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Portland Parks and Recreation

SYSTEM PLAN DOCUMENT

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Park Director's Forward

Portland Parks 2020 Vision Plan, adopted in 2001, was developed with broad community input and support, and turned neighborhood needs and desires into a vision for the park system. Over the past five years some key recommendations have been implemented, such as the creation of the Park Board and the Park Foundation.

But there is much work to do over the next **two decades**. The Vision Plan clearly shows a parks system **that is much loved but overused, with uncertain funding**. Natural resources are disappearing and some residents are without access to recreation facilities. There is a continued need **for partnerships with community residents and businesses**.

This document introduces an innovative approach to carry many of the Vision Plan's key ideas closer to implementation: a comprehensive System Plan encompassing a new planning tool called the Nature to People Spectrum.

The System Plan translates the vision into a cohesive blueprint for specific actions. For example, the Vision Plan calls for the acquisition of 1,870 acres of parkland; the System Plan details specific property locations and costs. The Vision Plan identifies general needs for trails and sports fields; the System Plan cites exact locales and costs. Layers of key systems are embraced in the unified plan, such as natural resource protection, recreational facilities development, and budget analysis. The system view of park lands and facilities is both city-wide and neighborhood-focused.

Developed out of the national parks and forests "Recreation Opportunity Spectrum," the new Nature to People Spectrum is a unique urban adaptation that offers a proven way to provide the kinds of park settings, activities and experiences that are important to people.

The System Plan is an analytical document prepared in-house. Its recommendations will go out for public review, then refined into a technical document to help implement Parks 2002 Vision.

Zari Santner, Director

INTRODUCTION: The System Plan

Parks and recreation are essential to the life of the City of Portland. Backdrop of lush greenery, habitat for wildlife, playgrounds, scenic paths for strolling, ball fields, landscapes of flowers, swimming pools, meandering streams, a haven for butterflies. Parks are connected in a most elemental way to everyday lives.

Portland has thousands of acres of parks, trails, and natural areas, with an extensive recreation program that serves millions of people. The charge to Portland Parks and Recreation (PPR) is to maintain and enhance this network for future generations. Over the next two decades years it will become more challenging to meet this goal.

As the Parks 2020 Vision Plan makes clear, PPR is at a crossroads, struggling to maintain the quality of the city's parks in the face of a growing population and uncertain funding. Despite the challenges, the 2020 Plan recommends expansion of the system with the addition of facilities, parks, trails and natural areas, and improvement of the urban forest.

To accomplish all that, PPR has a fresh approach: The System Plan.

The System Plan provides overall planning guidance in many new ways. Beyond analyzing parks as a whole, it emphasizes interrelationships among components, and previews the effects of various changes on the entire system. It examines PPR as part of the larger, more complex regional network of recreational resources and services. It creates a unified framework for fulfilling PPR's three mission areas -- resources protection, park planning and design, and recreation activities. The new Nature to People Spectrum offers a better method for providing the recreational settings that people seek.

1. Historical Threads of Urban Parks

Public parks in cities have existed for just a little more than a century. Rising out of the squalor of rapid urban growth between 1870 and 1910, these places were part of an effort to improve public health and welfare, and the results forever altered the form of American cities.

The three separate reform movements that were particularly effective in marshalling support still have had the most influence on contemporary municipal parks and recreation services. The *recreation* movement aimed at

getting people out for exercise and fresh air. The *urban planning* movement sought to develop visual relief from the dense built environment. The *nature conservation* movement was inspired to connect people with nature. Broad appeal across political, social and religious lines guaranteed success in improving cities.

Proponents of these three movements, however, had widely varied practices and goals, which often collided. Leaders in the recreation field were reformists and educators, looking for sites and activities to build muscles and moral strength. Urban planners were frequently horticulturalists, landscape architects and engineers, designing parks as defining elements of a city's form. Supporters of wilderness sought the acquisition of large tracts of rapidly-disappearing "wild" land on the outskirts of cities.

Contemporary park systems continue much of the legacy of the three movements. In some cities, administration for parks and recreation are separated into different departments. In the national parks, the inherent conflict between resource management and human activities remains the most important management issue. The fields of study for recreationists, landscape architects and natural resources specialists are so different that the college majors continue to be separate and disparate. When these educated professionals are brought together in a public agency, their differences remain true to their historic roots and are seldom comfortably integrated.

2. The City of Portland's Park "System"

Frederick Law Olmsted introduced in the 1860s a somewhat radical and even romantic concept of urban park "systems," which he defined as "a network of urban parks systematically laid out and interconnected by stretches of greenery."¹ The result would be individual parks, but also something greater than the sum of its parts. By 1902, nearly 800 American cities and towns had adopted the idea of a park system.

