

## **UPDATE ON WORK TO RESPOND TO PARKS AND NATURE BOND AUDIT**

Date: June 13, 2024

Department: Parks and Nature

Meeting Date: July 2, 2024

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Length: 45 minutes

### **ISSUE STATEMENT**

On November 5, 2019, greater Portland voters overwhelmingly approved a \$475 million parks and nature bond measure to improve water quality, protect fish and wildlife habitat and connect people with nature close to home. The bond measure includes three criteria to guide all bond investments—racial equity, community engagement and climate resilience, along with guiding principle language about increasing access to parks and natural areas.

The Metro Auditor's 2022 audit of the parks and nature bond focused on whether and how Metro was prepared to increase access to nature as envisioned in the bond commitments and found a lack of clarity about specific outcomes the bond sought to accomplish and an underdeveloped performance measurement system relating to access.

Work to respond to the specific recommendations in the audit will be complete by the end of 2024. At the July 2 work session, the Parks and Nature department will provide an update to Council on the work underway to respond to the audit findings and seek Council direction on a primary theme in the audit, how to better articulate and evaluate performance on access to the regional system of parks, trails and natural areas. Council's review and affirmation of how the department is articulating and evaluating progress on access will ensure that Parks and Nature can continue to advance bond investments, reporting tools and outcomes that align with Council goals.

### **ACTION REQUESTED**

Review and affirm the department's approach to articulating concepts of access so that the department can continue to pursue bond investments, outcomes and activities that best align with and advance Council direction. Receive an update and ask questions about work underway to respond to the recommendations in the audit.

### **IDENTIFIED POLICY OUTCOMES**

The three bond criteria of racial equity, climate resilience and meaningful community engagement, which advance Council direction for the parks and nature bond and reflect community feedback received during bond development, require the department to move beyond only measuring investments made to focusing on the broader impacts rippling out from bond investments. As such, Parks and Nature has developed a bond evaluation framework to articulate outcomes and impacts of bond investments on the region that will build upon and broaden current reporting efforts.

This framework, which links bond investments and activities to short, medium, and long-term outcomes through an established theory of change, also provides a compelling approach to demonstrate how bond investments at their core strengthen healthy habitat, while improving outcomes related to access into three primary areas:

- Proximity and experience
- Community empowerment
- Economic opportunity

Parks and Nature is currently developing strategies to support the utilization of this framework to report on bond progress to multiple audiences including the Metro Council, the Natural Areas Oversight Committee and the general public including a set of timebound milestones that the department will be tracking progress to over the life of the bond, data collection protocol and a set of visual storytelling tools.

### **POLICY QUESTION(S)**

1. How does staff's work to respond to the audit findings and recommendations align with Council expectations?
2. How does the proposed approach to defining access align with Council values and policy direction?

### **STRATEGIC CONTEXT & FRAMING COUNCIL DISCUSSION**

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

The primary stakeholder group engaged in the audit and response to date is the Natural Areas and Capital Program Performance Oversight Committee, which provides oversight to investments from the 2019 parks and nature bond. The Auditor presented the parks and nature bond audit to the Natural Areas Oversight Committee in fall 2023 and staff have continued to update the oversight committee on work to respond to the bond audit. Beyond that, efforts to advance recommendations in the audit rely on engagement with community around specific bond programs and projects underway now as well as anticipated efforts to update elements of the Parks and Nature System Plan and evaluate progress towards bond goals include access.

*Broader department and agency context:*

Parks and Nature is implementing the recommendations in the audit by continuing to make bond investments that increase multiple dimensions of access, strengthening tools to articulate and measure progress towards goals for access, and improving systems to document and incorporate findings from community engagement in the department's planning and program work. At every step, Parks and Nature is ensuring this work leverages department expertise and aligns and supports efforts to establish and measure progress to broader agency and regional goals.

The Metro Council's review of how the department is articulating concepts of access will ensure that Parks and Nature remains on track to deliver the bond investments, progress reporting and broader outcomes that align with Council values. In addition, Council direction at this point can help the department build an important foundation for broader departmental priorities such as anticipated adjustments to the Parks and Nature System

Plan originally adopted by the Metro Council in 2016. Updates to the system plan, advanced through Council direction and eventual adoption, will provide updated guidance to the department via a racial equity action plan, a tribal government engagement plan, an accessibility plan and a levels of service plan.

## BACKGROUND

The Auditor published the audit of the Parks and Nature bond in summer 2023 and presented the findings to the Metro Council and to the Natural Areas and Capital Program Performance Oversight Committee. The audit recommended the following:

<b>Audit recommendation (grouped by theme)</b>	<b>Relevant Parks and Nature work efforts</b>
<p><i>Recommendations 1 and 2:</i> Establish measurable and timebound goals for the bond's expected effect on access.</p> <p><i>Recommendation 3 and 4:</i> Collect data to measure performance for the bond's expected effect on access and report annually on progress made.</p> <p><i>Recommendation 5:</i> Use performance data to periodically evaluate the effectiveness of bond strategies to increase access and equitable access in the region.</p>	<p>Building a bond evaluation outcomes framework that articulates impacts of bond investments on the region, including on elements of access.</p> <p>Development of a set of performance milestones, which will allow the department to track progress over time.</p> <p>Building the methods to ensure the department can sustain performance evaluation over time utilizing qualitative and quantitative methods for data collection and a visual tool to communicate progress to multiple audiences.</p>
<p><i>Recommendation 6:</i> Document how communities of color, Indigenous communities people with low incomes and other historically marginalized communities were engaged in project planning and selection.</p> <p><i>Recommendation 8:</i> Use community feedback associated with the 2019 bond to evaluate and update the Parks and Nature department's program activities and capital investment priorities.</p>	<p>The department is increasing the capacity of the community engagement team to strengthen the systems that ensure feedback currently received from community through current engagement efforts around the Blue Lake Park renovation project, Willamette Cove, and the Lone Fir Memorial as well as anticipated effort can are clearly document and can help shape future planning and projects.</p>
<p><i>Recommendation 7:</i> Update the Parks and Nature System Plan to clarify how access will be prioritized in conjunction with other goals such as stabilization, restoration, and land acquisition for habitat conservation.</p>	<p>The Parks and Nature System Plan, adopted by the Metro Council in 2016, lays out Parks and Nature's mission and role, trends that will shape future work, and strategies to guide the future, includes a call for an update every five to seven years.</p>

Audit recommendation (grouped by theme)	Relevant Parks and Nature work efforts
	As such, Parks and Nature will be seeking Council direction and eventual adoption on several key projects launching now that will help serve as the foundation for the recommended system plan update including an updated racial equity action plan, a tribal government engagement plan, an accessibility transition plan and a levels of service plan.

In 2021, the Metro Council reviewed initial staff work on developing a bond evaluation outcomes framework and since then, staff have been providing updates on this effort to the Council and the Natural Areas Oversight Committee.

## ATTACHMENTS

[Identify and submit any attachments related to this legislation or presentation]

[For work session:]

- Is legislation required for Council action? " Yes " No
- If yes, is draft legislation attached? " Yes " No
- What other materials are you presenting today? Three community members will join and share their perspectives on the importance of the project.