

Chapter 6: Stewardship and Operations

As of 2010, the King County Parks and Recreation Division is the caretaker of 200 parks, 175 miles of regional trails, more than 200 miles of backcountry trails, 26,000 acres of open space, and 145,000 of conservation easements. These open space lands make King County one of the region's important providers and managers of public lands. As such, the principles and policies that guide the stewardship and management of these lands and resources are critical to ensure that these assets continue to contribute to the region's quality of life now and for future generations.

6.1 Operations

6.1.1 Funding

Operational funding supports a wide range of activities associated with the stewardship and operation of the open space system. Historically, operational funding for King County's open space system came from the county's general fund. Following a fiscal crisis in 2002, the county drastically reduced general fund support for the parks and recreation system. In 2004, this lost funding was largely replaced by the proceeds from a voter-approved four-year property tax levy (2004-2007). A subsequent six-year levy (2008-2013) currently provides the majority of the division's funding.

The division aggressively pursues efforts to diversify sources of revenue to supplement the levy, which does not provide full funding for operations. Other significant revenue sources include user fee revenues, which include fees for ballfield use, facility rentals, camping, swimming, and permits for use of park lands, and concessions, as well as entrepreneurial revenues, which include corporate sponsorships, major events such as the summer concert series and Cirque du Soleil, parking fees, grants, and Legacy Fund donations.

A modest and declining level of support comes from the King County general fund for the maintenance of local parks in the UGA, pending annexation by cities.

- SO-101 King County will continue to work with agencies, jurisdictions and the public to develop new and creative funding sources and other strategies to support the system.**
- SO-102 King County will maximize and leverage operational funds through public-private partnerships, pursuit of grant funds, use of volunteers, joint acquisition, development, use and management agreements, and will continue to seek other opportunities.**
- SO-103 King County will continue to pursue workforce efficiencies to help offset the growth in operation and maintenance costs.**
- SO-104 King County will continue to pursue use of a portion of open space capital revenue sources, such as REET or CFT, for ongoing maintenance and stewardship of sites acquired or developed with these funds.**
- SO-105 A fiscal analysis should be prepared to evaluate all capital project proposals to address stewardship needs of new projects. It should identify the long term operation and maintenance cost and the source of funds to support the project.**
- SO-106 King County will work to ensure that future funding efforts to acquire and develop land for open space purposes include a funding source to cover stewardship and maintenance costs.**

6.1.2 Maintenance

6.1.2.1 Maintenance Practices

Maintenance actions include enhancement, restoration, and the day-to-day care of the open space assets under the responsibility of the Parks and Recreation Division. Rooted in the vision, values, and stewardship principles outlined in the Open Space Plan, the maintenance practices implemented by the division will reflect the following policies:

- SO-107** King County should strive to use locally-adapted native species for natural area landscaping, restoration, rehabilitation, and erosion control. Habitat restoration projects should include provisions for adequate maintenance of plantings to prevent invasion of weeds and ensure survival of native plantings.
- SO-108** Use of drought tolerant plants and native vegetation in new site development projects will be emphasized to minimize the need for irrigation and reduce damage caused by non-native species.
- SO-109** Water conservation is an important consideration in management of the system. New construction and the rehabilitation of older facilities will incorporate low water use principles and equipment. Use of recycled water will be considered, when practical and effective.
- SO-110** Recycling efforts in parks will be promoted along with use of recycled materials available and appropriate for park uses.
- SO-111** The environment and the health and safety of staff and park users will be protected from the inappropriate use of hazardous or toxic materials.
- SO-112** Use of pesticides and fungicides will be based on integrated pest management principles.
- SO-113** Landscaping along King County's regional trails should be consistent with the most recent version of the *Regional Trails System Development Guidelines* and the *Regional Trails System Landscape Characterization Study*.