Portland's city parks became known as a "system" in 1903, when Olmsted's son, John Olmsted, presented his plans and maps to the Portland Parks Board. It consisted of a variety of parks located throughout the city, sited for convenience, as well as taking advantage of the area's noted natural features.

A park "system" is a bold idea, deceptively simple, that has proven very difficult to achieve. Many cities acquired individual parks but found it much more problematic to build the connecting parkways. Only a few were successful.

¹ Choay, pg. 24

Most others, like Portland, have discontinuous boulevard blocks that are remnants of a vision never realized.

3. Benchmarks of Progress

As the romantic naturalistic age evolved into the more pragmatic Progressive Era, numbers were used to convince people that parks made economic sense. Also, as cities started jumping on the "parks" bandwagon, they wanted to be able to make comparisons with rival cities. The basic formula that came into use has remained essentially the same: acres of park per 1,000 residents.

On this scale, today Portland rates relatively high, at 19.1 acres per 1000 residents -- a total of 10,613 acres of parks for a population of 555,650. The recommendation of the Parks 2020 Vision Plan to acquire 1,870 additional acres of parks is based on 20 acres per 1,000, calculated for projected population growth.

Another method of comparison is the number of parks facilities that are provided per resident. As of 2005, PPR owns and manages 175 miles of trails and 745 facilities covering seven major recreation facility types: community center, pool, play area, community garden, tennis court, skatepark and sports field.

Standard urban park planning generally focuses on these two standards -- space and facilities. In the broader view, planning also includes inventory, analysis, and projecting trends relating people to activities and resources throughout the geographic area. Deficiencies in the system are often identified through these indicators and collective statistics.

4. Is There a Better Way?

These widely-accepted guidelines, used to establish policies and recommendations, have many drawbacks. Often they become "absolutes" -- without regard to significant differences in the population, density, recreation patterns, climate or economic base of a community. If for example, there becomes a standards such as one tennis court per 1,000 residents, that isn't a complete method of determining if tennis courts are really needed, and where.

With ratios of acreage to residents it's not possible to tell whether a full range of recreation experiences are available throughout the city. The number of park types and facilities doesn't indicate how they are distributed throughout individual neighborhoods.

Protection of natural areas has recently been highlighted as one of the three legs of PPR's mission (along with design/planning and recreation programs). Standards based on numbers do not reflect whether protection is adequately achieved.

The field has become much more complex, with a host of multi-disciplinary factors that are significant to the success of parks -- including operations and maintenance -- that are not represented in the guidelines.

In a sense, these formulas are cookie-cutter standards that give little indication of how well parks services are meeting residents' needs and wants. They do provide valuable information, but only tell part of the story, and not the most important part.

The System Plan for Nature and People

A Spectrum of Recreation Opportunities

While urban parks have continued to judge success by the numbers, for the past 30 years federal land management agencies have taken a very different approach. They developed a system that seeks to provide a broad spectrum of *recreation opportunities*. Federal parks and forest managers used to count numbers, too -- how many people camping or hiking or horseback riding and so forth. But in studying the nature of recreation through years of psychological, social and behavioral science, they came to realize that these numbers reflect only one aspect of the recreational experience.

For example, "camping" can mean dramatically different experiences. The lively, noisy, very social experience of a developed campground with house-size RVs running generators is quite unlike the quiet, solitary experience of primitive backcountry camping under the stars.

From this understanding, federal parks and forest managers learned that what they offer are *settings*, which provide the *opportunity* for certain *experiences*. They now organize settings into a framework of guidelines called the ROS -- the Recreation Opportunity Spectrum. The spectrum is divided into six major categories of settings, from Urban (for example, a visitor center at a national park) to Primitive (a roadless wilderness spot). A full spectrum is needed to balance the mission of serving people's recreational needs.

The Portland Perspective

This framework is relevant to urban environments. In an urban area recreation settings can be just as dramatically different. A steep, rocky dirt trail winding through remote reaches of Forest Park offers a much different experience than the flat, paved Springwater Trail, crowded with other bicyclists, rollerbladers and people hiking with pets or pushing baby strollers. And just as the federal range stretches from urban to primitive, Portland park settings range from community centers to wilderness-like environmentally sensitive habitat.

People love Portland parks. With more demand and fewer resources, it is important for PPR to continually strive for what is most important to citizens. Just as with national areas, a full spectrum is needed to meet people's diverse needs and interests.

To achieve that, PPR has adapted the federal recreation program to offer a new way of getting to the heart of offering a full spectrum of settings, activities and recreational experiences through the system of Portland's parks.

The Nature to People Spectrum

The Nature to People Spectrum is a way of planning and analyzing what parks do best -- connecting nature to people -- to insure that PPR can meet the challenges of providing parks services to a growing population.

