

PARKS AND NATURE ROAD MAP PROJECT UPDATE

Date: November 17, 2025

Department: Parks and Nature

Meeting Date: December 4, 2025

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Length: 45 minutes

ISSUE STATEMENT

With the support of the voters of the region, Metro has been able to protect close to 20,000 acres of natural areas and parks, provide unique nature experiences at destination sites and provide funding to park providers and community organizations all in support of local nature priorities.

Fulfilling voters' expectations means that our natural areas portfolio and operational needs have grown substantially. While the Metro Council has emphasized the need to develop a stable, long-term funding source to support regional parks and nature services, rising obligations and costs are straining the operating revenue currently available.

The Parks and Nature road map project describes a process to leverage a collection of planning projects to deliver the following outcomes for Council consideration:

1. Ensure that the Parks and Nature System Plan is updated to accurately capture agency policy, service priorities, guiding values and measures of success for the next 5-10 years
2. Parks and Nature funding strategies in the short, medium and long-term, including a path for potential levy replacement, before the current levy expires in June 2028.

This work session provides an early opportunity to review with Council how efforts to update the Parks and Nature system plan update can effectively build toward demonstrating urgency, readiness and clear outcomes of a future local option levy.

ACTION REQUESTED

Review and affirm staff's plan to compile information as part of the road map process that aim to support future Council conversations about priorities for service delivery, site amenities and service standards, how we deliver services and how we can ensure that our service delivery is addressing Tribal priorities, ADA commitments and community priorities. Identify additional information needed to support future Council decisions, including potential funding decisions.

IDENTIFIED POLICY OUTCOMES

Metro Parks and Nature has a unique role in the region, restoring priority habitat in natural areas and supporting a system of destination sites across the region. Council direction helps determine Metro Parks and Nature's role in the region as well as the values governing how we provide services and measure progress. The Parks and Nature system plan approved by the Metro Council in 2016 establishes three key roles for Metro in regional parks and nature:

- Protected and restored lands

- Regional parks and nature experiences
- Grants, community funding and convening local partners

Subsequent Council direction has also established values and goals for how Parks and Nature delivers these services to achieve desired outcomes on climate, access and resilience economies. The Metro Council adopted frameworks for 2022 levy renewal and 2019 bond measures that articulated criteria and desired outcomes in four primary impact areas—healthy fish and wildlife habitat, proximity and experience of nature, community empowerment, and economic impact and equity.

The department’s governing protocol is designed to advance strategies, actions and investments that can fit within these four impact areas. For example, the Parks and Nature 2025-2032 equity, diversity and inclusion action plan (also known as REDI) identifies actions in categories of environmental, economic and cultural equity, health equity and restorative justice. In addition, Parks and Nature is working to update protocols and policies to address commitments for ADA accessibility and advancing Tribal relationships and priorities.

POLICY QUESTION(S)

- Does the proposed approach to compiling information through the Parks and Nature road map process align with Council expectations?
- What additional information or engagement could support Council discussions in 2026 and beyond on parks and nature system plan update or future levy?

STRATEGIC CONTEXT & FRAMING COUNCIL DISCUSSION

Explicit list of stakeholder groups and individuals who have been involved in policy development:

The road map process is and will be informed by Parks and Nature’s ongoing coordination with the region’s park providers, conservation organizations, members of the urban Indigenous community and community organizations to ensure the department’s current project, program and service delivery reflects community priorities. In addition, the department is actively engaging community and partners in specific planning and project efforts, ranging from community engagement on the Willamette Cove master plan to focused conversations with community partners to review, affirm and help prioritize actions articulated in the 2025-2032 REDI plan.

Parks and Nature will continue to ensure that the feedback received through these efforts around protecting nature for nature’s sake, extending the life of existing beloved Metro sites and being innovative in our ability to support community identified priorities, helps shape efforts to update the Parks and Nature system plan and a future levy. In addition, Parks and Nature will identify opportunities for expanding touchpoints with a range of interests including business, transportation, travel and tourism, agriculture, education,

housing/real estate, and emergency responders. The Metro Council may decide to prioritize additional stakeholder engagement activities as part of future levy conversations.

Finally, Parks and Nature is working closely with Metro's Tribal Affairs staff to improve relationships and foster proactive interactions with Tribal governments on the management of Metro's portfolio.

Broader department and agency context—dimensions of access with Metro's system

Large majorities of voters have repeatedly indicated their support for enhancing nature for nature's sake—protecting and restoring fish and wildlife habitat and improving water quality in our streams and rivers. Furthermore, the ability to experience nature on a daily basis is a value that's woven into the fabric of the greater Portland region.

Metro Parks and Nature manages close to 20,000 acres of public land, open to the public with both formal and informal access and benefits to people and place. This portfolio has grown over time as Metro has fulfilled voters' direction in supporting the 1995, 2006 and 2019 bond measures. Metro's natural areas offer informal entry without developed infrastructure, much like the national forests. Metro also invests in ongoing restoration activities at over 100 unique natural areas at any given time for ecological benefit.

Furthermore, the Metro Council has emphasized the value of increasing opportunities to experience nature and its benefits for all. Metro maintains, increases and enhances 19 people-centered sites that ensure safe, welcoming experiences to all visitors, spanning from regional destinations to boat launches to cemeteries and nature parks. Finally, Metro provides nature and stewardship programming to youth and adults and supports local priority parks, trails and natural areas in communities across the region.

The department tracks annual performance in the following categories—healthy habitat, proximity and experience, community empowerment and economic vitality.

Financial implications

Since receiving Smith and Bybee from the City of Portland in 1990, Metro has added three nature parks a decade and has grown its portfolio of parks and natural areas from 8,000 acres to nearly 20,000 acres. Metro's portfolio of developed sites is very diverse, including several boat launches, cemeteries, a golf course and a historic farm, and as such, poses unique challenges for management. Like other park providers across the region experiencing increased demand for outdoor spaces, Metro is working to keep up with demand on developed sites like Oxbow and Blue Lake Regional Parks in a budget-constrained environment, while also trying to stay ahead of evolving land management challenges like extreme weather, invasive species and the risk of wildfire.

The growth of the system for which Metro is responsible means that the roughly \$19 million raised annually by the current operating levy is not keeping pace with increasing

costs to fully serve the needs of nature and communities, including for staffing, supplies and overall system management.

Affirming goals for service delivery in tandem with conversations about a future levy through the road map process will allow Metro to ensure its parks and nature responsibilities are closer in line with financial capacity. The department is already implementing strategies to bolster its ability to manage through these financial headwinds. Strategies include documenting service delivery needs and costs planning for future long-term capital investments with an understanding of timing requirements related to the bonds and levies that support our work and including operational considerations at the front end of capital planning projects.

BACKGROUND

While the Metro Council has recently heard from Parks and Nature on efforts to update policy direction for the department through updates on the Tribal government consultation strategy and the 2025-2032 REDI action plan, the December 4 work session is designed to be responsive to requests from Council to launch comprehensive conversations about system-wide challenges and opportunities as well as future funding strategies over the next eighteen-plus months.

This fall, Metro Councilors were invited to visit Chehalem Ridge Nature Park, Oxbow Regional Park, Scouters Mountain Nature Park to hear directly from staff about the ongoing opportunities and challenges of operating sites where residents of the region can connect with nature and restoration and land management supports meaningful ecological benefit to our region's land and waterways.

ATTACHMENTS

None