

Chapter **

Lane County Parks in Context

The Lane County Park and Recreation Department was created in 1953. Among the new Department's initial mandates by Order of the Lane County Court, the governing body at that time, were the following instructions:

... To administer, under the County court, such park, recreational, scenic and historical facilities as may come under its jurisdiction, and to promote vigorously the discovery of sites and facilities suitable for the present or future use of citizens of the county for park, recreational, scenic and historical purposes and to obtain their acquisition and permanent designation for public use . . . It shall be the policy of the County Court to sell or otherwise dispose of no land presently owned by the county or coming into its possession without first having a report from the Park and Recreation Commission as to its value for recreational, scenic or historical use . . ."

In part, readiness to establish a County Parks system was precipitated by a time of unprecedented economic growth and general well-being. World War II had recently ended, and returning troops brought the need for housing. Lane County has 2.5 million acres of forest lands, among the most productive in the nation. For generations, the wood products industry drove the local economy and provided a seemingly limitless supply of timber and family wage jobs. Construction all over the country brought a booming demand for Lane County's wood products, attracting job seekers. Between 1960 and 1980 Lane County saw a nearly 70 percent increase in population.¹

Most of Lane County's forests are managed by the federal government, and receipts from timber harvests from these lands go to the federal coffers. They are also exempt from county property taxes. On the other hand, Lane and other Pacific Northwest counties with significant public forest land bases expend monies on these areas, for example, maintaining the public road system that traverses the forests, and on sheriff patrols in rural areas. To make up for some of the lost revenues and costs, from 1908 until 1990 the federal government allocated a percentage of timber receipts back to these counties.

Long enduring prosperity gave rise to several other national trends. There was a significant increase in per capita leisure time and corresponding demand for recreation facilities. There was also an emerging recognition of the connection between public health and recreation. In addition, rapid development brought growing consensus that open space was quickly disappearing, and setting aside some lands for outdoor enjoyment and natural resource protection was important.

These trends attracted Congressional attention and debate. A 1958 federal bipartisan mandate created the Outdoor Recreation Resources Review Commission (ORRC) to study the issues, and in 1961 the Commission published a report making the following key recommendations:

- Recreational opportunities must be provided at the federal, state, and local level, by public and private entities.
- Each state should have a long range recreation plan.
- The federal government should establish a Bureau of Outdoor recreation.
- A federal funding program should be established to provide grants to states to meet the demand for outdoor recreation and to acquire lands at the federal level.

Largely as a result of this work, federal legislation to fund recreation was introduced, and in 1965 Congress established the Land and Water Conservation Fund (LWCF) to create parks and open spaces, protect wilderness, wetlands and refuges, preserve wildlife habitat and enhance recreational opportunities. In addition to financing

¹ U.S. Census

acquisition of national parks the LWCF provided federal matching funds, or "stateside" grants for local park infrastructure and other improvements.²

The ORRC recommendations and stable funding provided by the LWCF provided an impetus for recreation agencies to take a long term approach to recreation planning and management. The 1960s and 1970s saw major park land acquisitions and investments in park infrastructure at the federal, state, and local level. Through 1980, Oregon received more than 30 million dollars in LWCF funds which were partially passed along to local governments, including Lane County.

In keeping with the Order that established the department, Lane County Parks aggressively pursued new park land acquisitions through donations, purchase, and transfer of foreclosed properties. In its first twelve years, it acquired 59 parks totaling 2,650 acres.

County Parks emphasized partnerships with other agencies from its beginnings. During the 1950's and 1960's, the Oregon Department of Fish and Wildlife purchased several riverside sites for water and fishing access, and Lane County agreed to build boat ramps and maintain these holdings. The Eugene Water and Electric Board (EWEB), the City of Eugene, the University of Oregon and Lane County worked together to purchase Alton Baker Park, now a city park. EWEB and Lane County jointly purchased the historic McKenzie Trout Hatchery on the McKenzie River. Lane County Parks continues to maintain several boat landings on EWEB and ODFW lands today.