6.1.2.2 Assessing Maintenance Needs

King County will strive to understand and plan for current and future maintenance needs through the following policies:

- SO-114** King County will develop measurable site maintenance plans and management goals to provide direction for the stewardship of open space sites and utilize these measures to evaluate effectiveness and provide guidance and historical data for future maintenance decisions.
- SO-115** King County will monitor, review and evaluate how site maintenance is conducted to account for the changing needs of the system and identify and incorporate new procedures and tasks to address the conservation of ecological values and recreational assets.
- SO-116** King County will develop and maintain a plan for major maintenance needs and rehabilitation of open space sites and facilities to ensure safe and sustainable public use and to reduce lifecycle costs.

6.1.3 Property Management

Good property management reinforces King County's commitment to sound stewardship of its open space system. As property manager, the Parks and Recreation Division is responsible for guiding the use of its 26,000 acres of open space and 145,000 acres of conservation easements and ensuring the value of this legacy for future generations.

- SO-117** King County will encourage and allow the use of open space land that is compatible with the site, consistent with its open space purposes, uses and funding sources, and can be demonstrated to serve the public and protect the site's natural resources.
- SO-118** King County will encourage and promote mutually beneficial agreements with school districts, other agencies and private groups for the use and management of sites and facilities for recreation and revenue generating activities.
- SO-119** King County will evaluate requests for alterations to open space sites to ensure that they are consistent with park purposes, park plans and natural area site management guidelines and will not diminish open space values, use, aesthetics and stewardship.
- SO-120** King County will issue use permits or agreements for events sponsored by others when the use is consistent with park purposes, funding and site conditions, will not deter from open space stewardship and aesthetics, and is compatible with designated open space uses and users.
- SO-121** King County will not allow alterations or enter into agreements or permit uses that incur future obligations to the county for maintenance, replacement, rehabilitation or removal until a thorough analysis of the long-term cost has been prepared, risks and liabilities to the county clearly identified, and supportive funding is identified or provided.
- SO-122** King County will evaluate all agreements, easements and use permits to ensure they continue to be in compliance with their terms and conditions, current county policies and codes, and remain in the best interests of the site and the public.
- SO-123** King County will consider concessions and business endeavors that are compatible with site management goals and enhance the park experience by providing an opportunity for increased public use, enjoyment, education, and enhanced stewardship of the site.
- SO-124** King County will consider concession and business operations for effectiveness and efficiency in delivery of services, as well as for revenue generation. The county will grant concession and business agreements that do not result in uncompensated cost to the county.
- SO-125** King County will clearly post signage with applicable rules and restrictions for open space sites in language that is easily understood by the public.
- SO-126** King County will address unauthorized uses of open space land by working to abate and restore encroachments.
- SO-127** King County will maintain a policy and procedure for the naming of park, recreation and other open space sites and features.

- SO-128** King County will accept gifts or donations of equipment, materials, land, labor or improvements for a site that are consistent with site purposes and conditions, enhance aesthetics and stewardship values, are consistent with site management guidelines, maintenance, development or master plans, reduce stewardship costs, provide additional resource protection and/or improve efficiencies.
- SO-129** King County will work with nearby property owners, park users, volunteers, agencies and the public to enhance and protect the character, function and natural resources of the open space system.

6.2 Stewardship

For King County, the term ‘stewardship’ represents responsible management of the open space system to ensure public safety, provide appropriate public access and use, and protect a site’s ecological and recreational value through maintenance, monitoring, enhancement, and restoration. Stewardship also implies the use of new techniques, skills, training and equipment, the development and implementation of best management practices, and the pursuit of revenue and partnership opportunities that sustain sound stewardship and operations.

In light of population growth and development, diminishing open space resources, and a challenging revenue environment for county government, sound stewardship of the open space system only grows in importance. Even as public use of and demand for parks and trails continues to rise, the Parks and Recreation Division will continue to face challenges in securing appropriate levels of funding to maintain and manage the open space system for the foreseeable future.

SO-130 King County will steward its open space system and keep these lands in perpetuity for open space purposes. Other uses will be considered only if they can be demonstrated through a public process and adopted criteria that they are surplus to the county’s public recreation or open space needs. Surplus of open space sites must also be consistent with requirements associated with their funding sources and King County Charter Amendment Section 897.

