How did the MPRB decide to close or modify park amenities?

Since mid-March, the Minneapolis Park and Recreation Board (MPRB) has actively monitored and responded to the coronavirus (COVID-19) pandemic with guidance from local, state and federal officials. MPRB leadership staff meets daily to plan COVID-19 strategies to protect the health and safety of the MPRB organization, its employees and park users.

On March 27, 2020, Governor Walz issued Executive Order 20-20 directing Minnesotans to “Stay at Home.” This lawful order restricted park uses with the following exception:

Outdoor activities. Individuals may engage in outdoor activities (e.g., walking, hiking, running, biking, driving for pleasure, hunting, or fishing), and may go to available public parks and other public recreation lands, consistent with remaining at least six feet apart from individuals from other households. This does not exempt public accommodations that may feature outdoor activities from closure under Executive Order 20-04 and does not permit trespass upon private property.

Effective on April 18, 2020, Governor Walz issued executive order (EO 20-38) setting updated requirements for outdoor recreation:

Individuals may engage in any outdoor activity that is dependent upon or derives its principal benefit from natural surroundings and open space, including but not limited to hunting, fishing, trapping, boating, hiking, biking, golfing, and picnicking for the purposes of pleasure, rest, exercise, or relaxation, provided that the activity can be engaged in accordance with the Outdoor Recreation Guidelines, including maintaining at least six feet of separation between participants from different households. Groups within a single household may engage in outdoor activities or sports that do not allow for social distancing (e.g., soccer or basketball) but should not engage in such activities with members of other households.

For the past several weeks, the MPRB focused on education and outreach in an attempt to establish social distancing compliance from the public, as required by the executive orders. Extensive efforts were made by the MPRB to avoid closing park amenities like other park systems have done locally and across the country. On Friday, April 24, the MPRB made the difficult decision to modify or close park amenities for the health of the community and based on the following recommendations, data and observations.

Public Health Guidance

April 3: The Minneapolis Health Department (MHD) provided clear guidelines to the MPRB for what is allowed and not allowed for a variety of park activities to ensure social distancing. In response to those guidelines, the MPRB launched its “Do Your Part” campaign on April 9 to encourage better compliance with social distancing to avoid closing park amenities like playgrounds and basketball and tennis courts.
April 10: The MHD recommended removal of basketball hoops due to concerns about lack of social distancing at basketball courts.

April 23: The MHD recommended MPRB make unavailable amenities which intrinsically make it difficult for people to physically distance such as basketball, soccer, use of playground equipment, trails and tennis courts. Recommendations included taking down basketball hoops, soccer nets and tennis nets.

April 24: Based on MHD guidelines, the rise in COVID-19 infections and deaths, and ongoing reports and observations of park use, the MPRB announced modifications and closures for many amenities would be complete by May 1. This includes closing playgrounds, skateparks, athletic fields and athletic courts for general public and team use; however, programming options are being explored to allow scheduled play. Parkway closures in areas experiencing trail congestion have been in effect for several weeks to expand social distancing for walkers.

In addition, the Centers for Disease Control and Prevention (CDC) has issued guidance for parks and recreation administrators. In part, the guidance states:

In general, most organized activities and sports such as basketball, baseball, soccer, and football that are held on park fields, open areas, and courts are not recommended during times in which individuals are encouraged or required to practice social distancing. These activities and sports typically require coaches and athletes who are not from the same household or living unit to be in close proximity, which increases their potential for exposure to COVID-19

National Trends and Park Surveys

MPRB leadership has been monitoring COVID-19 related trends locally and across the country. The MPRB has taken these trends, along with recommendations by public health officials, into consideration when making decisions.

National Recreation and Park Association

On March 30, the National Recreation and Park Association (NRPA) issued a statement recommending the closure of playgrounds. Neither Minnesota nor Minneapolis public health officials were recommending playground closures at that time. On April 23, the Minneapolis Health Department recommended closing playgrounds due to lack of social distancing.

On March 27, NRPA began conducting a weekly survey of park agency responses to COVID-19. The latest survey, using data collected April 15-17, reported the following statistics from urban park agencies:

- 96% reported all playgrounds closed
- 88% reported all skateparks closed
- 85% reported all outdoor sports fields and courts closed

Public Complaints

An April 25 Star Tribune story references “more than 125 complaints” logged by 311. That is only small portion of the complaints/concerns the MPRB has received, including almost 400 registered by MPRB customer service email and phone lines. In addition to complaints logged by 311 and MPRB customer service, park staff, park commissioners, city
leadership and State of Minnesota hotline used to report violations of the executive orders have received many, many hundreds more.

Park Ambassador Observations

On April 11, the MPRB launched a Park Ambassador program using 150 reassigned staff. Approximately 45 teams of two are out in the parks daily (weather permitting) to provide information and encouragement on social distancing practices in neighborhood and regional parks.

The MPRB recognizes complaints filed by park users may reflect a personal implicit (unconscious) bias, so park staff tracked park use through the Park Ambassador program to ensure MPRB observations and public complaints are consistent. Park Ambassadors observed and recorded social distancing compliance by activity.

