



# Museum Profile **COMO PARK ZOO AND CONSERVATORY**

RAMSEY COUNTY, MN

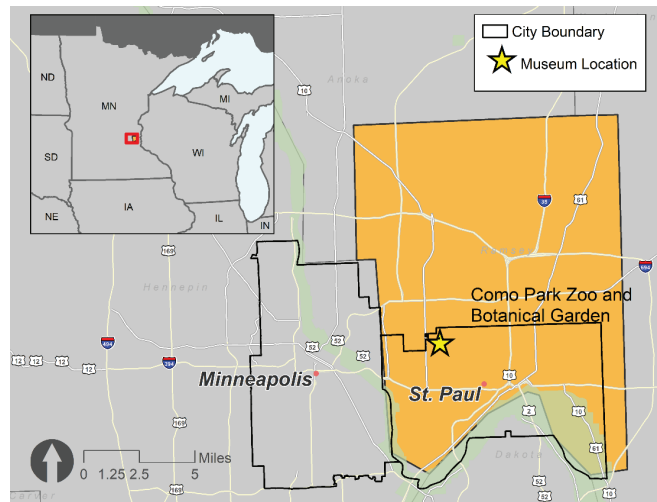
# Museum Profile: Como Park Zoo and Conservatory



## RAMSEY COUNTY, MN

Como Park Zoo and Conservatory (Como) is located in St. Paul, in Ramsey County, Minnesota. Como is owned by the city of St. Paul and operated by the St. Paul Parks and Recreation Department. Como sits on a 749-acre site that also includes an amusement park, a carousel, Lake Como, a golf course, a community pool, and open park space. Como is open 365 days a year and free to the public with voluntary donations. With nearly 2 million annual visitors, it is the second most visited site in the state, after the Mall of America.

The mission of Como is to “inspire our public to value the presence of living things in our lives,” including a strong focus on conservation. Como supports the wellbeing of visitors and the larger community through formal and informal educational efforts and by providing opportunities for connecting with nature, with staff, and with other visitors.



## RAMSEY COUNTY

Ramsey County is the second-most populous county in Minnesota, with a population of more than 530,000. The county population is majority White, with Asians and Blacks accounting for more than 23 percent of residents. The median

household income of \$57,717 is slightly more than the national median household income, while the county's 11 percent poverty rate is equivalent to the national poverty rate.

	Population	% Change in Population (2000–2016)	% White	% Black	% Hispanic	% Asian	% Other	Median Household Income	% Families in Poverty
United States	318,558,162	13.2	62.0	12.3	17.3	5.2	3.3	\$55,322	11.0
Ramsey County	531,528	4.0	64.0	10.9	7.3	13.5	4.2	\$57,717	11.0

Compared to other urban counties across the country, Ramsey County residents enjoy elevated levels of community health, while the K–12 educational sector experiences extremely high needs, reflected in students' performance across a range of publicly available measures of success. Ramsey County fell in the top quartile on the Community Health Index and in the

bottom quartile on the School Effectiveness Index.<sup>1</sup> The Health Care & Social Assistance, Education Services, Manufacturing, and Public Administration industries represent the largest employment sectors in Ramsey County, employing almost half (45 percent) of all working adults.

	Total Labor Force	% Health Care & Social Assistance	% Education Services	% Manufacturing	% Public Administration
United States*	131,362,978	14.5	9.2	9.3	4.7
Ramsey County	316,546	17.0	11.0	9.0	8.0

Data Sources: 2012–16 American Community Survey five-year estimates; U.S. Census Longitudinal Employer-Household Dynamics (LEHD), 2017.

\*Continental figures for total labor force include the 48 lower states and Washington, DC.

<sup>1</sup> Data elements included in the Community Health and School Effectiveness Indexes, along with measures for Ramsey County, can be found at the beginning of Appendix II.

## SITE VISIT PARTICIPANTS AND DATA COLLECTION

In fall 2019, the study team conducted interviews with 11 current museum staff and representatives from five different partner organizations. Site visit interviews conducted with Como staff and partners focused on understanding Como programming and partnerships that support formal and informal education and social wellbeing more broadly as well as Como's institutional approaches to assessment, training and professional development, and sustainability.

