Regional Parks Funding

Task Team Report

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Acknowledgements – Regional Funding Task Team

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Introduction

Clark County Parks and Nature enriches communities by creating and stewarding parks that promote health and wellness, boost economic vitality, preserve natural areas, and ensure access to the outdoors for all. With over 100 parks in its system, Clark County Parks and Nature provides public access to special places, from beaches along the Columbia River, to home plates on little league fields. The parks system also protects public access to nature by acquiring, building, and maintaining trailheads and trails in forests and along rivers that connect people with the outdoors. The County's nine regional parks received an estimated 2 million visits in 2025. Clark County Parks and Nature Division has grown into a large, developed park system over decades. But, as the County population continues to grow, the funding sources for parks operations and maintenance budgets have not kept pace with rising costs and growing community needs. Without a new source for operations and maintenance, the County will not be able to develop new parks and eventually will have to make difficult decisions to close parks where safe and clean conditions cannot be maintained.

In 2025, Clark County Council directed the formation of a regional parks task team to tackle current and future challenges presented by lack of adequate park funding options. The regional task team is made up of city council representatives and staff from: Vancouver, Ridgefield, Battle Ground, Camas, Washougal and La Center as well as representatives from Clark County. The task team set out to understand the needs of each local park system and evaluate dedicated park funding options for the Clark County region based on a review of models in other regions throughout the country. The team convened a total of ten meetings between October 2025 to April 2026 and developed this report summarizing the information discussed during that time.

Clark County's Urgent Need

Clark County's Parks and Nature Division funds park operations and maintenance from three main sources: 1) The Greater Clark Parks District (GCPD); 2) park-generated revenue from paid parking, shelter reservations, and sport field rentals; and 3) the County's general fund. These funding sources have generally not kept pace with expenses. The costs of utilities, labor, materials and supplies are increasing rapidly. This is due to many factors including inflation and changes in the labor market. Additionally, because of constraints on funding sources, some of Clark County's park properties are getting more attention than others, which has caused an imbalance within the system.

Revenue Sources

The Greater Clark Park District (GCPD) is a voter-approved Metropolitan Park District (MPD) created in 2005. The district is not County-wide; rather, it encompasses just the unincorporated urban growth area of Vancouver, which at the time was growing rapidly in population, but had few developed park properties. Generally, funding generated within the park boundary can only be used for parks within the boundary. The formation of the GCPD along with its funding mechanisms enabled the County to build 30 new parks and operate and maintain those parks over the last 20 years. The levy is a stable and parks-dedicated funding source. The main challenge is that these funds cannot be used outside of the GCPD.

There are eight large, regional parks outside of the GCPD that rely only on general funds and park-generated revenue. These regional parks are: Lewisville, Daybreak, Lucia Falls, Moulton Falls, Lacamas, Whipple Creek, Vancouver Lake, and Frenchman's Bar. Not only are these the most heavily used parks in the County system, but they also are some of the oldest, largest, and most remote parks. They require more staff time for operations and maintenance to keep the parks safe and clean. Unfortunately, the funding sources for these parks have become limited over time.

Currently, park-generated revenue covers about 12% of total park operating expenses, and the general fund only covers about 23% (see Figure 1).

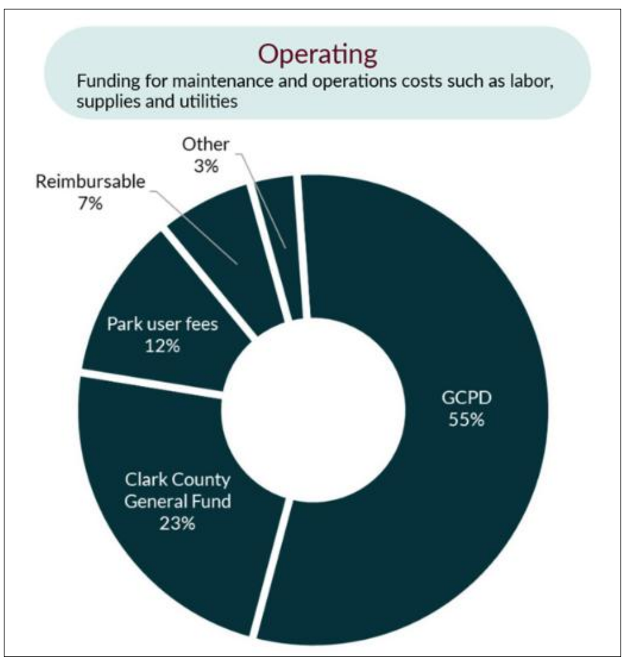

Figure 1: Clark County Parks Operations and Maintenance funding sources.