In its early years County Parks made increased water access a top priority, identifying several reservoir shore land sites and obtaining 50-year leases from the U.S. Army Corps of Engineers to convert them to County parks. The department established park design standards and made Orchard Point park a model for others in the system. In 1970, these initiatives led the Army Corps of Engineers to bestow on Lane County its first ever special citation for excellence for a county parks system.

The 1970's brought continued strong support for public park funding. County planner Howard Buford³ and Paul Beistel, the Parks Department Manager, convinced then governor Tom McCall to support a state matching grant request for 1.5 million LWCF dollars to acquire the 2,218-acre Mt. Pisgah area near the cities of Eugene and Springfield. Eventually, in 1982, Lane County acquired it from the state, naming it the Howard Buford Recreation Area and making it the largest of all parks in the county system.

By the mid 1970's, with a solid foundation of park land, steady infrastructure investments, and a staff of 35 employees, the department had created an admirable system that was on course to meeting the recreational needs of county citizens and visitors well into the future. As the decade ended, however, numerous circumstances conspired to reverse Lane County Parks' good fortune.

After providing visionary leadership throughout much of the park system's infancy and growth, Paul Beistel retired. At the same time, the nation also went into a brief inflation-induced recession. While most of the country soon adjusted, Lane County and other areas dependent on a single industry did not. From 1979 until 1991, the Lane County wood products industry lost 5,700 jobs, a decline of 40 percent.⁴ Lane County experienced population losses in 1982, 1983, and 1986 as people sought employment elsewhere.⁵ Lane County government struggled to meet expenses in the face of inflation, declining timber receipt revenues, and increased demand for services. Beginning with fiscal year 1978-1979, the Parks Department budget and staffing began undergoing significant annual reductions.

² Information contained here about the ORRC and LWCF is from www.nps.gov/lwcf/history.html

³ Howard Buford, a former National Parks Service planner, was hired jointly in 1948 by Eugene, Springfield, and Lane County as the first staff planner for the earliest local planning commission for this area, known as the Central Lane County Planning Council. Source: *Eugene Modernism 1935-65: Government*, Historic Preservation Northwest, Albany, Oregon (June 2003).

⁴ *Building our Region's Economy: Overall Economic Development Program for 1992-93*, Cascades West Economic Development District (June 1992).

⁵ U.S. Census

Then in 1980 Oregon voters passed a constitutional amendment prohibiting the use of gas tax monies on anything but roads as of 1982, and eliminating this source of park funding from the county budget. After nearly 30 years of stability and growth, the Parks Department was informed that it would be removed from the general fund when the gas tax change became effective.

Budget priorities changed at the federal level as well, and LWCF funding was drastically reduced. Oregon received no or little LWCF funds during most of the 20 year period from 1980-1999.⁶

Loss of gas tax revenues and LWCF funds had major long term consequences for park agencies across the state. A survey of Oregon's public recreation managers conducted for the 2003-2007 State Comprehensive Outdoor Recreation Plan showed that over 20 years later, state and local park agencies in 9 of 11 state regions identified a key issue of concern to be the need for major rehabilitation of existing outdoor recreation facilities from capital investments made during the 1970's and earlier.⁷

With loss of funding imminent, County Parks staffing was reduced by fifty percent. Seventeen of 82 county parks were immediately shut down. Four others were given to other park agencies. For the remaining, the County held a public hearing to "receive public input regarding their expectations for park and open space services and to specifically address the area of park closures in the event service level reductions are required . . . It is now apparent that funding at the level of adequate service levels in all parks is not available . . ."8

No immediate solutions to the Parks Department's budget problems surfaced, however, and in 1982 the Parks Department was entirely eliminated and all parks were closed. A lack of a staff meant no maintenance and increased vandalism, and the parks system rapidly deteriorated. A system that not long ago had been held up as a national model was reduced to deplorable conditions in less than half a decade. Ironically, Lane County Parks' futuristic efforts to acquire land and invest in infrastructure for the long term meant that the damage was that much more significant in scale and visibility. Local headlines drew attention to the situation.

