



**Customer Service and Data Gathering Initiative:  
Summary of Findings**

**Final Report**

**2011**

## I. Context and Methods

In 2011, King County Parks undertook a multi-faceted customer satisfaction effort with the following objectives:

- Determine the level of general satisfaction with the services currently provided by King County Parks
- Develop a better understanding of the region’s current and future parks and recreation needs
- Identify the roles that King County can play in meeting those needs

This information will provide direction to decision-makers about priorities for the future of the King County Parks system. It will also help guide the division about how to develop and measure the division’s service delivery in the future. Funding for this effort was made possible in part by a grant from the National Center for Civic Innovation (NCCI).

King County Parks engaged the following stakeholders through this effort:

- King County Parks employees and King County employees from other agencies
- Parks and recreation agency directors from other jurisdictions in King County
- Public (via focus groups and online and on-site surveys)

A similar line of questioning was posed to all stakeholder groups. Multiple meetings, which were facilitated by King County Park staff, were held with Parks Division employees, King County employees from other agencies, and the Parks Directors. King County Parks worked with consultants to engage the public, specifically through the use of focus groups and on-site and online surveying. The focus groups were held at a professional focus group facility, and participants were selected both from the general population and from a representative list of parks and trails users provided by King County Parks.

On-site surveys were conducted over a three-month period from July - September 2011. The on-site surveying was conducted at varying times and days and captured a variety of park and trail visitor patterns. The on-site survey locations that were chosen represented a range of recreational activities offered at King County Parks’ facilities and reflect the demographic difference across the county’s communities. In addition, three workshops were held that specifically sought to involve youth. Nearly 400 people were interviewed. More than 1,700 people completed the online survey, which was available from August 17 - September 18. The online survey was promoted by King County Parks, mostly by asking existing community and corporate partners and other networks to publicize it among their respective constituencies. King County Parks also publicized the survey at events and through traditional and digital media channels.

King County Parks recognizes that as a self-selecting survey process, the potential for bias in the findings exists. Most often, those who respond to self-selected surveys have strong opinions or affinities for the subject matter. However, the findings from the online and on-site surveys do demonstrate relative consistency to each other, as well as to similar surveys and other published reports from the Northwest region.

## II. Summary of Findings

Participants gave a broad range of responses and comments throughout the input gathering effort, and comments were at times contradictory. However, several major topic areas consistently rose to the top, and certain concerns were commonly expressed across all stakeholder groups, as outlined below.

Topic Area	Common Concerns
Parks and recreation in King	• King County’s parks, trails, and natural areas are a

County	<p>wise investment by King County residents.</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• There is a geographic inequity in the distribution of regional-level recreation facilities.</li> </ul>
Maintenance of existing facilities	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Investing in the maintenance of existing facilities and infrastructure should be a priority.</li> </ul>
Regional Trails System	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• This is a service best provided at the King County level.</li> <li>• Investing in community connections and missing links is important.</li> </ul>
Partnerships	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Partnerships with other entities (i.e. community-based groups, other jurisdictions) are good and will continue to be critical in order to leverage tight resources.</li> </ul>
Marketing and outreach	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Investing in marketing and outreach will help King County Parks raise its profile, as the level of awareness is generally low.</li> <li>• Investing in marketing and outreach will help King County Parks communicate better with the public about the county's parks, trails, and recreational opportunities.</li> </ul>
Aquatics	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• The future of aquatics in King County requires a collaborative, region-wide discussion.</li> <li>• The future of aquatics in King County cannot be adequately addressed in King County Parks' levy.</li> </ul>

### III. Summaries of Input by Stakeholder Group

The information that follows summarizes input that was gathered internally and externally through some fifteen meetings, more than 300 interviews, and online. Overall, nearly 3,000 people participated in this process and provided some form of input.

The summaries that follow present a snapshot of hundreds of pages of data that were analyzed and reviewed to identify major topic areas and key themes.

#### A. Focus Groups

##### Participant Overview

Twenty one King County residents participated in one of two focus groups held on July 18, 2011. One group consisted mainly of participants who identified themselves as frequent visitors to parks, trails, and natural areas in King County. The second group identified themselves as visiting parks, trails, or open spaces no more than twice a year. The first group was recruited using lists from King County Parks' partners, representing a range of user groups, recreational activities, and geography. The second group was recruited from the general population of King County.

