

Parks and Open Space



Introduction

Parks and open space help make Seattle a great place to live, play, and raise families. These places contribute not only to the city's environmental health but also to the physical and mental health of its residents. Access to open space can benefit individuals by giving them places to exercise their bodies and refresh their minds. Open spaces also provide valuable wildlife and vegetation habitat that might otherwise be scarce in the city.

The City-owned park and recreation system comprises about 11 percent of the total city land area. It includes gardens, community centers, boating facilities, and environmental education centers. From the magnificent views off the bluffs of Discovery Park to the tree-lined boulevard system and intimate pocket parks, these areas provide opportunities for residents and visitors to relax, enjoy competitive games, exercise, or meet with friends and neighbors.

Developed parks are not the only sources of open space that people enjoy in the city. There are also open spaces and recreation opportunities located in public rights-of-way, such as along Cheasty and Ravenna Boulevards or in Bell Street Park. Off-road bike trails, including the Burke-Gilman Trail and Alki Beach Park, offer other types of active recreation. An extensive system of P-Patches and community gardens throughout the city offer gardening spaces for residents to grow their own fruits, vegetables, and flowers. Seattle Center, which itself is not part of the City parks system, is nevertheless a unique urban amenity that offers both open space and a wide variety of cultural activities.

Other agencies also provide open spaces in the city. These include fields and playgrounds at public and private schools, areas such as the federal Chittenden Locks, several waterfront access points provided by the Port of Seattle, and the open spaces on several college and university campuses. Numerous private developments have made plazas and other open areas available to the public, such as Waterfall Garden Park in Pioneer Square.

In addition to the areas enjoyed by the public, there are many private open spaces in the city. These areas—such as yards in single-family and multifamily zones—also provide light, air, and breathing room that benefit everyone in the city.

Puget Sound and the city's lakes provide another form of open space. These wide stretches of water are open to the sky and offer visual relief from the urban environment, as well as visual connections to other areas of the city and region.

In 2014 voters in Seattle approved the formation of the Seattle Park District. This district provides a new taxing authority and funding source for the maintenance and improvement of City parks, as well as for programs aimed at serving historically underserved residents and communities. Some of the ways the City obtains new parkland are by using state funds, acquiring surplus federal land, establishing requirements for new development projects, providing incentives for developers, and creatively using public rights-of-way.

Access to Open Space

Discussion

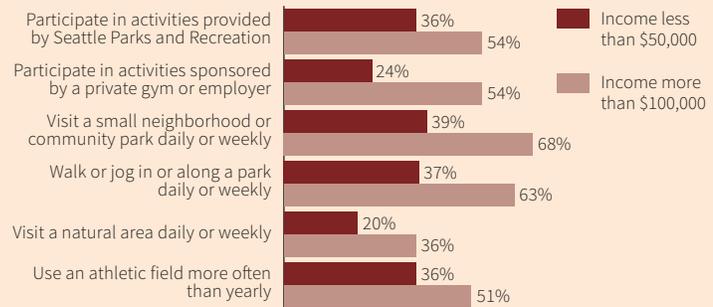
The city has a robust citywide park and open space system. These open spaces are available for use by all. However, the City continues to look for ways to improve this system. Seattle is already very developed, so there aren't many opportunities to find new land for open spaces. Creating the system that we desire—and one that will serve the growing city—will require new strategies, including some that will increase the capacity of existing parks. We will have to find the right balance between active and passive recreational activities throughout the park

system, build better access through the City’s transportation planning, and provide access to open space and recreational programming as part of public and private development.

Public health studies indicate that proximity to parks is associated with greater levels of physical activity as well as increased park use. Open spaces in Seattle are well distributed and available throughout the city. However, a recent study found that lower-income people are less likely to participate in physical activity than people with higher incomes, as shown on the accompanying table.

Seattle Residents’ Participation in Recreational Activities

Percentage of residents who participate



Source: City of Seattle Parks Legacy Plan Survey, conducted in 2012

This section addresses the design and distribution of our citywide park and open space system, including how new parks and open space are acquired and developed. The Seattle Parks and Recreation Department’s Development Plan also contains specific goals for Seattle’s parks, open space, and facilities such as community centers, athletic fields, and playgrounds.

GOAL

- P G1** Provide a variety of outdoor and indoor spaces throughout the city for all people to play, learn, contemplate, and build community.

POLICIES

- P 1.1** Continue to expand the City’s park holdings and open space opportunities, with special emphasis on serving urban centers and urban villages that are home to marginalized populations and areas that have been traditionally underserved.
- P 1.2** Provide a variety of parks and open space to serve the city’s growing population consistent with the priorities and level-of-service standards identified in the City’s Park Development Plan.
- P 1.3** Provide urban trails, green streets, and boulevards in public rights-of-way as recreation and transportation options and as ways to connect open spaces and parks to each other, to urban centers and villages, and to the regional open space system.
- P 1.4** Reduce health disparities by making investments that provide access to open space and recreation activities for marginalized communities.

