

REGIONAL INVESTMENT STRATEGY: PARKS AND NATURE BOND PROGRAM OPTIONS

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Length: 60 min

ISSUE STATEMENT

The Metro Council is seeking regional funding to protect and connect nature and people throughout the greater Portland region. The Metro Council has directed staff to develop a potential bond renewal for referral to voters in 2019. Building on Council direction on the renewal's outcomes, programs and size, staff seek further Council direction on investment program criteria and targets in order to refine a draft bond renewal package.

ACTIONS REQUESTED

Provide staff direction on questions and investment options to explore through further engagement and planning, prior to Council consideration of bond measure referral.

IDENTIFIED POLICY OUTCOMES

- Build on momentum of past Parks and Nature bond investments, while meeting new challenges, particularly population growth, racial disparity, and climate change
- Advance Parks and Nature System Plan and Metro's work with partners to connect people to nature, protect fish and wildlife habitat, improve water quality
- Advance racial equity, diversity and inclusion in bond development, programming and implementation
- Integrate with regional investments in affordable housing and transportation.

POLICY QUESTIONS

- What options for a potential 2019 Parks and Nature bond should staff continue to explore through community and partner engagement, and technical analysis?
- What additional information or input from stakeholders or local government partners does Council need in order to make a referral decision?

POLICY OPTIONS FOR COUNCIL TO CONSIDER

In January staff received direction from the Metro Council on a set of draft outcomes, six priority investment area and key criteria for project selection, advancing racial equity and increasing the region's climate resiliency. At a work session on Feb. 19, Council provided further direction on the bond renewal's size and relative level of investments in each program area.

Staff seeks further Metro Council direction on options and questions to explore further through engagement and analysis, including potential program investment criteria and targets.

STRATEGIC CONTEXT & FRAMING COUNCIL DISCUSSION

In late 2017, the Metro Council directed staff to work with partners and the community on a coordinated regional strategy for potential investments in housing, parks and nature, and transportation, to address the challenges of growth and keep greater Portland livable for everyone. The passage of the regional affordable housing bond in November demonstrates greater Portland voters' eagerness to work together to address these critical issues.

Residents of the region have repeatedly supported investments in parks and nature, an essential element of greater Portland's quality of life and our national reputation. Over two decades, the region's voters approved two bond measures (in 1995 and 2006) that allowed Metro to create a unique regional park system with nature at its heart. Voters have also passed two levies to care for this system, in 2013 and 2016 and the Metro Council approved additional capital investments in 2014 to increase the public's use and connection to the natural areas that have been protected and restored.

Metro has a strong track record of success delivering on commitments made to voters in these funding measures. With voters' continuing support, Metro has worked with partners to protect clean water, restore fish and wildlife habitat, and bring parks and nature closer to hundreds of thousands of people. Parks and nature investments have made our communities healthier and our economy stronger. Metro now manages 17,000 acres of parks, trails and natural areas across greater Portland, including beloved places like Oxbow and Blue Lake, as well as lesser-known but invaluable natural areas. Thousands more acres of parks and natural areas have are enjoyed by people every day thanks to local and community projects made possible by regional funding.

Although much has been accomplished, there is more to do. A growing population and changing climate threaten the streams and habitat Oregonians have worked so hard to protect. Treasured parks and trails need improvements to keep up with demand. And some communities – particularly communities of color and other historically marginalized communities – need a more equitable share of benefits of investments in parks and nature.

The Metro Council adopted a Parks and Nature System Plan in 2016, spelling out Metro's regional role in addressing these needs with partners and the community. The Metro Council has also directed staff to advance racial equity throughout the development and framework of a potential bond, incorporating actions from the Parks and Nature Department's 5-year Racial Equity, Diversity and Inclusion Action Plan. This means including in decision-making those communities that have been left out in the past, as well as looking at how future investments can provide benefits to communities of color and other historically marginalized populations.

BACKGROUND

In fall 2018, Metro engaged a wide range of partners and community members to explore options for a potential bond. Staff conducted focused discussions with members of the conservation community, fellow park providers, Indigenous community members, and farmers to discuss priorities for a potential bond measure, including how it could advance racial equity. Working with a cohort of culturally-specific organizations and conservation groups, Metro also co-hosted two community forums, hearing directly the voices of more than 100 community members who were not included in creating previous Metro parks and nature bond measures.

In September, Metro convened a Stakeholder Table to explore options and provide recommendations to the Metro chief operating officer. Members include roughly 30 people representing perspectives from the conservation community, culturally-specific organizations, business, working lands and local elected officials.

Through the rich insight of these community members and partners, staff identified potential priorities for a third parks and nature bond, as well as ideas that could help a bond meet community and conservation needs in the future. Staff presented a summary of engagement to date to the Metro Council at an Oct. 11 retreat and Nov. 13 work session and continue to share with Council feedback received from organizations and individuals about future capital investments in the region's system of parks, trails and natural areas.

Over three work sessions in January 2019, the Metro Council discussed and provided direction to staff on the key outcomes the potential bond measure should prioritize in order to serve the needs of people and nature in greater Portland. Staff and the Council also considered possible gaps between Council's desired outcomes and previous parks and nature bond investments and how a future bond could achieve the Council's desired outcomes by being more explicit and transparent about investment priorities as well as by adding new program areas for funding in the future. In February 2019, Council provided further guidance on the bond renewal's size and relative level of program investments.

Since the February 19 work session, staff have continued engagement with stakeholders and jurisdictional partners to discuss Council's direction and hear input on investment priorities and selection criteria for bond program areas. These activities included community workshops, focus groups with communities of color and key partners, and discussions with park system directors and city managers. The Stakeholder Table reconvenes March 12 to continue developing recommendations for program investments.

Staff are preparing for broad public engagement on a draft bond renewal package in April – including program allocations, investment criteria and target areas. Council direction on March 19 will further define the outlines of this draft package for public review and engagement. Staff will return to work session on April 2 to present the draft package and receive Council direction to proceed with this engagement. Council could consider referring a final bond renewal package to the region's voters in late spring.

- Is legislation required for Council action? **Yes**
- If yes, is draft legislation attached? **No**