##### Summary of Comments

*Factors that make a good park or trail and that make park/trail customers satisfied.* Both park users and non-users identified similar attributes when discussing what makes a "really good" park or trail and what makes them satisfied or happy with a park or trail:

- A place for people to gather and come together to use, care for, and volunteer in parks and trails;
- Natural space that is cared for and well-maintained;
- A safe place, including safe facilities (such as smooth trails) and being safe from crime;

- “Versatility” in the facilities within or across parks to provide opportunities for different activities and interests;
- “Accessibility,” in terms of both (1) location (so that residents can easily reach parks) and (2) accommodation for people with disabilities;
- Areas for dogs on and off leashes; and
- Special features, facilities, and destinations, such as views and streams with salmon.

*How customers use parks now and would like to use them in the future.* As expected, residents described using parks in a variety of ways, including mountain biking, hiking, walking their dogs, riding horses, bringing children to play, volunteering, and going to concerts. In the future, park users and non-users indicated that they would like to use parks in the same way they do now, or in an extension or follow-on to the way they use parks now.

*Familiarity with and opinions of King County Parks’ facilities and mission.* Both park users and non-users indicated that they were unaware of the number and variety of parks, trails, and open spaces in the King County Parks system. Also, non-users were particularly unfamiliar with the mission of the Parks Division.

Park users emphasized the following when asked about the future of the Division:

- Add reclamation and education to Parks’ functions,
- Increase partnerships, and
- Continue community partnership grants.

Non-users’ suggested the following in discussing what the Division should do in the future:

- “Get the word out” about parks, trails, and open spaces,
- Keep parks and trails well maintained, and
- Do not charge entrance fees to use parks and trails.

*Communicating about King County Parks.* Both park users and non-users indicated that they were interested in having more information, from various online modes, about King County Parks in order to be better informed and to better use the parks and trails. Users and non-users suggested more signage; branding, such as putting larger logos on signs; and public service announcements to make it more clear which parks are owned and maintained by King County.

## **B. On-site and Online Surveys**

### **Participant Overview**

On-site surveys were conducted with park and trail visitors during the time of their usage of a King County Parks facility, such as at a scheduled event (ex: concert, soccer game) or during informal, unscheduled use (ex: walking on trail, playing at playground, at gardening plot). Some 396 people completed the on-site interviews, including three workshops aimed at engaging youth.

King County Parks promoted the online survey through traditional and digital media, at outreach events, and by encouraging our partner groups to disseminate the survey among their respective constituencies. There were 1,754 respondents who completed the entire survey, with a total of 2,396 having started it and 642 dropping out at some point after answering at least a few questions. The analysis considered all responses to each question and did not exclude respondents who did not complete the entire surveys.

## **Summary of Comments**

*Customer satisfaction.* The research finds strong support for King County Parks overall, with 90 percent reporting they are “very satisfied” or “satisfied” with their “experience at King County Parks’ parks trails, and natural areas”.

Respondents showed strong support for the appearance and cleanliness of King County Parks’ facilities, with 88 percent saying they are “very satisfied” or “satisfied.” While levels of satisfaction related to “safety and security” of King County Parks’ facilities (71 percent) and “information on signage at parks” (68 percent) are still high, the drop is notable and worth looking at more closely.

Overwhelmingly, respondents call King County Parks a “wise investment by King County residents”, with a 98 percent who “strongly agree” or “agree”.

*Usage.* Although people use parks and trails in King County for a variety of reasons, the most common uses are walking, hiking, enjoying the outdoors and dog walking. In addition, more than two-thirds of respondents reported using the parks and/or trails “daily or almost daily” or “weekly.” The use of parks and trails is spread nearly evenly throughout the year by regular parks users, although there is a slight drop in the winter, which is to be expected given the winter weather in King County. For those who use parks and trails less often, the frequency was focused on spring and summer.