In addition, the following data were used to create the economic activity analyses and network map:

- 2018 Adopted Budget for the City of Saint Paul
- 2018 Internal Revenue Service (IRS) 990 forms for Como and its Como Friends foundation
- Program evaluations for several Como programs
- Interview notes and related materials collected by the case study team

This site profile includes the following:

- A summary of select Como programming and partnerships that support formal and informal education and the health and wellbeing of visitors and the community
- Como's institutional approaches to measuring and assessing its efforts, providing staff training and professional development, and enhancing institutional sustainability
- A descriptive network map that illustrates the scope and variety of connections Como maintains with local partners throughout the county and beyond

## KEY PROGRAMS AND PARTNERSHIPS ENGAGE DIVERSE AUDIENCES IN INTERACTIVE LEARNING EXPERIENCES

Over the past decade, Como has created two new departments to facilitate a more welcoming and interactive visitor experience and to link programming more tightly to Como's mission. Through a Visitor Engagement Department, Como has worked to change the roles of staff and volunteers and help them engage more and in new ways with visitors. For example, a value-added program provides opportunities for learning and interaction throughout the day by offering short programs and demonstrations on different themes across Como's campus.

A grant-funded Learning Experiences Division focuses on Reaching Our Audience by Developing Mission-Aligned Programs (ROADMAP). Using a program development

framework, staff pick one of four mega-concepts (Como Cares, Biology, Ecology, and Human-Nature Connection), identify a concept within the mega-concept, and then engage with guiding questions. All guiding questions have a range of constructions to address different developmental levels and intended audiences. Staff use a template to build on guiding questions and identify outcomes related to each of three areas: Feel, Learn, Act. They also identify talking points, needed props, and opportunities for audience participation, and they code all talking points to link them to desired outcomes.

The Learning Experiences Division team has trained staff in these program planning and visitor engagement models and developed a Visitor Interaction Guide to support the new engagement vision. One interviewee stated that, "In the past, there was a feeling as a staff or volunteer that you have to know every fact. We have changed the strategy to learning how to connect and engage visitors to this place." Another interviewee described this as a shift from fact telling to storytelling and to a focus on connection through experience. Throughout this process, the Learning Experiences Division paid attention to building buy-in, listening to people's concerns, and identifying change management strategies to support staff and volunteers in making this shift.

### **Como Ensures Equitable Access to Programming That Supports Learning and Wellbeing**

Como supports its focus on equity and access through the partnerships and networks available through its position within a city agency. For example, Como staff participate in the St. Paul Mayor's Equity Initiative at the citywide, departmental (Recreation and Parks) and institutional (Como) levels. Teams focus on addressing equity in supplier diversity, public programs, and workforce. One staff person noted, "As the second most visited site in the state, Como has a huge role to play in equity."

Como also offers programs to increase access for different groups and to enhance its learning experience. Como has an extensive partnership with the Autism Society of Minnesota (AUSM). Como and AUSM collaborate on summer camps and school-year education programs. Each contributes its expertise, (e.g., animal/conservation and social/behavioral). Como provides a unique setting for some of AUSM's classes and excursions. Como and AUSM together created sensory tools to support better visit experiences for people with autism, including a sensory map (color coded to show areas with higher sensory input) and a toolkit with sensory tools. In addition, Como offers sensory mornings, opening an hour early so that

people with autism can have a calmer experience at Como. AUSM provides training for Como staff to help them better serve the community.

Como also offers programming geared to other groups with specific needs. At Sign Language Day on the first Sunday of each month, American Sign Language interpreters interpret zoo talks. Senior Strolls take place on designated days when seniors can visit before or after normal hours. Como can be crowded, so this provides seniors with the opportunity to move more freely and allows staff members to offer more targeted activities.

Como staff and partners reported that these programs offer participants the opportunity to enjoy their experience at Como but also to build community and social connections. Ongoing programs where people can meet again and again over time are especially conducive to building connections. Such programs included Senior Strolls, AUSM classes, and Lil' Explorers, a weekly morning program for young children and their caregivers.

