

Parks & Recreation System Plan

Staff Listening Sessions Report

July 22, 2015

Throughout April, May and June, 2015, eight listening sessions were held with staff from both the Parks and Open Space and Recreation Divisions. These listening sessions were an opportunity for staff to provide valuable feedback in the early stages of developing the Parks & Recreation System Plan. Each listening session had participants from both divisions and a total of 105 staff participated.

The goals of the listening session were to:

- Explore and listen to Parks and Recreation staff expertise regarding the Parks and Recreation system.
- Explore staff concerns for the Parks and Recreation system.
- Develop a set of future outcomes for the Parks and Recreation system.
- Establish informed and positive relationships between Parks staff and Recreation staff.

Throughout each session, staff provided answers to questions by writing them on 3 x 5 cards. These cards were then read aloud for the group. The actual words written on these cards formed the basis for Session Summaries that are included in the appendix of this document. They also were the basis for the accompanying word cloud of staff's Best Possible Outcomes for the future of Parks and Recreation in Eugene (see page 4).

Primary themes arose from each session, are included in the Session Summaries, and are the basis for this report. The results of these listening sessions provide key pieces of information to build recommendations for the future. Those recommendations will be explored and developed in the next phase of work.

1. **Appreciation for our System and Staff.** Across the board, the participants in each of the sessions expressed a deep appreciation for the Parks and Recreation system of today. While there are many challenges, there is a sense that the foundation is strong and provides a critical resource to the community: quality of life. The natural beauty of Oregon combined with the diversity of our system (big parks/small parks; natural/ developed; programmed activities/ do-it-yourself) and many progressive attributes (trail and path network) place Eugene's among the best. The services provided to youth and teens in particular were called out as increasingly important as we become a culture that is under-exposed to nature and over-exposed to both risk-averse parents and unhealthy choices.

A sense of pride for the work that staff perform was also expressed. Dedicated and resourceful staff work within challenging environments every day to provide quality services to the community. Staff do a great job with available resources and are good stewards of the existing system and the taxpayer's dollar.

2. **Better Integration between Divisions.** This theme has two distinct paths. The first is that disconnectedness and miscommunications between the two divisions has a negative impact on service delivery and leads towards actual setbacks that could be avoided. The second path is about creating enhanced services to the community through cross-pollination of the two divisions. This leads towards greater interdisciplinary work where new and innovative opportunities can arise.
3. **Funding Challenges.** Each division has a unique challenge: Lack of operational funding for Parks, and outdated and insufficient facilities for Recreation. For Recreation, facilities that were built 40-years ago do not accommodate the numbers of people or the types of activities that are needed today, let alone planning for the future. Recreation staff are resourceful and creative in the programming they provide, but are severely hampered by a lack of functional and flexible space. For Parks, the lack of operational funding is stressing both system and staff. Parks staff have a strong customer service ethic and want to provide high-quality services to the public, but are hampered by a lack of adequate resources to maintain parks to the level they were designed. Staff are also challenged with additional responsibilities such as that caused by increases in illicit activities and homeless camping, and other work not immediately associated with parks, such as maintenance of stormwater swales and medians within the right of way. These additional responsibilities take time and resources away from traditional park maintenance work. Additionally, there are frustrating limitations on how certain funding resources can be used, such as Urban Forestry resources that can only be used in the right-of-way while trees in parks go unmaintained. This combination of being understaffed, spread too thin, and working in difficult environments is taxing on staff. A sentiment that the operational funding challenges must be addressed prior to further system development was prevalent.
4. **Telling our Story.** Staff believe Parks and Recreation are strongly supported in the community and that the public recognizes the importance of these services to their quality of life. However, there is a concern that the services are taken for granted and that there is a lack of understanding of what it takes to keep the system going. Interest in an education campaign and finding ways to “tell our story” was commonly discussed. Utilizing advocacy groups and partner agencies that can carry our message was also encouraged. In addition to educating the community about the challenges we face, it is imperative to continually and creatively market the programs and services we offer to all segments of the community.
5. **Equity of Services.** Staff expressed a strong ethic around wanting to serve all aspects of the Eugene Community: all geographic areas, all ages, all incomes, all cultures, and all abilities. While it is acknowledged that much is already done to meet this goal, there is still more to do. Whether it is establishing parks and recreation facilities in underserved neighborhoods, increasing programming diversity, or doing a better job of marketing our services to those that need it most. There is growing concern around equity as Recreation is asked to recover costs by increasing fees and the impact that will have on the goal of serving those in most need with free and low-cost programs. Similarly, there is concern that further budget reductions could result in “pay to play” situations where parks are no longer free and accessible.

6. **Compassion and Concern over Homelessness.** Staff in both Parks and Recreation interface regularly with the homeless population. There is a great deal of empathy and compassion expressed for individuals and many instances of staff serving as resource and support. There is also concern and frustration about not having the skills to effectively deal with some individuals, about the affect this population has on other system users, and how much of our limited resources are re-directed towards this issue.
7. **Planning for Climate Change.** The effects of climate change on the system are something that staff has been thinking about and wants to prepare for. In particular, the effects of increased population growth (climate refugees) and reduced water availability. There is a desire to be a leader in sustainable practices and also to be proactive in addressing these issues.
8. **A Bold Vision for the Future.** *Best outcomes* are a way of expressing the potential of the Parks and Recreation System. It is a goal, or a direction, and it focuses on the positive efforts of people who are seeking the best. When asked about the *best possible outcomes* for the future of Parks and Recreation in Eugene, staff not only expressed a desire to address the issues enumerated above, but to be bold, entrepreneurial and innovative. Many described a system with “Wow Factor” or “World-class Facilities” that increase tourism, generate revenue, and provide top-notch amenities for the community. Specific ideas included camp grounds, regionally-connected trails, a tournament ballfield complex, a whitewater park, and a state of the art recreation and aquatic facility. Many talked about deepening our partnerships with the school districts and other community providers to provide more seamless services.

APPENDIX: Individual Listening Session summaries can be found [here](#):

Staff Listening Session Summary #1

Staff Listening Session Summary #2

Staff Listening Session Summary #3

Staff Listening Session Summary #4

Staff Listening Session Summary #5

Staff Listening Session Summary #6

Staff Listening Session Summary #7

Staff Listening Session Summary #8

