelican videos that do not represent our normal content and unfollow soon after they follow.
- Meta purges spam and bot accounts frequently.

Even so, the rate of new followers far outpaces the unfollows. In 2023, we had about 12,000 new followers, and today we have 17,000, representing a 41% increase.

Permits in 2026

PERMIT TYPE	January	February	March	April	May	June	July
Park, Building, & Gym Rentals	54	67	86	99	161	236	193
Commercial Operator Permits	1	1	2	0	7	6	5
Alcohol Consumption Permits	6	1	2	5	14	18	17
Total	61	69	90	104	182	260	215

PROJECT UPDATES

Athletic Venues Initiative

Based on feedback received at the May focus group meetings, and with assistance from professional consulting firms, City staff are exploring multiple options/possibilities for ice facility investments and artificial turf field investments in Duluth. The outcome of these studies will assist with developing a revised funding approach for the remainder of the Athletic Venues funds. Staff continue to engage with athletic groups for ongoing conversations and feedback. The studies are expected to be completed by the end of September.

Chester Bowl – Thom Storm Chalet Reconstruction

Construction is underway at the Thom Storm Chalet! Work completed to date includes foundation work, including the expanded footprint that will allow for an accessible elevator, mechanical rough-ins, and new concrete. Soon, the construction crew will be building upwards! The project is moving along well thanks to the dedicated and detailed work of staff from Property and Facilities Management (PFM), LHB, BP Builders, and Chester Bowl Improvement Club (CBIC). Behind the scenes, CBIC and Parks & Recreation staff are working with historian Charlene Roise to develop interpretative displays highlighting the history and significance of Chester Park and the chalet. The interpretative displays will be installed within the newly constructed chalet, which is expected to be completed in early 2027.



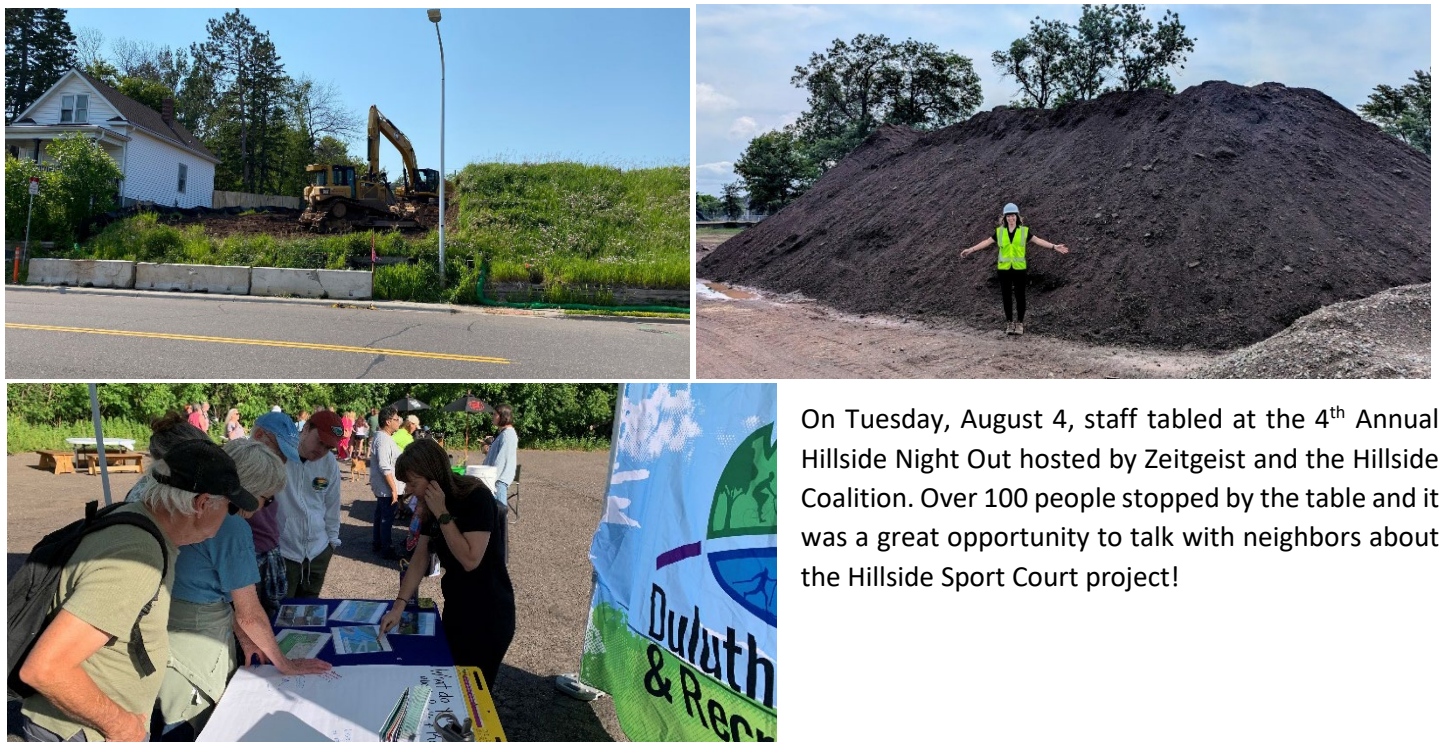
Hawk Ridge Nature Reserve – Accessible Trail Improvements