### **Partnerships with Formal Education Institutions Advance the Institutional Mission and Enhance Educational Experiences of Students**

Como partners with St. Paul Public Schools on multiple programs to promote learning about plants, animals, and conservation. The Como Residency Program provides a free weeklong, on-site experience for second and third grade classes focused on the scientific method and conservation. Como staff serve as lead teachers during the visit; classroom teachers participate in summer training and often plan related activities before and after the program to extend learning. In addition to the more intensive Como Residency Program, Como hosts free field trips open to all St. Paul second graders, supported by Como Friends fundraising. Como also offers visits and school-based education programs across grade levels. These visits help participating classrooms fulfill statewide standards focused on science and literacy. Como further serves as a site for children with

disabilities to learn job skills and as a site for teen volunteers and internships. Some Minneapolis and Greater Minnesota schools participate in these programs as well.

Como also partners with the University of Minnesota in multiple ways. Como provides on-site learning and project opportunities for veterinary students and public gardens management classes. Staff serve as an audience for veterinary students' capstone presentations, and Como contracts with the School for Veterinary Services. The university hosts some of its summer camps at Como, and its gardening students provide assistance with Como projects.

### **Como Provides a Refuge for Visitors and Creates Opportunities for Cultural Exchanges through Shared Experiences**

Staff noted that simply visiting Como can enhance the health and wellbeing of visitors. Over the past 20 years, staff have observed elevated levels of visitors at times of community stress, (e.g., after 9/11 and the 2008 recession). During the previous recession, when unemployment levels hovered around 10 percent, staff observed elevated levels of daytime visits from fathers and children. Older adults and children and caregivers frequent Como during the winter for a respite from the harsh Minnesota weather. And it is common for people to use Como's grounds to meditate, play music, and draw or sketch.

Como provides arts and cultural opportunities that promote the wellbeing of individuals and the broader community. For example, through a partnership with the Minnesota Bonsai Society (MBS), Como hosts an annual Bonsai event. MBS members bring trees to display and offer demonstrations and educational workshops. Como provides space and publicity at no cost. The event results in new members and increased class registration for MBS. Several MBS volunteers visit Como weekly to help care for Como's Bonsai collection. Como also partners with the Japan America Society of Minnesota (JASM) for the annual Obon Festival, which provides JASM the opportunity to educate the

community about Japanese culture. Como provides financial backing and publicity and handles logistics. A staff person noted that JASM's participation helps Como create a more authentic Japanese American festival.

This example highlights the unique position Como plays in connecting individuals and organizations to one another by hosting shared cultural experiences—creating connections that bring resources into Como itself and providing the Japanese American community in the region with a place to share a piece of their cultural heritage with each other and with the broader community. These types of experiences, including other Como arts and cultural events like Music Under Glass (winter concerts in the Conservatory) and Groovin' in the Garden (summer outdoor concerts), knit diverse communities of individuals, families, and organizations together through shared experiences at Como.

### **Como Uses Data to Continuously Improve Programming and Visitor and Volunteer Experiences**

At the time of the site visit, Como staff were testing an evaluation approach to complement the ROADMAP program and to assess the outcomes it identifies. The Learning Experiences Division, which guides the ROADMAP process, adopted Team-Based Inquiry (TBI) as its evaluation framework. TBI is an ongoing cycle that includes generating questions, investigating, reflecting on lessons learned, and targeting improvements. In fall 2019, the Learning Experiences Division began to provide TBI training for staff as well as coaching and support as teams worked through the inquiry cycle.

As part of TBI, staff collect data about the experiences of visitors, interns, and volunteers to improve programming. Volunteers complete surveys every one to two months and complete evaluations after training sessions. Staff track the number of volunteers overall by department and event and the monetary impact of volunteer hours. Staff also complete an evaluation after

each value-added program, including estimated attendance and the number of participants who attend the entire program. Teachers who participate in on- or off-site programming receive a survey.