In 1983, the County instituted a 5% Car Rental Tax, dedicated to County Parks operation and development. A small work force was formed under the supervision of the Public Services Division within County Public Works to perform basic maintenance. The car rental tax proved to be a stable source of basic funding, and in 1985, the County rehired a full time division manager and adopted a parks strategic plan. The immediate objective was to assure a "very basic level of service to our customers and arrest deterioration of the system assets."⁹ Through careful budgeting, and minimization of capital investments and maintenance, the newly created Parks Division began to slowly rebuild the system.

In Fiscal Year 1988-1989 the Board of County Commissioners added Parks back into the General Fund, contingent on the department working toward increased self-support by continuing to minimize capital expenditures and providing only basic maintenance, and increasing fees for admissions, moorages, group picnic reservations, and overnight camping.

Then Oregon voters passed Ballot Measure 5 in the following year, capping property taxes. At the same time public land timber harvests were drastically reduced, jeopardizing a revenue stream that had funded county programs for nearly a century. While Congress passed legislation to temporarily replace the timber receipt payments, the change

⁶ Funding of \$5 million in 1980 dropped to 0 in 1983 and hovered at or below \$500,000 for most years until 2000, remaining at 0 from 1996-1999. *2003-2007 State Comprehensive Outdoor Recreation Plan (SCORP)*, Chapter 1, Introduction, page 1-3 Oregon Parks and Recreation Department, (January 2003).

⁷ *Ibid.*, Chapter 5, Identification of Statewide Outdoor Recreation Issues, page 5-12.

⁸ April 20, 1981 Lane County Public Hearing Notice.

⁹ *Parks 2005 Plan*, Lane County Parks Division (January 1999).

introduced a high level of financial uncertainty. Lane County directed its budget committee to reduce spending in fiscal year 1991-1992 by \$3 million, and eliminated 25 positions county-wide.

With the intent to strengthen the taxing limits imposed by Measure 5, in 1996 voters passed Ballot Measure 47 and in 1997 Measure 50. These measures limited property taxes to 1994 levels and capped future increases. Lane County, historically the biggest public timber producer in the nation, was particularly hard hit because property taxes had been kept low as a result of relatively high timber receipt revenues.

Oregon's tax revolt typified a national demand for leaner government that had been brewing since the previous decade, signifying a drastic shift in general attitudes about government spending priorities. Parks and other government programs that were once considered worthy of tax support to serve the greater public good were now viewed as nonessential. If the Lane County Parks Division was to survive and provide even adequate levels of service, it had to be self-supporting.

With this in mind, and at the direction of the Board of Commissioners to move toward long term financial stability, the Parks Division took several steps over the next 15 years:

- The Division became more pro-active, adopting and implementing short-term (4 to 6 year) strategic plans, including:
 - a 4-Year Financial Plan (1991)
 - a Parks 2000 Plan (1994)
 - a 4-year Capital Improvement Plan (1995)
 - a Marina Action Plan (1996)
 - a Public Park Management Consolidation Plan (1997)

The 1997 Consolidation Plan represented a major step toward increased financial stability. Other park agencies also experiencing budget constraints partnered with Lane County Parks to geographically consolidate holdings, thereby increasing operational efficiency. In particular, Oregon Parks and Recreation (OPRD) received all county parks in the Middle Fork Willamette watershed, while Lane County Parks took several state parks along the McKenzie River. Also, some leases with the Army Corps of Engineers were allowed to expire or were released, and some acreage near national forests was conveyed to the U.S. Forest Service. Other small exchanges were made with the City of Eugene and Springfield. These efforts reduced park maintenance costs without eliminating lands from open space and recreational use.

- The Parks Division expanded grant seeking efforts to improve campgrounds, moorages, and other revenue generating facilities.
- The County approved a proposal to designate several roadside parks and covered bridges that no longer served motor vehicle traffic as wayside parks, making them eligible for limited road fund expenditures.
- Parks increased its emphasis on partnering with other agencies and volunteer outreach, to maximize coordination and thereby improve services. An example is the McKenzie River Cooperative Maintenance Partnership, established in 1998, composed of several private and public entities with an interest in protecting the natural and recreational resources of the river. A marketing and volunteer coordinator position was created in the Division as well.
- In 2000, the Board of Commissioners approved systems development charges on development within the County's land use jurisdiction to fund park improvements. This source of funding was later amended to include long range planning in order to fund a long overdue update to the 1980 Parks Master Plan.

