

PARKS AND NATURE LOCAL OPTION LEVY: CURRENT INVESTMENT UPDATE AND FUTURE LEVY WORK PLAN

Date: April 2, 2026

Department: Parks and Nature, GAPD

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Length: 45 minutes

ISSUE STATEMENT

The Metro Parks and Nature levy is critical to Metro's ability to restore habitat, protect water quality and provide nature experiences across the region. The current levy, which needs to be renewed by the voters every five years, will expire in June 2028. Staff are developing a work plan to explore future funding options, including documenting how the current levy has delivered on promises to voters, assessing service delivery needs, and analyzing potential feasibility and timing.

ACTION REQUESTED

Provide direction to inform a work plan for a future Parks and Nature levy measure, to be presented to Council in May.

IDENTIFIED POLICY OUTCOMES

The 2016 Parks and Nature System Plan articulates several key aspects of Metro Parks and Nature's mission, including protecting water quality, restoring fish and wildlife habitat, and connecting people with nature.

Metro's Parks and Nature levy supports these activities across nearly 20,000 acres of parks, trails, and natural areas. Investments are guided by the following outcomes in the levy framework adopted by the Metro Council in the 2022 levy renewal measure:

- **Habitat** – Improve habitat and habitat connectivity for plants, fish, and wildlife at Metro's parks and natural areas.
- **Water quality** – Improve hydrologic function, and water quality and quantity at Metro's Parks and natural areas.
- **Resilience** – Execute land management plans at Metro's parks and natural areas to reduce risk from extreme weather.
- **Climate leadership** – Collaborate with local, state, federal, Tribal and nonprofit partners to plan for and make strategic decisions related to conservation priorities across the region for broader, more effective action for climate adaptation and resilience.
- **Native plants** – Protect and restore culturally significant native plants in partnership with Tribal nations and greater Portland's Indigenous community.

- **Accessibility** – Improve the accessibility of Metro destinations for people of all ages and abilities.
- **Inclusion** – Ensure that Metro visitors of all backgrounds can access a variety of nature experiences to strengthen their relationship to the natural world.
- **Workforce equity** – Increase the prosperity of historically marginalized workers and communities through levy investments.
- **Contractor equity** – Build capacity and experience of historically marginalized contractors through projects at/with Metro.
- **Engagement and accountability** – Serve communities through inclusive, transparent and accountable engagement.
- **Education** - Design collaborative and culturally relevant education that lifts up multiple ways of knowing by centering work with educators from historically marginalized communities.

POLICY QUESTION(S)

- How well are current investments fulfilling promises made to voters in the 2022 levy renewal framework?
- What outcomes and goals should be incorporated into a future levy measure development work plan that staff will bring back to Council in May?

STRATEGIC CONTEXT & FRAMING COUNCIL DISCUSSION

Nature close to home is an essential element of quality of life and sense of place in the Portland region. For 30 years, voters have repeatedly asked Metro to protect and restore this critical asset as our region grows – ensuring we have clean water, healthy fish and wildlife habitat, and opportunities to experience nature for generations to come. Metro has established a core role in the region’s parks and nature system as a land protector, park provider and funder, with a unique scale and location of investments.

The Metro Parks and Nature levy works in close tandem with Metro bond investments that have also been repeatedly approved by voters – fulfilling our promise to restore fish and wildlife habitat, protect water quality and provide quality nature experiences across a growing portfolio of parks, natural areas, historic cemeteries, trails and more.

Maintaining this portfolio is a long-term duty that requires ongoing adaptation: being responsive to the needs of nature as well as communities, working closely with partners, and remaining accountable to the people of the region who have entrusted Metro with this work.

With the current levy set to expire in June 2028, this work session provides an opportunity for Council to review key outcomes and challenges in the implementation of the current levy, as well as preview the work ahead to secure continuing funding for this work. Parks

and Nature staff will provide context on current levy investments across the region and highlight several operational considerations that are emerging. This will be followed by an assessment of the work ahead to develop a future levy measure, presented by Metro's Government Affairs and Policy Development team.

Stakeholder groups and individuals who have been involved in policy development:

In recent months, Parks and Nature and GAPD staff have engaged with Tribal governments as well as a variety of conservation partners, community organizations, and jurisdictional partners to discuss the current levy and hear thoughts on potential priorities and considerations for the future. Metro has sought technical assistance from Trust for Public Land, The Nature Conservancy and The Intertwine Alliance.

Future work planning

A future levy measure is a key part of the Parks and Nature road map project, which also includes updating the system plan and other policies that guide Metro Parks and Nature investments.

As part of this effort, Parks and Nature is engaging with staff and partners to understand needs and inform future service priorities. Metro is also engaging with Tribal governments through this process. The information being compiled, which includes qualitative and quantitative data to describe the impact and challenges facing service provision, will provide a helpful tool to understand how Metro has been accountable to investment measure frameworks as well as potential options for continued service delivery.

Financial implications

When the first levy was passed in 2013, Metro managed about 15,000 acres of natural areas and 13 developed parks and marine facilities. Since that time, implementation of the 2006 and 2019 bonds has led to the protection of over 4,000 additional acres of priority habitat and the creation of 7 new nature parks across the region. Metro is working to keep up with changing visitor needs in developed parks, along with evolving land management challenges across all our properties, such as invasive species and the risk of wildfire. The cost of maintaining parks and natural areas, from trail repairs to habitat restoration to restroom cleaning, continues to rise.

Raising approximately \$19 million annually, the levy makes up the majority of the Parks and Nature department's operating budget. As costs rise, Metro's Parks and Nature Department has implemented cost-saving measures to protect core functions that the levy is meant to fund. The FY 2025-2026 budget reduced the Parks and Nature operating fund by \$2.6 million and 17.8 FTE. Together, these trends require a close look at what can be achieved with available funding as well as what may be possible to secure in the future, including a future levy measure.

BACKGROUND

The levy was originally approved by voters in 2013 to restore Metro’s natural areas, maintain and operate parks, and improve opportunities for people to safely enjoy parks and natural areas. At a rate of 9.6 cents per \$1,000 assessed value, the levy costs the average household around \$28 a year. The levy was renewed at this rate in 2016 and 2022, each time with the support of more than 70 percent of regional voters.

2022 levy program areas

When the Metro Council referred the 2022 levy renewal to voters, it adopted a framework for investment that included the following program areas:

- **Habitat restoration and land management (minimum of 40% of levy investments)**. Restore fish and wildlife habitat, improve habitat quality for priority species, and improve water quality and quantity at Metro’s parks and natural areas and provide ongoing maintenance to ensure ecological health, restore culturally significant plant communities, and reduce the long-term costs of maintenance.
- **Regional park operations (minimum 35% of levy investments)** – Support visitor services, maintenance, and amenity improvements at Metro’s parks, trails, natural areas, and cemeteries so that they are welcoming, safe and inclusive, and meet or exceed standards for accessibility.
- **Community-led investments and education (minimum of 15% of levy funds)** – Co-create culturally specific interpretive programs, materials, and events, and provide resources (financial and programmatic) to support communities in their efforts to strengthen connections with nature.

2022 levy outcomes

Based on community and partner engagement and input from stakeholders, the 2022 levy framework also included a number of desired outcomes meant to articulate its long-lasting impacts of the levy. These are also aligned with the 2019 Parks and Nature bond criteria.