

Chapter 2: About the King County Parks and Recreation Division

2.1. Organization Mission / Vision / Values

Mission

To enhance the quality of life for communities by providing environmentally sound stewardship of regional and rural parks, trails, natural areas, forest lands, and recreational facilities, supported by partnerships and entrepreneurial initiatives

Vision

The King County Parks and Recreation Division envisions a diverse, equitable, and accessible system consisting of regional and rural parks, an interconnected network of regional trails, healthy natural areas and forests, and world-class recreation facilities. The system's assets contribute to the health, well-being, and enjoyment of the regional population and rural, unincorporated communities. Through sustainable operations, strategic investments, and citizen participation, the division preserves, protects, maintains, and enhances public lands and recreation facilities. King County residents value the system for conserving environmental quality and scenic beauty; offering social, educational and recreational opportunities; and for its contribution to the economic health of the region. King County residents are actively involved in the stewardship of their public open space and recreation heritage.

Values

- *Regional and Rural Service:* Provide park and recreation assets that serve the county-wide population, as well as communities in rural unincorporated King County
- *Safety:* Ensure that parks, trails and recreation facilities are safe for all users
- *Partnerships:* Pursue partnerships with public, private, and non-profit entities that leverage public dollars, enhance public recreation opportunities, and involve King County residents in the stewardship of King County's open space and recreation assets
- *Entrepreneurial:* Generate revenue and contribute to the financial sustainability of agency operations
- *Conservation:* Protect and enhance the ecological values of open space assets, including fish and wildlife habitat, native biodiversity, critical areas, and air and water quality
- *Equity:* Strive to provide public open spaces and recreation opportunities that maximize accessibility and are equitably distributed
- *Efficiency:* Maximize the value of public dollars through sensible cost reduction strategies while respecting best environmental management practices

2.2. History and Accomplishments

King County's Evolving Role

Since the early 1900s, the role of the Parks and Recreation Division in providing recreation and open space opportunities has evolved and expanded through several distinct periods, largely driven by the major funding efforts that directed them.

1900 to 1950: Establishment of King County's Parks System

During this era, the need for a parks and recreational system for unincorporated areas of the county became apparent, and the first steps were taken to acquire land and provide recreation programs. Many of the original park lands were donated to the county, and the first park properties were acquired. Facilities added or built during this period include the Works Progress Administration (WPA) buildings, which are some of the largest and most well-preserved log structures that remain in the nation today.

1951 to 1965: Focus on Recreation

The focus during this period shifted to providing innovative recreational programs and acquiring additional park lands. Acquisition became important as growth shifted to suburban areas on the Eastside and to the north and south of Seattle. Of particular interest for the government was lakefront access, as well as areas for playgrounds, games, sports and parkways. The first county-wide park bond issue was passed in 1956 for \$1 million. The county acquired its first regional park, Marymoor Park, in 1962 for \$1.1 million.

1966 to 1980: The Forward Thrust Era

During a period of unprecedented park expansion funded by the Forward Thrust bond issue, what was then called the King County Department of Parks and Recreation acquired and developed recreation facilities and programs distributed widely throughout the county. Forward Thrust was a model interjurisdictional and interdisciplinary effort at the regional planning level. With \$49.2 million from the bond, the county government was able to leverage millions more in grants and matching funds from other state and national programs. King County's park system doubled in size, adding more than 4,000 acres, 53 miles of waterfront, and miles of trail rights of way. One of the most notable Forward Thrust park initiatives was the creation of the aquatics system of sixteen indoor pools and one outdoor pool. The *King County Comprehensive Plan*, the *Ten Year Program for Open Space Acquisition (1965)*, the *Urban Trails Plan* and the *General Bicycle Plan (1976)* all contributed to shaping the future of the system at this time.

1980 to 2000: The Open Space Era

By 1980, the focus shifted to regional parks, natural resources and the preservation of open space. County residents, responding to dwindling open spaces and loss of habitat and public access, passed a \$50 million Farmlands Preservation Bond issue in 1979 to preserve agricultural open space, followed by a \$117 million Open Space Bond in 1989 to acquire other open space lands. In 1993, King County established a \$60 million Conservation Futures Bond Acquisition Program to purchase open space, parks and trails and initiated the \$14.8 million Waterways 2000 Program to conserve streams and rivers to protect salmon and provide open space for recreation and education. During this period, regional facilities, such as the Weyerhaeuser King County Aquatic Center, were developed and significant passive recreation and natural area parks, such as Cougar Mountain Regional Wildland Park, Moss Lake Natural Area, Spring Lake/Lake Desire Park, and Middle Fork Snoqualmie Natural Area, were acquired to protect ecological resources and provide passive recreation opportunities.

Another significant development during this period was the 1999 listing of Puget Sound Chinook salmon and bull trout as threatened under the federal Endangered Species Act. As a result, the State of Washington passed several laws directing planning efforts to address habitat degradation in fresh and salt water on a watershed-scale. This led to the beginning of the Watershed Resource Inventory Area (WRIA) planning process that continues to shape open space planning and management today.