Expenses

Over the years, Clark County has taken many measures to reduce costs, including reducing staffing levels. Currently, the County employs 37 operations and maintenance staff to maintain 7,166 acres of park land. Compared to other parks agencies of similar size, this level of staffing is 80% less than the national median. Compared to other park agencies, regardless of size, the County's staffing level is 92% less than the national median (see Figure 2). Figure 2 shows the ratio of full-time employees (FTEs) per 10,000 residents based on data collected by the National Recreation and Park Association (NRPA) in 2024.

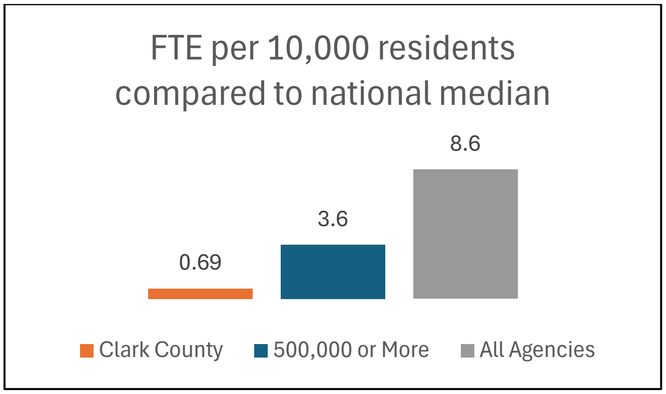

Figure 2: Comparison of staffing ratio to residents for park system reported in the 2024 NRPA Park Metrics database.

Staffing levels are lower, but the usage of County parks has increased with the rapidly expanding residential population. Increased usage means more garbage, more vandalism, and more wear and tear on facilities. Using task tracking software, the County has documented that 33% of daily tasks assigned to staff cannot be completed and only the most urgent maintenance and repairs are being done. Graffiti and vandalism can't be addressed as quickly, if at all. Bathrooms must be closed more frequently due to damage or disrepair. The list of deferred repairs continues to grow and over time becomes more costly to repair.

For the last seven years, the County has had to dip into reserve funds to cover the gap between regional parks' available funding and their actual operational costs (see Figure 3).

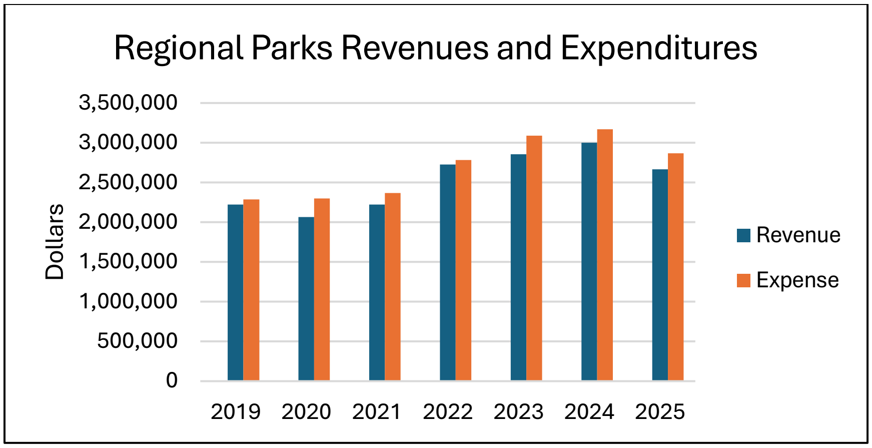

Figure 3: Regional parks revenues and expenditures between 2019 and 2025, without the Council-approved subsidies from reserve funds.

Expense Reductions and Revenue Enhancement Strategies

With an already lean staff, the County has had to turn to other measures to try to reduce the budget deficit. In 2025, County Council approved a resolution to increase park user fees, such as parking and picnic shelter reservations, which had not increased since 2010. Additionally, starting in July 2025, Park Management reduced irrigation of natural turf areas in Clark County-owned and operated parks. The effort reduced water usage by about 40% and saved approximately $116,000. Furthermore, in 2026, Council also approved the creation of a new partnerships position for the Parks and Nature Division. This position is solely focused on new contracts with park partner organizations to produce revenue and offset operating expenditures.

