

CHAPTER 7



STRATEGIC DECISIONS



The City of Gresham is at a crossroads. In one direction, the path leads toward an unsustainable park system, where funding is not sufficient to maintain a basic level of park service. This direction may lead toward park closures, the removal of aged facilities, a lack of recreation programming, no parks in high-need areas, and the disbanding of the Parks and Recreation Division.

In the other direction, however, the path leads toward a sustainable park system, where stewardship of City assets is the key to park management. This path asks City residents to support a vision that they can rally around: the vision of clean, green, and thriving community where parks and recreation are integral to our quality of life. Vibrant parks, well-maintained facilities, peaceful natural areas, and interconnected trails link the community together to strengthen the fabric of the city.

The purpose of this Plan is to capture this vision and convey it to the community, so that citizens, City Councilors and staff together feel empowered to make strategic decisions to improve their community through people, parks, and programs. This Plan also provides a roadmap, showing alternative pathways, but more importantly, providing directions so that the City to forge its own path into the future.

Alternatives I and II are bookends in a library of choices. These choices are best illustrated by the hundreds of projects noted in Appendix F, along with a number of non-capital projects and operations improvements proposed in this Plan.

The *Parks & Recreation, Trails and Natural Areas Plan* provides the City with the tools and information necessary to make good choices for the future. This Plan is not asking the City to choose between these Alternatives I and II. Instead, it is recommending that the City pursue a strategy to achieve a sustainable system. Ideally, that system will carry Gresham through this financial crisis and into the future.

PLAN FOR THE FUTURE

Once adopted, this Plan cannot sit on the shelf. It needs to be in front of the public, where its recommendations can be implemented. Although the economy may continue to falter, the City needs to remain firm in its course of action. This course most likely involves:

- Generating community support;
- Implementing short and long-term funding strategies, including a utility tax and park and recreation district; and
- Forging a partnership between the City and this new district.

Generating Community Support

With limited resources, the Parks and Recreation Division has done well to disguise the impacts of the parks funding crisis. Most parks are maintained at a basic level, and the City is still moving forward, albeit slowly, on its new sports park. The City stopped providing recreation programs four years ago, but residents have quietly accepted this level of service. What residents need to realize is that this situation will likely get worse.



New funds for the park system most likely will require increased public support and a willingness to pay for park and recreation services. Before any funding option is presented to voters, the City needs to engage in a public relations campaign to present the message and vision of this Plan. People must become aware of the current funding limitations and how these will affect the availability of park resources now and in the future. Residents need to make informed choices regarding how much or how little they can support.

Implementing Funding Strategies

As part of the planning process, the Parks and Recreation Advisory Subcommittee (PRAS) critically reviewed all funding options to address the anticipated funding gap for

maintenance, operations, and capital funds (Appendix H). The conclusion of the PRAS, staff and consultant team was that two strategies are needed:

- 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.

Both options require the support of the community and City Council. While the utility tax could be implemented by the City, a parks district would be a separate entity from the City, with an administration and budget of its own. While a utility tax could be implemented fairly quickly, a park district would take longer to initiate.

The City should immediately undertake a financial feasibility study to examine these options. The Baseline Financial Analysis Report, the draft Preliminary Funding Scenarios Memo, and this Plan will provide guidance on the City's funding needs.

While residents have objected to new taxes in the past, the City has one of the lowest tax rates in Oregon (Appendix I). In Oregon, property tax rates by city range from approximately \$3.50 to more than \$7.00 per \$1,000 taxable assessed value. The City of Gresham is at the bottom of this list, with a rate of \$3.61 per \$1,000. At some point, citizens will have to tie their desires for a great park system and livable city to their willingness to pay for services.

Future City/District Partnership

A key consideration in the formation of a new park and recreation district is the future relationship or anticipated partnership between the City and the new park district. A separate feasibility study will help determine if the district should be formed as a special district or a county service district. The City can explore collaborative options to allow the new park district to maintain and develop City sites. This may free up City funds to continue to acquire new park sites and preserve critical natural resource areas. On the other hand, the City may defer to the park district in the collection of SDCs, whereby the district will take on park acquisition, development, maintenance, and programming.

PERFORMANCE MEASURES

When this Plan is implemented, the performance measures noted below will help the City and community members recognize Plan successes and progress. These measures correspond with the vision set forth in Chapter 3.

As the City begins to measure its performance, baseline data will be collected, and the goal for the next fiscal year will be set. The Division or new district should track these measures annually and use them in the development of new work plans.

- Percent of residents who live within 1/2-mile of a neighborhood or community park.
- Percent of residents who report feeling safe in parks; or the actual numbers of reported crimes in parks.
- Percent of residents who report that the City does a very good or excellent job of providing facilities and services that meet their needs.
- Percent of park facilities in good condition.
- Reduction in cost required to complete deferred maintenance tasks.
- % of parks receiving adequate park maintenance based on the assigned tiered maintenance level.

- Miles of trails provided by the City.
- Number of acres of natural resources preserved.
- Number of City programs offered, along with the number of participants in City programs.
- FTE equivalent in volunteer hours achieved by volunteers in parks, recreation and open space.
- Number of partnerships in place to provide parks, recreation and open space opportunities to Gresham's residents and visitors.

CONCLUSION/FINAL MESSAGE



The *Parks & Recreation, Trails and Natural Areas Master Plan* provides the vision and tools necessary for the City to make strategic choices on preserving their assets. The City of Gresham has a large inventory of parks, facilities, trails and green space, but it doesn't have the resources to adequately take care of these sites. Nor does it have the resources to meet current or projected community recreation needs. This Plan sends a resounding message that the City must take action now to preserve its park investment. In the face of funding challenges, allowing the park system to deteriorate further is neither a cost-effective nor sustainable choice.

The strategic planning process is not static. To be successful at implementing the community vision, the Parks and Recreation Division will need to take action based on the guidance and framework of this Plan, evaluate progress, and make continuous adjustments in the coming years.

However, adequate funding is needed to achieve this vision. The City must decide now the course it will take to provide adequate parks and recreation services for the next 20 years. Specifically, a new stable funding source must be found to increase park spending per capita and make significant progress in achieving the goals of this Plan. With adequate

support, Gresham can correct past deficiencies, address deterioration of the existing park infrastructure, and ensure a more equitable level of service for residents. These actions will help create livable city and vibrant economy that attracts residents and businesses.

With adequate community and financial support, Gresham has the potential to develop a sustainable, high-quality park system. This vision is achievable with the commitment of citizens, park interest groups, planning staff, and City leaders. By working toward this common vision, the park and recreation system can be transformed into a signature asset for the City of Gresham.

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