Some programs, especially those funded through state Legacy Amendment funds, require more robust data collection. For example, the Como Residency Program's data collection includes the following:

1. Pre- and post-student surveys to assess increased knowledge related to conservation and the scientific method
2. Demographic data related to participating schools' populations and individual participants
3. Data from teachers' responses to the program and the connections they make to Como's program in the classroom
4. Data on the weight of children's lunch waste during the five-day program (compost, trash, recycling)

The data on children's lunch waste helps children understand the impact of environmental choices. These varied approaches to data collection provide data for funders as well as data for Como staff and teachers to assess if and how the Como Residency Program is meeting its goals: supporting learning about science and conservation, helping youth develop skills in cooperation and other areas of social development, and providing a shared experience for students that teachers can build on throughout the year.

Multiple staff and partners also mentioned joint debrief and reflection meetings after an event or program as another way to assess best practices and opportunities for improvement. For example, a joint debrief of the Obon Festival yielded insights about successes and challenges and suggestions for future changes in order to further promote learning about Japanese language and culture and enhance the community-building experience.

## **Como Connects Training and Professional Development to Larger Institutional Goals**

Como invests extensively in training staff and volunteers on new approaches to engage visitors, on using the ROADMAP process for program design, and on implementing the TBI evaluation approach. Implementation of Como's new visitor interaction guide and approach to visitor engagement included training 500+ staff and volunteers. Building empathy, especially around the visitor experience, has become a training focus for staff and volunteers, reflecting Como's priorities for Phase Two of the ROADMAP process. For instance, instead of focusing on facts about Como's flora and fauna, trainings instead emphasize helping visitors develop a greater connection to Como, to storytelling, and to the animals themselves. Conservation Champions is a program that offers access to additional learning experiences by providing funding for staff to go off-site and take advantage of opportunities that support Como's conservation and visitor engagement goals.

Como's volunteer and intern infrastructure helps position interns and volunteers to successfully contribute to Como's organizational goals. Como developed position descriptions that allow volunteer coordinators to place individuals based on their skill set and also make clear the expectations for each role. Volunteers participate in a Como-wide volunteer orientation and receive further training about their specific work area from a supervisor. In addition, monthly trainings, each focused on a specific area or animal, allow volunteers to increase the number of places within Como where they can volunteer. A volunteer handbook explains policies and procedures. More than 1,000 volunteers and interns engaged with Como in 2019, and staff reported high volunteer and intern satisfaction as well as high volunteer retention rates. Both staff and volunteer trainings aim to strengthen participants' knowledge about and connection to conservation and the natural world, support the development of empathy for the natural world and local community, and thereby increase visitors' connections to Como.

## COMO'S DIVERSE NETWORKS ENHANCE THE WELLBEING OF VISITORS, PARTNERS, THE BROADER COMMUNITY, AND THE INSTITUTION ITSELF

The connections Como maintains with local educational institutions, cultural organizations, and other community-serving groups enhance visitors' experiences at Como, improve the quality of Como's educational experiences, and provide opportunities for Como to connect with diverse sectors of the broader St. Paul/Minneapolis community. At the same time, Como's institutional connections also support a robust funding environment for Como. According to one interviewee, the Twin Cities have a strong philanthropic community, and city and state support are also available. Under the state's Legacy Amendment, Como applies every two years for funding for specific projects from the Arts and Cultural Heritage Fund, which historically has supported a range of programming, including Lil' Explorers, Music in Nature, the Como Residency Program, Senior Strolls, Sensory Friendly Mornings, Sign Language Days, the Yellow Bus Fund (free transportation to Como for school groups), and special exhibits.

In addition, Como Friends is a 501c3 organization that exists to provide supports for learning experiences and to ensure sustainability for Como. Collocated in the Como administration building, Como Friends provides support in three areas: (1) Fundraising, (2) Working with the Mayor's office to access state funding, and (3) Communications. Como Friends functions as Como's development arm: It solicits gifts from individuals, foundations, and corporations; holds fundraising events; and manages Como's gift shop. Como Friends works closely with Como leaders and staff to pursue shared strategic priorities. Como often starts new programs through Como Friends, which procures initial grant funding. Como Friends

has created endowments for specific program areas, such as the Japanese Garden. It also works with Como staff to meet larger strategic planning goals, e.g., capital improvement of specific features that require multiyear fundraising. Como Friends supports a wide variety of initiatives to further Como's mission, including improvements and additions to the physical institution, programming and partnerships, and making educational efforts more available to the community through transportation, camp, and field trip scholarships. Como Friends also offers support for professional development, including Conservation Champions, a micro-grant program that allows zookeepers, horticulturists, and educators to participate in conservation projects with partners around the world. Staff use these conservation experiences to inform their work and Como's education efforts.