King County also led the way in building a regional trails network during this period. The development and expansion of active recreation parks characterized this era, in particular delivering sports programs outside the incorporated areas of the county. Innovative programs such as the Youth Sports Facilities Grant program and the 101 Ballfields Initiative provided funds for construction and rehabilitation of many recreation facilities located on school sites throughout the county.

2000 to 2004: A Time of Transition

The Washington State Growth Management Act encourages the annexation or incorporation of urban unincorporated areas. Between 1990 and 2000, ten new cities formed in King County, shifting the responsibility for local parks and recreation services from King County to the cities. The cumulative impact of annexations and incorporations coupled with a fiscal crisis in 2002 prompted King County to reevaluate the provision of all non-mandated services supported by its general fund, including the parks and recreation system. Committed to ensuring that the public be able to enjoy the trails, parks and recreation facilities in the county, King County investigated a broad variety of funding options to preserve its open space system.

In spring 2002, the Metropolitan Parks Task Force (MPTF) was established to identify ways to keep the county's parks and recreation system open in 2003 and beyond and to restore stability to the parks system by removing it from dependence on the general fund. The MPTF issued its recommendations in June 2002 and called for the county to:

- Refocus its parks and recreation mission to provide for regional trails, regional passive parks, regional resource and ecological lands, regional active recreation facilities and rural parks
- Transfer all local facilities within cities and work to transfer local facilities in potential annexation areas
- Implement a broad variety of new entrepreneurial strategies to help raise revenues to support park operations
- Facilitate the acquisition and development of active recreation facilities by convening potential partners and providing capital funding when appropriate rather than assuming ongoing operation and maintenance obligations
- Seek voter approval for a property tax lid lift to support county regional and rural parks

These recommendations evolved into the *Parks Business Transition Plan*, becoming the blueprint for the transformation of the county's parks system. Another key element to the transition was a companion ordinance, referred to as the Parks Omnibus Ordinance (14509), which was approved by the King County Council and gave the Parks and Recreation Division the authority to implement its newly refocused mission and vision. In spring 2003, voters approved a four-year levy to support regional trails, parks, and recreation facilities maintained by King County.

It was also during this period that the parks agency was merged with the Department of Natural Resources, forming the Department of Natural Resources and Parks, Parks and Recreation Division.

2004 to Present: A Refocused Mission

After the tumultuous start to the decade, the Parks and Recreation Division came away with a refocused mission and role, providing regional active and passive parks and recreation amenities, natural area parks, regional trails, working forest lands, and local rural parks. As a result, it has become a more nimble agency that has successfully transitioned to a "new way of doing business", including having diversified its revenue base. In addition to property tax levy support, nearly a quarter of the agency's operations funding is now derived from a combination of entrepreneurial initiatives, competitively priced user fees, and gifts and grants. Public-private partnerships have further contributed to the agency's ability to leverage resources, creating new public recreation amenities and offering programs, events and other ways for the public to enjoy and benefit from King County's open space system.

The Parks and Recreation Division has also continued to transfer local urban parks and pools to cities and other entities, such as school districts and non-profit organizations. Since 2002, more than 60 local parks and pools comprising nearly 1,600 acres of local park sites have transferred to cities.

In 2007, King County voters renewed the original operations and maintenance levy for an additional six years and approved a companion, six-year capital expansion levy dedicated to support the acquisition of natural area parks and expansion of the regional trails system. In 2009, King County voters passed the “Open Space Protection Act”, an amendment to the County Charter to strengthen the protections against the sale or transfer of 96 open space properties totaling 156,000 acres. The properties identified are of high ecological value and are managed differently from other types of sites, such as those classified as active recreation sites. This amendment ensures that these properties are protected in perpetuity.

A list of recent accomplishments is included in Appendix VI.

2.3. Open Space System Goals

The King County Parks and Recreation Division strives to achieve its mission in the context of the policies outlined below. The policies reflect the evolution of King County government in the region and reinforce the vision set forth by key guiding documents, such as the *King County Comprehensive Plan (2008)*, *Metropolitan Parks Task Force Report (2002)*, and the *Parks Business Transition Plan (2002)*.

- G-101** King County will be a regional provider of open space with a major focus on systems of open space corridors that conserve natural resources and provide recreation, education and interpretative opportunities, ecological value, and scenic beauty.
- G-102** Regional active, passive and multi-purpose parks will be available to all citizens of the county.
- G-103** King County will be the provider of local parks for unincorporated rural areas the county.
- G-104** King County will have a countywide regional trail network of non-motorized, shared use (multi-purpose) paths that link cities and communities and offers recreation, alternative commuting options, and migration corridors for wildlife.
- G-105** King County will conserve and manage valuable forest lands for the health of the forest ecosystem, and where appropriate, as viable working resource lands.
- G-106** King County will acquire lands for their ecological value and steward them in a manner that protects and enhances their environmental benefits while ensuring appropriate public use, appreciation, and enjoyment.
- G-107** King County will develop a system of backcountry trails that provide passive recreation experiences in a more natural, rustic setting.
- G-108** Local open space sites in urban growth areas will become the responsibility of cities.

