

BOX 7.2 MINNEAPOLIS

Pedestrian concourse along the Mississippi river

forming a system of well-planned and interconnected parks, lakes and greenways; the 'Grand Rounds' that almost encircle the city in a 50-mile loop. Unusually for the United States, Minneapolis has a regional authority, the metropolitan council, responsible for planning functions and for establishing guidelines for the regional parks system. The board makes sure that Minneapolis's park priorities are enshrined in the regional plan.

Authority to levy taxes

The MPRB enacts its own laws and has statutory authority to define and regulate the use of all its landholdings. Regulations are enforced by the resident park-keepers and by the Minneapolis Park Police Department; a law-enforcement agency created to protect park users and park property.

To pay for its parks, the Minneapolis city charter gives the MPRB the authority to levy a tax on residential property. The Board of Estimate and Taxation sets the tax rate, allocating about 9 per cent to the parks system. The rest of the MPRB's budget comes from the state of Minnesota and a small amount from revenue income (user fees, facilities rental). In addition, the MPRB supplements its tax-based income through the Minneapolis Parks Foundation, a non-profit group, and through revenue-generating public-private partnerships.

Staff expertise

Part of the success of Minneapolis's parks comes from its cadre of long-serving employees with extraordinary seniority and expertise and near encyclopaedic knowledge of the board's historic practices. Staff loyalty is largely due to a strong union that guarantees good working conditions, good benefits, job security and competitive salaries. The job specialisation imposed by union rules allows staff to develop knowledge and experience that no contractor or part-time employee could match. However, high pay results in high operational costs per resident, the second highest in the USA.

Minneapolis (population 380,000, 2.9 million in metropolitan area) in the north-central USA, began as a mill town on the Mississippi surrounded by lakes and tall-grass prairie. The lakes are still there and the city's natural parklands are today part of an interconnected system of parks encircling the city.

The Minneapolis Park and Recreation Board (MPRB)

The MPRB is a much admired model for other park management agencies for its blend of public accountability, financial independence and the expertise of its long-serving staff. It was created in 1883 by the Minnesota state legislature and consists of nine democratically elected park commissioners. It can hold legal title to property and develop and administer land for use as parks or parkways.

The MPRB is now responsible for local and regional parks,