



February 15, 2023

Dear Mayor Wheeler and City Council,

The Parks Levy Oversight Committee (PLOC) reviewed the FY 2023-24 Requested Budget at our February meeting due to the investment of Parks Local Option Levy (Parks Levy) funding in what will be Year 3 of the Parks Levy. The PLOC supports the FY 2023-24 Parks budget request as it maintains full support for PP&R and it includes several new proposals that support Parks Levy voter commitments.

Voters overwhelmingly approved the Portland Parks & Recreation (PP&R) five-year Parks Local Option Levy (Parks Levy) in November 2020 to provide crucial operating funding for the PP&R parks system, supporting programs that provide recreation services and help conserve parks, nature, and clean water. The PLOC and our appointments to this committee were established in July 2021. We serve as an advisory body to PP&R Director Long, and our role is to review and advise the Bureau on Parks Levy expenditures, commitments to voters, Parks Levy transparency and communication, and on a Parks Levy independent audit.

We shared our thoughts on Year 1 of Parks Levy processes and delivery on voter commitments with City Council in our first annual report, produced in fall of 2022. On behalf of our PLOC, Judy BlueHorse Skelton presented our first annual report to City Council on October 26, concurrently with the Bureau's presentation of its annual report. In our year 1 report, we were pleased to see progress towards delivering on all of the Parks Levy voter commitments. We compliment PP&R for continuing to plan for responsible use of Parks Levy funding in FY 2023-24, and find the requested budget consistent with supporting the fifteen commitments made in the voter pamphlet. Specifically, new requests included will support: reducing the revenue target for Recreation Services, allowing for a focus on equity and access; increasing apprenticeship and trainee programs; continuing and establishing operations and maintenance; and more. We also support the opportunity the Parks Levy provides to support ongoing, transformational changes to how PP&R provides services.

Of particular note is the addition of a horticulturalist trainee to support PP&R's Nature Patch program, or Ecologically Sustainable Landscapes Initiative (ESLI). The PLOC is supportive of this addition, particularly in using the ESLI as an approach to land management. The expansion of the Nature Patch team with this new position is an essential step in ensuring the program's success and supports the Parks Levy's commitment to enhance and preserve parks, rivers, wetlands, trees, and other important natural features in urban areas for the benefit of all Portlanders and wildlife. The ESLI

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Sustaining a healthy park and recreation system to make Portland a great place to live, work, and play.

approach to land management is also a critical piece of addressing climate change and PP&R's program serves as a model for other cities and communities for mitigating climate change equitably. Ecologically sustainable land management will enable resilience as standard practices and planting will become increasingly unsuitable to increased climate pressures. While the addition of this Nature Patch position is vital to the program's impact, the PLOC encourages PP&R to continue to build out the ESLI, highlighting and planning around the work that is being done and the impact that ecologically sustainable land management has on urban heat islands and climate change mitigation.

The PLOC is also particularly interested in the use of Parks Levy funds to support Portland's tree canopy. The Parks Levy presents an opportunity to be transformational in PP&R's urban forestry management, goals, and partnerships. The FY 2023-24 request includes funds to, among other things, update the Urban Forestry Management Plan, increase preventative tree care ensure PP&R keeps existing trees, and funding a fee waiver program for low-income households. This work is critical to supporting and expanding a healthy tree canopy, protecting air and water quality, improving public health, increasing public safety, and making the city more livable for both humans and wildlife. In the coming years, the PLOC would like to see PP&R increase tree-related partnerships to maximize the impact of Parks Levy funds, particularly when it comes to tree planting. In doing so, greater alignment, efficiency, and impact will be possible, furthering the Parks Levy commitments to plant new trees in communities where today canopy coverage is lower and protect Portland's 1.2 million park trees.

We are supportive of the Parks Levy's investment in Recreation Services to reduce cost as a barrier for program participation. The investment allows PP&R to continue to develop and assess financial access programs to further reduce cost as a barrier for Portlanders living with low income to access PP&R programs like swim lessons, day camps, and exercise classes. The complementary proposal to increase and refine demographic data capture and disaggregation will allow PP&R to know it's customers better and increased outreach, surveys, focus groups and other engagement will help to understand needs of centered communities. The PLOC emphasizes the importance of this work, particularly how these investments center equity in programming and services. As PP&R continues to work to engage underserved communities and reduce barriers to access, the PLOC encourages PP&R to prioritize equity and work with community partners to expand impact of the initiatives.

Finally, the PLOC also implores PP&R and City Council to continue to explore and prioritize funding sources to address the nearly \$600 million maintenance backlog. The 2020 voter-approved 5-year Parks Levy allowed the Bureau to avoid devastating service cuts and make progress on operating service levels, but it provided funding for operations, and did not solve all the Bureau's long-term ongoing financial needs, including its capital maintenance needs. This funding to repair and replace existing critical public park assets is imperative for the continuation services for Portlanders now and in the future. The growing and compounding backlog threatens the future sustainability of the parks and recreation system and, in effect, stands as a contradiction to the investments in programming and daily maintenance the voters made. At the same time that PP&R

makes progress on Parks Levy commitments, we encourage PP&R and City Council to plan and work towards a sustainable funding source for capital major maintenance.

All of this work will take time and commitment, not only from PP&R staff, but City Council and the community. We recommend that City Council approve PP&R FY 2023-24 Requested Budget. The investments being made with the Parks Levy are meaningful steps towards supporting a healthy park and recreation system – one that is part of our vital public infrastructure and which supports ecological sustainability, equitable benefits, and healthy Portlanders.

Respectfully,

Parks Levy Oversight Committee

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