Construction of the 0.6-mile accessible trail at Hawk Ridge Nature Reserve is nearly complete and looking fantastic! Thank you to SAS and our PFM team for their exceptional construction management and oversight, and to Zenith Trail Contracting for their excellent work and beautiful craftsmanship. The trail is expected to receive its final touches and be fully open to the public within the next few weeks. Planning for a community celebration and ribbon cutting event is in the works, so keep an eye out for that invitation soon!



Hillside Sport Court Park

The reconstruction of Hillside Sport Court Park is in progress! Extensive grading work has been done to better connect the lower portion of the park to the adjacent neighborhood. Concrete work is currently underway, with some sidewalks and stairs already installed. Next steps include finishing the concrete work, preparing for and installing the new playground, and reconstructing the sport court. The project is expected to be completed this fall.



On Tuesday, August 4, staff tabled at the 4th Annual Hillside Night Out hosted by Zeitgeist and the Hillside Coalition. Over 100 people stopped by the table and it was a great opportunity to talk with neighbors about the Hillside Sport Court project!

Norton Park

Last year, the City of Duluth was awarded an Outdoor Recreation Grant from the MN Department of Natural Resources. There was a four-month delay getting the grant agreement from the State, and the grant agreement was authorized by City Council on July 27 and now the project can move forward! The project includes replacing the existing playground that is at the end of its useful life, installing a pavilion, adding an accessible route for the site, sealing and restriping the basketball pad, regrading the multi-use field, and adding stormwater management to the site to redirect water and improve drainage for the field. Staff are finalizing the construction documents and anticipate putting the project to bid in the coming weeks.

The playground renderings illustrate the equipment that will be installed at Norton Park. It features a play area for ages 2-5 and 5-12, which expands the age range served here from the previous equipment that primarily served ages 5-12 with two rockers for younger kids. Among other accessible elements, the new equipment features an ADA Loop Slide that has a connection at the bottom of a slide to a climbing apparatus that can be more easily navigated by children with mobility limitations.



The timing for the Norton Park project may work out for a contractor to be able to complete the project before winter, but there is also a strong possibility that the project could be pushed to construction next year. The playground equipment has been ordered, but the roughly 8-week manufacture timeline means installation could be in October at the earliest. Let's keep fingers crossed for a warm fall to give us the best chance at completing this exciting project this year!

Signage – New Installs and Replacements

Coming soon to a park near you! New signage and wayfinding will be installed at parks and trails throughout the city, from Perch Lake to Brighton Beach and many places in between. These additions will help guide motorists to parking lots and trailheads, and also provide wayfinding maps and trail assurance markers to help park users further enjoy our public park spaces. This round of sign installations includes Perch Lake, Morgan Park, Munger Landing, Wade Stadium, Wheeler Athletic Complex, Congdon Park, Portman Park, and Brighton Beach.

PARK MAINTENANCE UPDATES

In addition to all the maintenance work that keeps our parks and trails operating, staff have accomplished two special projects: resetting the landscaping at Memorial Park and resetting the park meadow and raised planters at Sister Cities Park. Park Maintenance staff are also in the process of removing dilapidated infrastructure at Central Hillside Park including two sets of old stairs made of railroad ties that are failing along 3rd Street (before and after pictured below), the toddler playground equipment that was at the end of its useful life located at the corner of Lake Avenue and 4th Street, and grinding stumps from previously removed ash trees. Work is well underway.



Park Maintenance Manager

The Park Maintenance Division said farewell to manager Abbie Hopper earlier this month. We are grateful to Cliff Knettel, Assistant Manager at Parks & Recreation, for stepping into the role for the time being as Interim Manager. The Park Maintenance Manager position will be posted on the City jobs website in August, and we hope to hire someone soon.

VOLUNTEER HIGHLIGHT

On July 9, the Duluth Monarch Buddies held a milkweed planting event at Kitchi Gammi Park (Brighton Beach) to enhance the existing naturalized landscape areas near the playground and pavilion. The 12 volunteers planted 124 milkweed plugs!