These measures have helped to reduce the budget deficit in the meantime, but aren't enough to close the level of service gaps and will not be enough to address future needs.

Cities and County Data Evaluation

To better understand the status quo of the other regional park providers in the county, the task team learned about each agency's unique park system. Together, the task team members compiled data from each of their park systems to benchmark against national metrics. Benchmarking metrics were pulled from the NRPA 2024 Annual Report based on data from member agencies across the country. Each park system compared their metrics to the national median for communities of their size.

One shared strength of our region is the amount of open spaces and natural resources. The amount of park-owned properties, including open spaces or natural areas, is high compared to national levels. Figure 4 shows little to no gap existing for the metric of total parkland per 1,000 residents. For Clark County and the City of Camas, their metrics are significantly above national median levels.

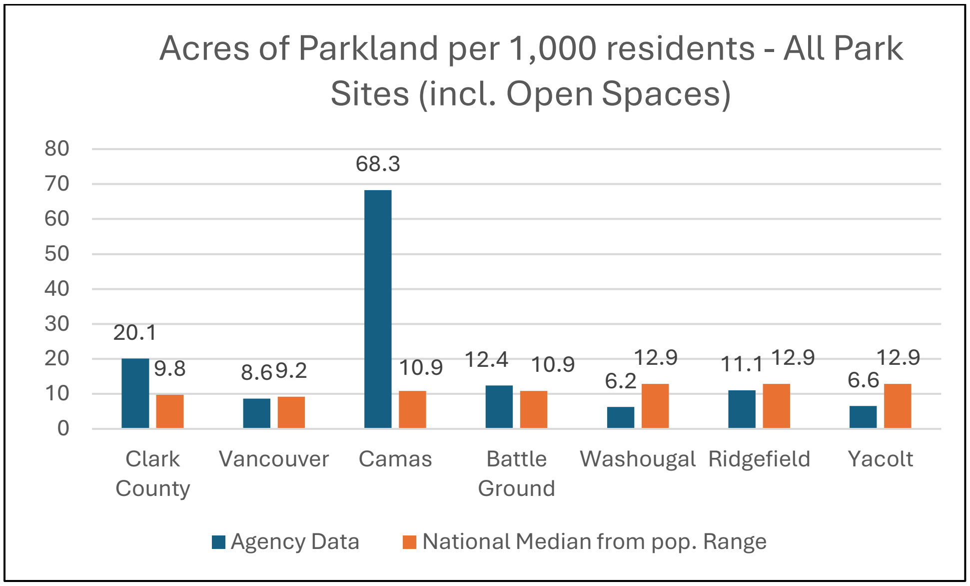

Figure 4: The comparison between agency data and national median data (based on population size) for acres of parkland per 1,000 residents.

Other metrics varied widely between agencies, depending on the size and number of parks each agency maintains and the level of development within the city. One commonality of all the park agencies in Clark County is that they are **funded and staffed below the National Median for agencies of their size.**

The figures prepared below are part of a gap analysis conducted using the national median benchmarking. Park system data are plotted in orange and the gap to meet the national median is plotted in blue. The vertical scale is zero to 100 percent, with 100 percent representing the national median value. For example, if the national median value is 100 parks facilities per agency and the City of Vancouver's count was 60 parks, then the chart would show the City of Vancouver at 60 percent and the gap at 40 percent.

As shown in Figure 5, all the task team's park systems are below national median levels for operating expenditures from regions with similar populations. Since some of the park system providers in Clark County don't provide recreation programming, the Figure 5 comparisons do not include recreational programming costs.

