

EXECUTIVE SUMMARY



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In the winter of 2006, the Gresham Parks and Recreation Division began updating its *Parks & Recreation, Trails and Natural Areas Master Plan* to identify opportunities to enhance the City's park and recreation system. As an update to the 1996 Plan, this report establishes specific goals, objectives, and recommendations for maintaining, conserving, and developing quality parks, facilities, trails, and natural areas in a sustainable way. As a twenty-year long-range plan, it aims to carry the City through the current financial crisis and into the future.



PUBLIC INVOLVEMENT

The planning process included extensive public outreach to identify community preferences for the park system. Nearly 1,800 residents participated in the planning process. According public feedback, many people are not satisfied with the City's current park and recreation system. Concerns over safety and security, park maintenance, facility condition, inadequate park development, and the lack of programming were noted in nearly all public involvement forums.

COMMUNITY NEEDS

Based on community priorities for the park system, specific needs for parks, recreation facilities, and programs were identified for Gresham. Key needs include:

- *Maintenance:* A large number of deferred maintenance projects have led to a steady deterioration of City assets.
- *Renovation:* Aging recreation facilities are increasing the need for renovations at existing park sites.
- *Acquisition and Development:* The City will need to acquire extensive acreage to provide parks in unserved areas and growing areas;

- *Recreation Programs:* Special events, nature programs, and volunteerism should to be expanded to bring more people into parks.

SYSTEM COSTS

Because of an impending financial crisis, the master planning process included a thorough financial analysis, identifying:

- Existing system costs to maintain the current park system; and
- Future costs to develop and maintain new parks and facilities.

Even without new parks, maintaining the current park system is anticipated to cost about **\$2 million** annually, with another **\$2.2 million** annually to address the current maintenance backlog. The 2009/10 budget includes only \$1,520,000 for maintenance and \$250,000 for capital replacement. This creates a **shortfall of about \$2.4 million annually** to maintain the existing system.

On the other hand, the City will need more than **\$292 million** in capital funds to meet all recreation needs noted in this Plan. With current funds, the City cannot even afford to implement its priority projects.

PARK SYSTEM IN DECLINE

Despite the tremendous need for improvements, capital and operations funding is decreasing. Funds from park system development charges (SDCs), intergovernmental revenue, general fund monies, and grants have diminished to the point that adequate park maintenance is impossible. Improvements may be unthinkable. Unless something is done quickly, this means:

- A decreasing level of maintenance at all sites, likely meaning more trash, taller grass, vandalism and graffiti, chipping paint, and unclean restrooms in City parks.



- Deferred maintenance projects, allowing facilities to deteriorate further;
- A lack of funds for necessary park renovations, creating unsafe conditions that may require park closures and/or facility removal;
- No City-provided recreation programs to meet community needs;
- No park development at undeveloped sites;
- No park acquisition to meet future needs in developing areas or areas currently unserved by parks;
- Staffing cuts to free up funds for existing (but incomplete) park projects; and
- Insufficient staff to oversee volunteer projects, resulting in elimination of volunteer opportunities or unsupervised projects that may not meet City standards or safe practices.



This approach is neither sustainable nor cost effective. When traditional sources of funding rebound, it will take a great investment of money and energy to restore the depleted park system to its current level of service.

THE SUSTAINABLE PARK SYSTEM

Despite the dire prediction, there is another alternative. Called the “sustainable park system,” this approach is marked by:

- An tiered maintenance approach, focusing efforts on sites with the highest maintenance needs;
- A capital reinvestment program to replace aged facilities;
- Park renovations, especially at the most frequently and heavily used sites;
- City-provided special events and nature-based programs to bring people into parks and support community unity;
- Park development in areas with the greatest unmet needs;

- Park acquisition in critical areas, where the opportunity to acquire sites in the future may be lost;
- Funds to complete park projects that have already been initiated, as well as funds to maintain these sites when they are brought online; and
- A designated staff person to recruit volunteers and partners to support the park system.

POTENTIAL FUNDING

The critical difference between these two alternatives is their funding base. While the first scenario is based on existing funds only, the sustainable park system is based on the availability of a stable, new funding source. This Plan recommends that the City of Gresham consider two new funding sources:

- In the short term, a utility tax would provide a needed Band-aid for the existing park system. A tax as low as \$2.50 per month per household or business could generate more than \$1 million annually to support park maintenance and replacement of unsafe facilities.
- In the long term, a park and recreation district would help ensure that critical needs are met. A voter-approved property tax of just \$1.50 per 1,000 taxable assessed value (TAV) would provide \$9 million per year to support on-going maintenance, renovation, and small recreation program. An additional 35 cents per 1,000 TAV could generate a \$32 million bond for priority park renovations.

While residents have objected to new taxes in the past, they may be willing to make this strategic investment if it means they can continue to enjoy City parks. In the face of funding challenges, allowing the park system to deteriorate further is neither a cost-effective nor sustainable choice.

STRATEGIC LEADERSHIP AND COMMUNITY SUPPORT

With limited resources, the Parks and Recreation Division has done well to disguise the impacts of the parks funding crisis.



What City leaders and residents need to realize is that this situation will likely get worse.

Before any funding options are presented to voters, the City should present this Plan's message and vision to residents. People must be made aware of the current funding limitations and how these will affect the availability of park resources. Then City leaders and residents can determine how much or how little they can support to sustain the park system. In doing so they should ask themselves one critical question:

**What kind of community
do we want to live in?**

The *Parks & Recreation, Trails and Natural Areas Master Plan* provides the vision and tools necessary for the City to make strategic choices for preserving critical assets. Gresham has a large inventory of parks, facilities, trails and green space, but the City cannot adequately take care of them. This Plan sends a resounding message that the City must act now to preserve its park investment.