The majority of people visit parks and trails in this area with one to three other people, making it a social activity. In addition, “word of mouth” is the leading form of communication about parks, trails, and recreational opportunities, followed by “searching online.” As people tend to only recommend activities they value, this finding reinforces the overall finding about support for King County Parks. The majority of the on-site respondents learned about their favorite parks and trails through signage and passing by in vehicles to and from their homes.

*Recreation Trends.* As the survey dug deeper into specific uses of parks and recreation facilities in this area, one finding was notable: A relatively small percentage of respondents participate in water-based activities, with 72 percent reporting they use them “only a few times per year” or “never.” Related, a relatively smaller percentage of respondents (61 percent) thought it was important to have affordable opportunities for swimming or to teach water safety.

When asked how to prioritize future investments, respondents pointed to “regional trails” (35 percent), “preserving natural areas” (30 percent) and “local/community parks” (14 percent) as the top three options. Only 6 percent of respondents cited “aquatic facilities” as a priority for future investment. Although demand is low for additional county aquatic facilities, a large number of respondents indicated that when they do use aquatic facilities, they are owned by local municipalities. In addition, respondents voiced concern for the closures of local pools and the deferred maintenance of those facilities left open.

*Communicating about King County Parks.* Respondents to the on-site surveys indicated a lack of brand differentiation between King County Parks and state and municipal facilities. Large natural areas were often confused with state parks, and smaller county-owned community parks were frequently mistaken for city parks.

## **C. Parks and Recreation Agency Directors**

### **Participant Overview**

King County Parks facilitated two meetings involving parks and recreation agency directors from other jurisdictions within King County. Seventeen participants representing sixteen jurisdictions attended.

## **Summary of Comments**

*State of Parks and Rec in King County.* Open public spaces of all kinds are important – maintaining connection between communities and nature is a key to quality of life in our region. However, geographic inequity exists, especially in terms of regional-level recreational facilities in South King County. Taking care of existing facilities should be prioritized, and new acquisitions should account for the costs of future on-going operations and maintenance needs that come along with expansion.

Flexibility is needed in terms of limitations from funding sources and also in terms of flexibility in how spaces are designed (i.e. to allow for multiple uses and to adapt to future changes in recreation trends).

*Aquatics.* Our region is surrounded by water, so equitable and accessible aquatics programming is needed to help ensure public safety. Long-term needs and funding for aquatics facilities should be addressed at the regional level; this is a bigger issue than what should be included in King County Parks' levies. However, some aquatics needs could be met through spray parks in existing facilities around the county.

*Regional Trails.* Trails are consistently ranked by the public as #1 asset in communities. The Regional Trails System is unique and touches every jurisdiction, but there are lots of missing links to be developed. More funding and more flexible funding is needed to develop local connections to the regional trails.

The Regional Trails System is King County Parks' top asset and is right role for King County, which should serve as a facilitator, coordinator, planner, and funder. Trails need to be standardized throughout King County, such as making amenities like restrooms, interpretive/educational opportunities, and rest places, more frequently available.

*Regional Collaboration.* King County should think about parks and recreation in King County as a whole system, especially in terms of geographic proportionality and equity. King County can play a leadership role as facilitator/convener on matters such as natural area conservation and regional linkages; regional recreational facilities; and regional trails and local links to the Regional Trails System (RTS).

King County has a role to play as a regional funder (ex: YSFG) or fund administrator. King County Parks should maintain pass-through funding to cities and should make funding more flexible by including parks, maintenance and operations, and trails.

Long-term needs and funding for aquatics facilities should be addressed at the regional level; this is a bigger issue than what should be included in King County Parks' levies (for example, the discussion should also involve school districts and non-profits).

## **D. King County Parks Division Employees**

### **Participant Overview**

King County Parks facilitated eleven internal meetings involving more than 130 employees representing every work group within the division.

### **Summary of Comments**

*Staffing.* In order to achieve enhanced levels of service in a safe and effective manner, more staffing is needed for general day to day operations of the division and support (vehicles, tools, technology, equipment, etc) should be increased accordingly. More support needs to be developed and added in specific areas of expertise, such as forestry, noxious weed control, managing partnerships, and outreach/external communications.