At the heart of the spectrum is this key idea:

$$\text{Settings} + \text{Activities} = \text{Experience}$$

Settings are physical places or environments. A setting includes the landscape and facilities, built structures or elements, and vegetation of varying types and amounts. In Portland, settings range from highly developed facilities like Pioneer Courthouse Square to neighborhood sports fields to undeveloped natural areas like Oaks Bottom Wildlife Refuge. The setting for recreation is a prime force in the ensuing experience.

Activities include the full range of things people do in recreational settings, from competing in athletic competitions in front of hundreds of spectators to a solitary walk in a pristine forest. Within Portland parks there are hundreds of possible activities

Experience is the result of the activity that takes place in a particular setting. People come to parks looking for certain experiences. A brown bag

lunch with a co-worker on the Eastside Esplanade is one kind of experience. A big family reunion at Mount Tabor Park is another. A solo paddle at dawn out of Kelley Point Park is yet another.

While the possibilities are unlimited, the Nature to People Spectrum offers a method for PPR to find the best balance of settings city-wide within the realm of resources to be allocated.

The Settings of the Nature to People Spectrum

Instead of the six settings in the ROS, Portland's Spectrum features three types, ranging from urban (People □□ People), to the built environment in nature (People □□ Nature), to undeveloped (Nature □□ Nature.)

People □□ People

These are "urban" settings, where recreation is primarily social and the main motivation is interaction with others. People come to these settings either with friends or family or as part of a group such as a team or club. Examples include community centers, pools, stadiums, event venues and fields for competitive sports.

People □□ People settings are in high demand. The Godbe Survey showed that people want more swimming pools and recreation centers. Play areas are also popular -- more than a third of respondents said they visited playgrounds daily, weekly or monthly.²

From a park provider standpoint, these are the most expensive of all setting types to develop and maintain, although some have the potential to generate revenue. Often they require specialized recreation facilities and typically there is a high expectation of comfort and cleanliness. They need to be designed for durability, safety, easy maintenance and resistance to vandalism.

People □□ Nature

These settings are important for linking people with the natural world, in contrast to the surrounding urban environment. Vegetation is dominant, creating opportunities to see wildlife, smell fragrant flowers, hear leaves rustling and mark the natural progression of the seasons. The traditional pastoral park is a main example, but this type of setting also includes examples like Crystal

² Godbe survey, 2005

Springs Rhododendron Garden and the Park Blocks, along with recreational trails.

Parks have decreased in size as property values have increased, so sometimes the People □□ Nature setting can be part of a larger park with more facilities. Such areas may be compromised because there is not enough buffer from the more people-oriented parts of the park.

Nature □□ Nature

These are setting where ecosystems are the primary focus of attention. Some natural areas are zoned to allow nature-based recreation and people can have access through volunteering to restore habitat, or using the site to learn about nature. In other areas there is no visitor access, temporary or permanent, due to resource sensitivity. They also can be enjoyed by viewing from afar.

Nature □□ Nature settings are intended primarily to protect the city's ecological health, and diversity of wildlife and native plants. They provide valuable ecosystem services, such as improved air and water quality, and protection from flooding through managing stormwater.

City residents value nature and would like to see more wild areas. More than half of the respondents of the Godbe survey said that there was a need for more natural areas, which was the highest of all 13 recreation areas listed.³

Meeting Parks Needs Into the Future

The Nature to People Spectrum, like the ROS, is a simple plan that offers tremendous benefits. With this new spectrum, PPR has departed from the standard park-type classification system and focuses instead on understanding the system in terms of the types of recreation opportunities and experiences that are available. It allows planning to revolve around satisfying people's recreational needs, and providing a full spectrum of experiences instead of merely creating more settings. It guides the careful use of assets to support experiences. It also takes into account the uniqueness of places to play on the strengths of different settings. Given projections of increasing population, it will become more challenging to provide a range of opportunities that fulfills everyone's needs and preferences. The spectrum will help to balance the allocation of resources so that park needs will be met and sustained into the future.

³ Godbe survey, 2005

The Analysis of "Experience"

Major changes in demographics are expected over the next 25 years -- many more cultures, an aging population, fewer children, increases in some ethnicities, and so forth. Everyone will not have the same experiences or expectations about parks and recreation. *[It would be good to give some examples here, perhaps of different cultural expectations.]* Thus, providing a diversity of experiences is very important.

Experiences are the basis for satisfaction, but experiences are complex. While people experience the parks in the settings, those are only part of the total experience, which includes anticipating the experience, and feeling about the experience over time. When people are interviewed for park "satisfaction" surveys, all the different phases of the experience need to be considered to see in the process of coming to understand what they like and why.

With the Nature to People Spectrum, PPR can define the parks system in a way that allows for the understanding of qualitative results and benefits, rather than just counting numbers of facilities.

[to see complete document, contact me at matrazzo@msn.com]