- P 1.5** Make rights-of-way available on a temporary basis to provide space for community events, such as street fairs, farmers' markets, or neighborhood celebrations.
- P 1.6** Provide areas to preserve important natural or ecological features in public ownership, and allow people access to these spaces.
- P 1.7** Provide public access to shorelines by using street ends, regulation, or acquisition.
- P 1.8** Encourage or require private developers to incorporate on-site publicly accessible open space or to provide appropriate recreation opportunities for building tenants within new developments.
- P 1.9** Consider the use of open space impact fees to help fund open space system improvements that will serve the expected growth.
- P 1.10** Use cooperative agreements with Seattle Public Schools and other public agencies to provide access to open spaces they control.
- P 1.11** Create healthy places for children and adults to play, as well as areas for more passive strolling, viewing, and picnicking.
- P 1.12** Use investments in park facilities and programs to reduce health disparities by providing access to open space and recreational activities for all Seattle residents.
- P 1.13** Design open spaces that protect the natural environment and provide light, air, and visual relief within the built environment.
- P 1.14** Make the most of the limited available land by developing parks and open spaces so that they can accommodate a variety of active and passive recreational uses.
- P 1.15** Consider access by transit, bicycle, and foot when acquiring new park facilities or improving existing ones.

Parks and Recreation Activities

Discussion

Seattle Parks and Recreation provides programs and facilities that let people play, learn, and lead healthy, active lives. People gather, take classes, exercise, and play sports at community centers, pools, and lakes. Other City facilities, such as golf courses, boating centers, and tennis courts, offer additional opportunities for recreation. Seattle Parks and Recreation offers programs for teens and classes that provide opportunities for lifelong learning and recreation options for those with disabilities.

GOAL

- P G2** Continue to provide opportunities for all people across Seattle to participate in a variety of recreational activities.

POLICIES

- P 2.1** Consider the use of open space impact fees to help fund recreational facility system improvements that will serve the expected growth.
- P 2.2** Develop a long-term strategic plan that accounts for citywide and neighborhood demographics, as well as the demand for various active and passive recreation activities.
- P 2.3** Establish partnerships with public and private organizations to supplement programming that supports residents' needs and interests.
- P 2.4** Develop activities at community centers based on the specific needs of each community they serve and make them neighborhood focal points where people can enhance their individual health and well-being and strengthen a sense of community.
- P 2.5** Promote the use of open spaces and park facilities in the city for events that celebrate our history and the many cultures of our community.
- P 2.6** Provide recreation and social programs that allow older adults to remain healthy and actively involved in their community.
- P 2.7** Provide athletic fields that can serve as places where people of diverse ages, backgrounds, and interests can engage in a variety of sports.
- P 2.8** Offer fun and safe water experiences through a diverse range of healthy and accessible aquatic programs at outdoor and indoor venues throughout the city.
- P 2.9** Provide welcoming, accessible, and affordable recreation and social programs for people with disabilities and their families.
- P 2.10** Engage teens with activities that help them to build their identities and to acquire skills that will lead to healthy and productive lives.
- P 2.11** Develop programs that foster awareness and appreciation of nature from the neighborhood scale to the regional scale and provide activities for residents to help protect or restore the environment.
- P 2.12** Provide programs that are culturally responsive, accessible, welcoming, and affordable to communities of color and to immigrant and refugee communities.
- P 2.13** Provide welcoming, accessible, and affordable recreation and social programs for LGBTQ youth and adults.
- P 2.14** Develop partnerships with organizations that consider race and social justice to be fundamental to their operations and business practices.

Maintaining Park and Recreation Facilities

Discussion

The City's park system makes up a significant amount of the city's land, and that land contains many types of buildings, swimming pools, trails, landscaped and natural areas, and urban forests. Keeping these facilities safe and enjoyable requires constant attention.

GOAL

- P 3.3** Manage the City's park and recreation facilities to provide safe and welcoming places.

POLICIES

- P 3.1** Implement capital improvements that are driven by a long-term programmatic strategic plan.
- P 3.2** Maintain the long-term viability of park and recreation facilities by regularly addressing major maintenance needs.
- P 3.3** Look for innovative ways to approach construction and major maintenance activities to limit water and energy use and to maximize environmental sustainability.
- P 3.4** Enhance wildlife habitat by restoring forests and expanding the tree canopy on City-owned land.
- P 3.5** Protect habitat and wildlife areas through education, interpretation, and wildlife-management programs.
- P 3.6** Increase access to public land by assessing, managing, and cleaning up contaminated sites.
- P 3.7** Preserve and reclaim park property for public use and benefit, and ensure continued access to parkland for the growing population.
- P 3.8** Leverage capital and program investments and agreements with private vendors to provide training, apprenticeships, youth employment, and living wage job opportunities for marginalized populations.

Major Open Space Attractions

Discussion

Some of the facilities maintained by Seattle Parks and Recreation and certain other open spaces in the city attract many visitors from outside their immediate neighborhoods. Washington Park Arboretum, Woodland Park Zoo, Kubota Garden, Seattle Aquarium, Magnuson Park, the Olympic Sculpture Park, and Seattle Center are examples of locations that offer natural and cultural attractions and bring users from across the region into Seattle's neighborhoods.

GOAL

- P G4** Plan and maintain regional parks and facilities to accommodate the people who will want to visit them, while respecting the facilities' neighbors.

POLICIES

- P 4.1** Develop plans for regional and special-use parks to take advantage of unique natural and cultural features in the city, enhance visitors' experiences, and nurture partnerships with other public agencies and private organizations.
- P 4.2** Design parks and program activities in Downtown in ways that create a welcoming and safe environment.
- P 4.3** Recognize that visitors to major regional attractions can impact the neighborhoods surrounding those facilities, and look for ways to limit those impacts, including through enhanced walking, biking, and transit connections.
- P 4.4** Look for innovative ways to conduct construction and major maintenance of park facilities that will provide training, apprenticeships, youth employment, and living wage opportunities for marginalized populations.