- The Board of Commissioners authorized placement of general obligation bonds before the voters in the November 2002 election. Although many diverse interests joined forces and worked hard to raise support for the park bond, including the Homeowners Association and the Mt. Pisgah Arboretum, it was rejected by voters.
- The Parks Division began charging higher fees and offering more services, including new fees at Howard Buford Recreation Area and kayak rentals at Perkins Peninsula Park. While controversial, the fees were necessary in order to keep open the numerous parks that have no fees, return to a well-maintained parks system, and restore adequate levels of service.
- Parks worked with the county real estate department to identify foreclosed properties that could be designated as park land and sold to generate parks system revenues. This provided a much needed revenue boost, nearly \$1 million, anticipated in fiscal year 2006-2007. The sales involved a residential lot in the city of Eugene and another unimproved coastal property of approximately 80 acres of sand dunes and forest that was long ago approved for subdivision development. The city lot was sold to St. Vincent DePaul for affordable housing, and the coastal property was purchased by State Parks for permanent protection. County Parks committed to invest these revenues in capital projects that will generate long term income for park system improvements.
- In 2005, Lane County Public Works began minting limited edition silver coins to commemorate the county's 17 historic covered bridges, three of which are designated as county parks. Proceeds from the sales will be used for maintenance and restoration of the bridges that are no longer used by motor vehicles.
- The Board of Commissioners allocated a share of transient room tax funds for an on-line reservation system implemented in 2006. The Parks Division initiated several other efforts to make it easier for customers to access services via the Internet, instituting on-line reservation and payment services for camp sites, picnic reservations, and special use permits. Several Parks Division products are also now available through Lane County's e-commerce website, including a new road and recreation map and T-shirts.

It is essential to examine the past when planning for the future. This chapter has attempted to do so, looking at both the national and local context of Lane County Parks' history. As the past illustrates, Lane County Parks enjoyed nearly 30 years of essentially unwavering political and financial support, and then suddenly plunged literally into elimination in a few short years, amidst a backdrop of changing public spending priorities and local economic hard times. It took the following two decades for the parks system to struggle back to a position of near stability.

In recent years, while the local economy has diversified and property values have soared, Lane County continues to deal with major financial issues. Revenue streams are flat due in part to voter-approved tax limitation measures passed in the 1990's, and decreases in timber receipts. Permanent loss of timber replacement receipts is a likely future scenario. Recent inflationary trends, and escalating health insurance and other costs are anticipated to continue to confront Lane County in future budget decisions. At the same time, public expectations for high quality parks, free of charge, contrast with willingness to supply tax revenues and harsh economic realities.

Car rental tax revenues are a steady but insufficient funding stream for County Parks. LWCF monies provide opportunities on a project-by-project basis, in the form of matching funds, but at levels that will never likely be comparable to those of the 1970's. Other state grants continue to provide opportunities for funding park improvements. However, these revenue sources can be expected to fluctuate with economic trends.

One of the most pressing problems now facing the County Parks Division is its aging infrastructure. However, having instituted numerous changes and a financial plan to work toward a self-sustaining future, the Parks Division is beginning to turn the corner toward long term health and stability. The Division can assume it will need to operate independent from the County general fund on a permanent basis. Generating service-based fees and otherwise diversifying revenues, and continuing to operate strategically and entrepreneurially are key to Lane County Parks' future success.

In 2005, based upon counts at developed parks, there were at least 3 million individual visits to the county parks system. The Parks Division recognizes that citizens and visitors of all income levels, cultures, and interests, have high expectations for safety, cleanliness, maintenance and facilities. A growing population means demand will increase. Park visitors want and expect both passive recreation opportunities and high levels of service. These demands present challenging and exciting opportunities to grow, and to work toward restoring the county parks system to its former level of excellence.