SO-131 King County will manage open space sites to ensure that the land, facilities and natural resources are protected and that appropriate public use is safe and enjoyable. The public is expected to have access to the open space system for recreational, scientific, and traditional cultural use, but access may be restricted when necessary to protect or restore natural resource values and processes, when deed restrictions limit or restrict public access and use, and/or when safety issues warrant limitations on public use. Access strategies for each site will be identified and monitored.

6.2.1 Stewardship and the Public

The public plays a key role in the long-term stewardship of the open space system, as park and trails users, advocates, volunteers, and taxpayers. King County residents continue to demonstrate that they value the benefits of King County’s open space system and the role that it plays in enhancing regional quality of life and communities. Most recently this was demonstrated through public votes, including:

- 2003 approval of a four-year property tax levy to support operations and maintenance
- 2007 approval of a six-year property tax levy to support operation and maintenance
- 2007 approval of a six-year property tax levy to support open space expansion
- 2009 approval of a charter amendment strengthening protection and conservation of certain ecologically valuable open space properties

SO-132 King County will promote awareness of the role of the county’s open space system in the quality of life in the region, in the recreation industry and its economic benefit to the region.

6.2.2 Preservation and Conservation

- SO-133** King County will integrate habitat management and enhancement as a major component of its stewardship. Natural area parks will be managed to protect and restore ecological processes, conserve wildlife habitat, and foster native biodiversity. This focus may include management, enhancement and restoration of degraded natural areas to increase their ecological, wildlife habitat, climate change adaptation and resiliency, and educational values.
- SO-134** King County commits itself to preservation, protection and conservation of native biodiversity and will demonstrate this in daily activities. Environmentally sensitive maintenance techniques and best management practices will be followed to the greatest extent possible at all open space sites.
- SO-135** King County will work with other agencies to maintain the necessary quality and quantity of water in its streams and lakes to provide for plant communities, suitable fish and wildlife habitat and recreational use.
- SO-136** King County will promote forest management and restoration in order to conserve and enhance its vital natural areas with healthy forest canopies that contribute to improved water and air quality, surface water management, fish and wildlife habitat, aesthetics, climate change adaptation, and energy conservation.
- SO-137** King County should be a leader in natural resource management by demonstrating environmentally sound and sustainable forest practices on county-owned open space sites that result in retention of forest cover and improved forest health. This may include adopting forest management practices that promote carbon sequestration.
- SO-138** Priorities for restoration projects on open space sites should be based on priority recommendations in the WRIA plans (Salmon Recovery Plans), the Flood Hazard Management Plan, individual *Site Management Guidelines*, and other King County-endorsed planning documents and processes.
- SO-139** King County will monitor and document the ecological and forest conservation easements in its inventory to ensure conservation values are protected and that lands are being managed consistent with the terms and conditions of the individual recorded easement.

6.2.3 Biodiversity

Biodiversity includes plant and animal species, the habitats they use, the ways that species and habitats interact with each other, and the physical environment and the processes necessary for those interactions. Some major benefits of biodiversity include purification of air and water, soil fertility, and moderation of floods, droughts, temperature extremes, and forces of wind, as well as control of pests and disease, resiliency and adaptation to a changing climate, and pollination of plants.

- SO-140** King County supports the integration of conservation principles into its management actions in order to conserve native biodiversity through policies for land and water resource management, climate change planning, and fish and wildlife habitat conservation.
- SO-141** King County will strive to identify and conserve components of native biodiversity within its open space system that are especially sensitive to climate change and work to conserve biodiversity through the protection and restoration of ecological processes that create and sustain habitats and species diversity.
- SO-142** The conservation principles presented in the King County Department of Natural Resources and Parks Ecological Lands Handbook and in the King County Comprehensive Plan provide broad guidance to focus and direct restoration activities to enhance natural resources and ecological value on open space sites.
- SO-143** King County will promote wildlife habitat enhancement projects by community groups, park users, stakeholders, non-profits, and businesses through education, active stewardship, and volunteer events.
- SO-144** On all open space sites, King County will develop a coordinated strategy for preventing, monitoring and controlling infestations of state-listed noxious weeds, and where feasible, other non-native invasive weeds of concern.