These observations were, in general, in alignment with public complaints and local and national data and trends – park users were not consistently following social distancing requirements at many park amenities, with tennis courts, picnic areas, soccer fields, playgrounds and basketball courts about 70% complaint with social distancing guidelines.

How has the public been informed about MHD recommendations and MPRB actions to close/modify park amenities?

Onsite Signs

Prior to April 24, approximately 2,700 multi-language signs were deployed encouraging social distancing. This included general social distancing signs and almost 800 “Do Your Part” signs encouraging park visitors to social distance to avoid having park amenities closed and tennis nets and basketball rims removed. Between April 24 and May 1, another 2,000 onsite signs are being deployed to all affected park amenities being closed.

Park Ambassadors

Park Ambassadors are out in the parks daily to provide information and encouragement on social distancing practices in neighborhood and regional parks.

News Releases

Since early April, multiple MPRB news releases were sent to more than 50 Minnesota news outlets, including print, online, television, radio, multicultural and specialty news organizations. Broad coverage has been received.

GovDelivery Mass Emails

On April 9, a GovDelivery mass email was sent urging people to take social distancing seriously at playgrounds, athletic courts/fields and trails. On April 24, another GovDelivery email was sent with information on the decision to close or modify park amenities. The emails were sent to more than 44,000 unique email addresses, including every neighborhood association in Minneapolis. As of 1:30 pm on April 28, the emails have been opened by more than 20,000 unique email addresses.
Social Media

MPRB Facebook and Twitter posts on April 9 (urging social distancing) and April 24 (announcing the closures/modifications) also informed a wide audience. As of 1:30 pm on April 28, the posts have registered more than 45,000 total impressions.

What scientific evidence is there showing the virus can spread in outdoor environments?

Public health officials acknowledge there is much to be learned about the coronavirus that causes COVID-19. What is known about the virus can change daily and sometimes conclusion drawn from one set of research can’t be replicated.

In the absence of robust data on every type of possible risk, officials have focused recommendations on the importance of social distancing – in both indoor and outdoor environments – to limit the spread of COVID-19. We do know it spreads through contact, shared space and shared contact with surfaces or items. Those conditions exist when there are groups congregating in parks. As more research is conducted, the MPRB will be able to more finely tune its response.

Why are tennis nets being removed?

On April 3 the MHD recommended that tennis courts stay open if only one person played on opposite sides of the net. Playing “doubles” or hitting with more than one person on each side of the net is not allowed.

The MPRB publicized this guideline in its April 9 “Do Your Part” campaign, which included onsite signs at every tennis court stating what was allowed and not allowed, and warning that non-compliance will result in removal of tennis court nets.

Staff observations and public complaints in the two weeks following the “Do Your Part” campaign indicate social distancing was not consistently followed at tennis courts. On April 23, the MHD, recommended tennis nets be removed. On April 24, the MPRB announced it would remove nets beginning April 24.

United States Tennis Association

In addition to guidelines and recommendations from the MHD, the MPRB was aware of recommendations by the United States Tennis Association (USTA).

April 4: The USTA asked people not to play tennis because of the risk of transmitting the virus.

April 13: The USTA announced it was cancelling its spring and summer leagues.

April 22: USTA updated its guidelines, declaring that it is the responsibility of each tennis provider to make an assessment based on local conditions, which depends on a variety of factors, including if tennis is played with strict social distancing. The USTA links their recommendations to the Federal Guidelines for Opening Up America Again and the three-phased approach, noting safety precautions must remain in place as states move from Phase One to Phase Three and until there is a universal vaccine or effective treatment for the coronavirus.
Why are golf courses and trails remaining open while many other amenities are closing?

It's hard to consistently stay six feet apart on playgrounds and athletic courts/fields. The nature of competitive sports and playground activity brings people in close contact. Public health officials recommend no participation in team games and no sharing sports balls (tennis, soccer, baseball, softball, basketball).

Park Ambassador observations and a large volume of public complaints showed non-compliance with social distancing at athletic courts/fields and playgrounds over the last two weeks.

Golf is played in groups of four or less and close physical contact is easily avoided and not part of game play. Modifications to game play – which include adapted cups and greens to eliminate the need for ball removal, along with the removal of ball washers, water stations, tee markers, rakes and benches – are easily made to prevent multiple people from touching hard surfaces. Golf course staff also discourage golfers from congregating before tee times and lingering after a round is complete.

Trails offer exercise opportunities without prolonged close contact with others. Sections of eight parkways or park roads have closed to motor vehicles and opened to pedestrians to create extra space for social distancing. The recommendation to stay 6 feet apart and not to congregate/gather remains for this amenity.

Are there plans for modified outdoor programming or virtual programming this summer?

In the coming weeks, Park Ambassadors will begin providing outdoor programming aimed at youth and done in a manner that allows for safe social distancing.

Options are being explored for adjusting classes and programs for social distancing or hosting them online. Details about future virtual and modified programs will be announced and listed online once determined.