



City Club of Portland

Good citizens are the riches of a city

"Forest Park:
Past, Present and Future"

Comprehensive Study Charge
March 2009

Approved for Study
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BACKGROUND

Forest Park may be a city park, but it is a park like no other. It is approximately 5500 acres of unimproved, near natural, forest land inside the boundaries of a major city. It owes its existence in large part to City Club, for it was a Club-sponsored study committee, appointed in November 1944, which proposed the creation of a "Municipal Forest-Park."

Of interest and perhaps as a sign of those times, two of the stated reasons for the park were to "grow timber which will in time yield an income" and "provide productive work for casual labor." The committee also wished to "beautify the environs" and "afford extensive nearby outdoor recreation."

In what must surely be one of the first examples of City Club "advocacy and awareness" efforts, the study committee evolved into a broader-based citizen group, the Committee of Fifty, charged with shepherding the proposal through the local bureaucracy. Finally, in 1948, Portland's City Council approved both the acquisition of the necessary land and the formation of the park.

Since the creation of the park, interest groups and public bodies have raised or provided the necessary funds to buy several small tracts – four in all, totaling roughly 150 acres – of in-holdings and adjacent properties for the benefit of the park. There now exist over 70 miles of trails. But in the main, the park has remained largely unchanged. As the park commemorates its 60th anniversary, it is important that we look back and forward to see how City Club's vision for this tract of wild and natural ground has fared and whether the greater community has the ability and the will to protect and manage it properly.

CURRENT ISSUES AND CHALLENGES

It is obvious to all that government budgets are under tremendous strain and will be for some time to come. The budgets of the state of Oregon and the City of Portland are no exception. The budget for the management and maintenance of the park is paid exclusively by the City of Portland. By contrast, according to Portland Parks and Recreation (PPR), the park's users come from the entire metropolitan area. Is it reasonable for this structure to continue or should some regional sharing of funding be explored? Would such an arrangement ultimately lead to a sharing of authority over management?

As with other special-use parks in Portland, such as the Japanese Garden and the Hoyt Arboretum, PPR partners with an organized volunteer group – the Forest Park Conservancy (formerly the Friends of Forest Park). The group engages in a multitude of activities in support of the park. As one PPR director noted, "we couldn't live without them." Does reliance on volunteers give those volunteers influence on policy decisions and might such influence morph into quasi-authority? Do user groups, such as dog owners or bike riders, lobby on issues of special interest to them before PPR or the Conservancy?

The Conservancy has expressed the view that the slow degradation of the park over the years has now reached a crisis. It states that 44 percent of the park is in "severely degraded to only fair condition," measured mainly by invasive species and tree health. The worst of the invasive species is English Ivy – and the Conservancy fears that the park will soon become an "ivy desert" if more is

not done to loosen ivy's hold on the park. With heightened awareness of global warming, there is also growing interest in examining the possible benefits of the park to the regional ecosystem. How might these benefits be analyzed, documented, and valued by the broader public?

Some specific issues exist with user groups that could impact the park. Portlanders love their dogs and bicycles. In blatant violation of the city leash law, dog owners enjoy hiking on the miles of wooded trails with their dogs running free. PPR reports that the Audubon Society complains that such use damages the park's plant life. PPR candidly admits that they cannot afford the staff to police the issue properly. The growing popularity of biking in the park, especially mountain biking, likewise brings new problems and conflicts. How best does PPR control the interaction of a mountain biker coming down and a hiker going up the same trail? Further, to what extent does mountain biking create erosion and result in damage to plants?

Activities adjacent to the park create issues as well. The Forest Park Conservancy submits that nearby housing developments, logging activities and rock quarries all threaten the park. To the extent that such activities provide jobs and wealth to the economy, who "draws the line" between appropriate economic and environmental concerns and should the line move with changing imperatives? Conservation easements and land acquisitions are being pursued by the Conservancy, Metro and the City of Portland. The Collins Sanctuary has already been purchased by Metro and portions of the Balch Creek watershed are in negotiations.

Access to the park is a further source of growing tension. There are only two main access points into the park and neither seems to have ample car parking for the number of users, especially on the weekends. Homeowners at the west end of N.W. Thurman Street have raised the issue repeatedly. But what should an agency like PPR do when it possesses limited funds to put toward a solution?

The issue that appears to be of greatest concern to PPR is fire. PPR recently received a one-million dollar grant from the Federal Emergency Management Agency (FEMA) to study all aspects of fire prevention, control and management. These issues are of such grave concern because of the park's proximity to residential areas, limited access to the park itself, and the nature of the fuel loads in the park. Furthermore, there is not one clear message. Adjacent homeowners may be told one thing by the fire department and required to do another by their homeowners' insurance companies, neither of which is consistent with sound horticultural practices as defined by the park staff.

STUDY OBJECTIVES

The goal of this study is to provide the following:

1. A brief account of the history and development of Forest Park.
2. An analysis of the key administrative, financial and environmental challenges currently facing the park.
3. A set of recommendations that address key challenges facing the park.

SCOPE

The creation of Forest Park, as stated above, was due to the early work of another City Club research committee. This fact presents a rare opportunity for a bit of historical reflection and observation. The committee should devote some of its efforts to a "looking back" at the formation of the park and major events along its sixty-year path to where we are today.

The majority of the study, however, must focus on the current challenges facing Forest Park that threaten its long term future. The committee should undertake a review and analysis of Forest Park – and possibly conduct focus groups or surveys of Forest Park users, neighbors and other groups – seeking to answer the following questions:

1. What is a realistic vision for the future of the park and how might that vision be realized given the economic times?
2. What public body or agency is best suited to manage Forest Park?
3. What is the appropriate long term role of the Forest Park Conservancy?
4. How should conflicts between user groups be resolved, and by whom?
5. What is needed to restore the park to good ecological health and how best should such restoration be financed?

The committee should make what recommendations it deems justified relating to the future of Forest Park.

TENTATIVE REPORT OUTLINE

Executive Summary
Introduction
History and Development of Forest Park
Current Challenges Needing Attention
Administrative
Financial
Environmental
Conclusions
Recommendations