*Infrastructure.* In order to take care of existing infrastructure and facilities, major maintenance needs to be addressed systematically and with adequate resources, not only to address the backlog, but also to maximize the useful life of today's investments (i.e. Preventative maintenance is more cost-effective in the long-run.) Improving maintenance shop facilities can have an impact on employee efficiency, effectiveness, and productivity.

*Acquisitions.* Acquisitions should be strategic, working towards achieving a well-articulated vision. Acquisitions should be scaled to what existing and anticipated resources can provide, and staffing and resources for ongoing maintenance should be increased accordingly.

*Regional Trails.* This is a good fit for King County Parks. The division should invest in keeping up with maintenance of existing facilities and should prioritize missing links and community connections.

*Marketing and outreach.* The division would better serve the public by increasing marketing about its facilities and inventory and by being better equipped for community relations and understanding the public's needs and interests.

*Partnerships.* The division has done a good job developing partners, and should continue to invest in planning for and managing partnerships. The division should keep equity in mind when developing partnerships, such as the accessibility of under-resourced user groups or other recreational or geographic communities to partner with the division and/or not be shut out of a facility because of other partnerships.

*Enforcement and Safety.* In order to ensure that people feel safe in parks and on trails and that rules are followed, the division should have resources to invest in enforcement strategies, including collaborative approaches.

*Policies and Decision-Making.* When the division makes budgetary and policy decisions, the division should consider factors such as equity and social justice and accessibility, meaning that the public can get to and use King County Parks' facilities and that facilities and recreational opportunities remain affordable.

## **E. Other King County Employees**

### **Participant Overview**

King County Parks facilitated a meeting that involved eighteen employees from a variety of other King County agencies, such as the Office of Performance, Strategy and Budget, the Department of Natural Resources and Parks Director's Office, Wastewater Treatment Division, Solid Waste Division, Roads Service Division, Risk Management Division, and Council staff.

Due to the close working relationship between the agencies, King County Parks facilitated a separate meeting with the Water and Land Resources Division, in which five employees participated. The questions were slightly different for this session, largely focusing on natural area stewardship and ecological concerns. Other topics, such as aquatics and regional trails, were not covered in this session.

### **Summary of Comments: General Group**

*Equity.* King County Parks should maintain all parks and trails to the same level. As the division is still custodian of parks in the Urban Growth Area, funding needs to be secured that accounts for those parks. The King County Strategic Plan has emphasis on equity and social justice, which is not expressly reflected in King County Parks' mission statement.

*Partnerships with other jurisdictions.* It is challenging to achieve standardization and uniformity throughout county, and King County Parks can serve in a regional leadership role, including facilitating and providing funding for local projects and creating connections around the county.

*Funding / Levy.* Levy-based funding poses challenges: what is needed/what customers want vs. what is likeliest to be approved. However, major maintenance and capital planning should be considered in next levy. The division has been successful with its entrepreneurial funding, but since its asset base is changing, there are fewer opportunities for those efforts.

*Marketing/Outreach.* King County Parks has lessons learned to teach other King County agencies; the division has taken to heart this new way of doing business. It needs to get credit for this, by better promoting its accomplishments and improving messaging on how parks contribute to quality of life, especially among the public. The division also needs better recognition when King County has contributed funding for projects in local jurisdictions.

King County Parks offers a wide range of activities and opportunities, but some parks are ‘hidden’ – most people know Marymoor, but don’t know difference between smaller parks of different jurisdictions. The division has built a generally good presence on social media and in outreach, but there are many more opportunities for it to explore and to partner with community groups.

#### **Summary of Comments: Water and Land Resources Division**

*Land Management.* King County Parks has a role to play in the county’s overall conservation vision, which includes carbon sequestration, salmon recovery, noxious weed removal, and forestry and it should continue to develop greater expertise in maintaining natural lands (ex: noxious weeds, forestry, trail building/maintenance). There needs to be a strategic vision for acquisitions, communicated across divisions. With new and existing acquisitions, better use of site management guidelines would help ease disconnects between how WLRD and King County Parks approach managing and maintaining lands.

*Education/Outreach.* Both divisions need to better educate the public on the purpose of a site’s acquisition and appropriate public use/use of certain places within a site while leaving other areas undisturbed, such as through better use of on-site signage. King County Parks should increase its public engagement and should continue to grow its participation base and volunteer program.