As a city institution and part of the St. Paul Parks and Recreation Department, Como has a degree of financial stability that many other museums lack. Como is a free museum linked to its community in multiple ways that enhance visitors' enjoyment of the spaces and their educational experiences with the collections. Through this work, Como facilitates social and institutional connections throughout the Twin Cities. Como intentionally aligns program development, evaluation, visitor engagement approaches, and training for staff and volunteers in order to support Como's goals of increasing visitor engagement, building empathy and connection to the natural world, and advancing knowledge about conservation. Como's focus on visitor engagement extends to increasing access and opportunities for diverse groups with specific needs so that they can fully participate in and experience Como.

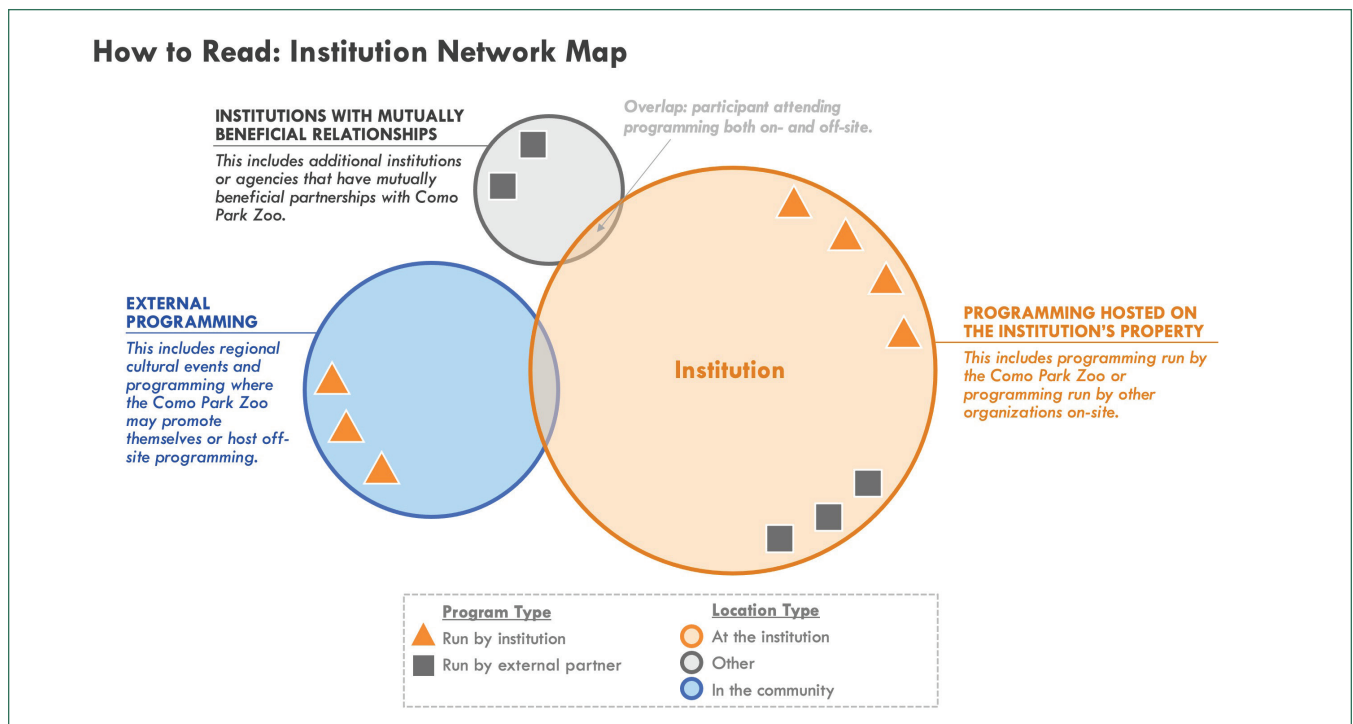


# COMO PARK ZOO AND CONSERVATORY NETWORK MAP

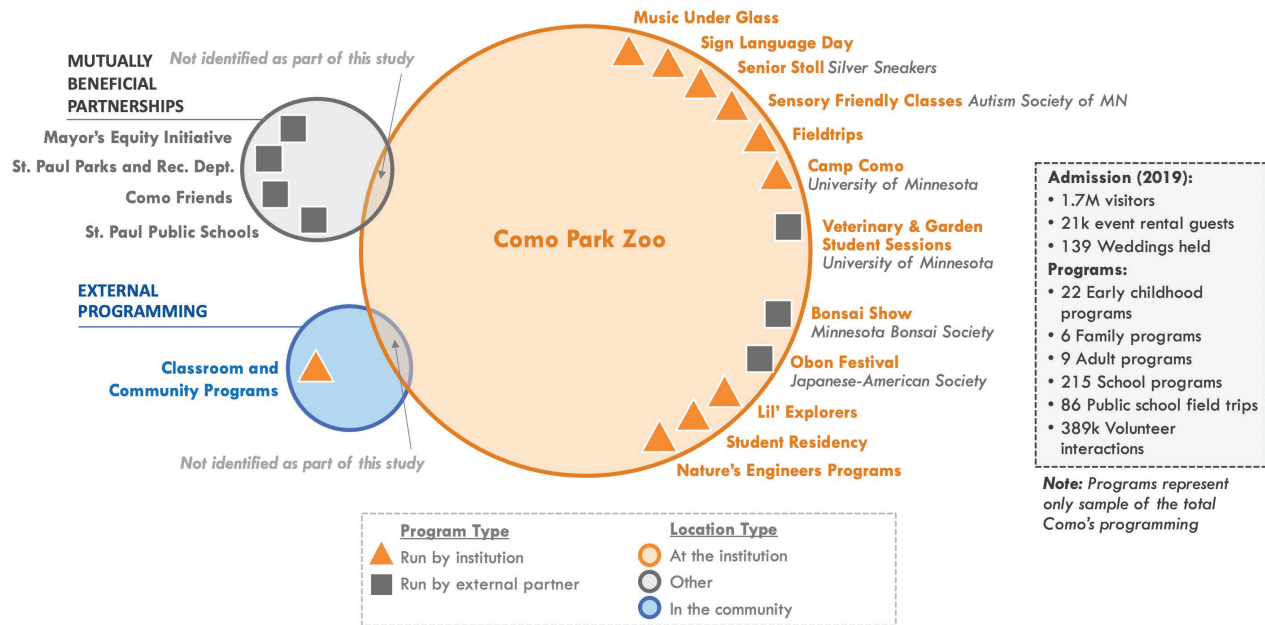
Using data provided by Como, the study team developed a descriptive network map to highlight the different types of connections Como maintains with other institutions in the local community. The map illustrates the relationships between Como and those entities that offer programming at the park itself and

those that support cross-marketing efforts or have reciprocal relationships with the park, and it includes examples of off-site, Como-led programming. The map does not provide an exhaustive list of the park’s programs but attempts to illustrate a subset of the relationships that the park maintains.

*NOTE: The network map is purely descriptive. The connections represented on the map do not necessarily, and are not intended to, provide estimates of the duration, durability, intensity, or broader economic impact of the relationships between Como and any single entity, or the broader network itself. The goal of the network map is to represent the range and diversity of different types of institutions that connect to the park in different ways.*



## Como Park Zoo Network Map



The figure above illustrates a *sample* of the connections of the many programs offered across Como's network. Within the orange circle is a small sample of programs conducted on the physical property of the institution—both programs produced by the institution and those produced by others. Within the blue circle is a sample of programs produced by Como and offered off-site in the community. The gray circle represents a sample of institutions and initiatives where Como has mutually beneficial partnerships.