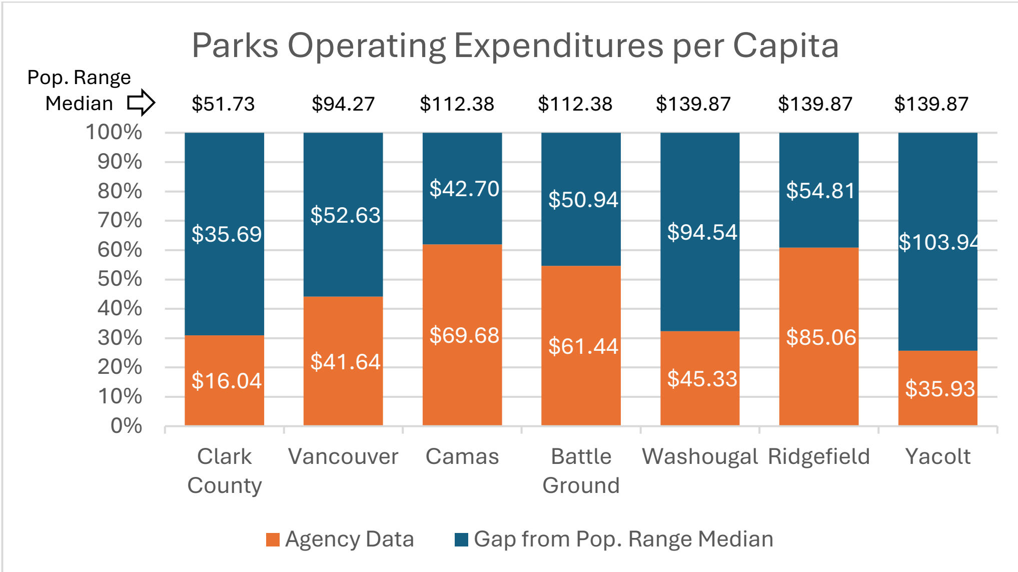

Figure 5: The percentage gap between agency data and the national median data (based on population size) for operating expenditures per capita for parks only (does not include recreation expenses)

In addition to operating expenditures, **staffing levels are also all below national median levels.** As shown in Figure 6, the ratio of full-time park employees (FTE) per 10,000 residents in each agency is below the national median for similar populations. Again, this comparison does not factor recreation programming staff into the comparison.

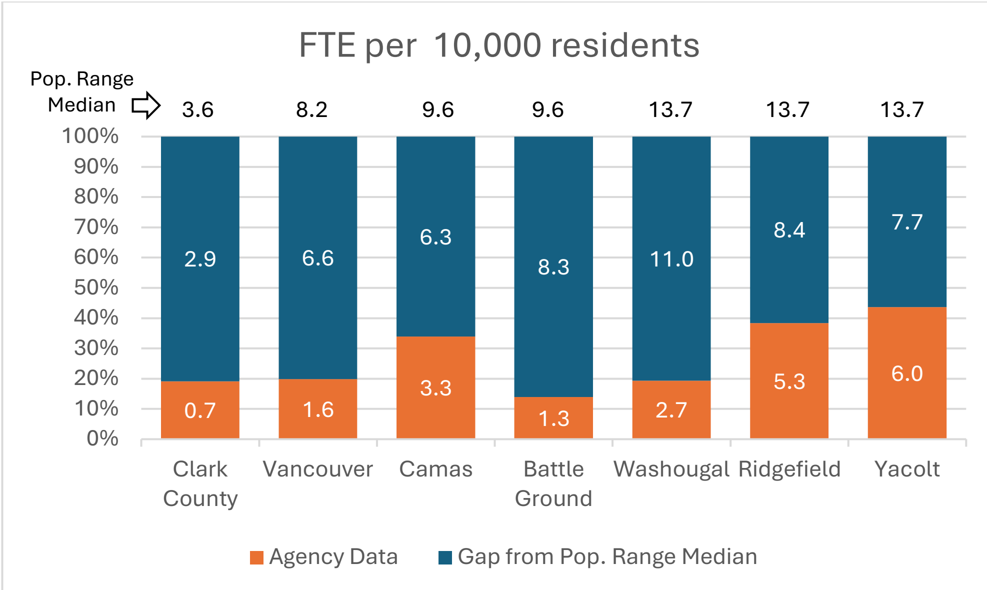

Figure 6: The percentage gap between agency data and the national median data (based on population size) for full-time employees (FTE) per 10,000 residents for parks only (does not include recreational programming staff)

The current data illustrates the realities of rapidly growing communities that will need park and recreation spaces and services. Based on State growth projections, the county will see a projected population growth of 34% over the next 20 years. That equates to about 154,854 more residents by 2045, which is similar to adding another city the size of Vancouver (current population of 202,600) to the County. This massive growth will require investment in park systems or drastic reductions in the level of service and numbers of parks in Clark County.

Given the demand for parks and open space access, each provider agrees that reduction is not a viable path forward. And while each agency has gaps in comparison to the national median, the task team members acknowledge that each system's needs and level of service goals look different. This report will not prescribe the funding needs to meet each agencies' needs or goals. While a shared revenue source for parks would be beneficial to cities that participate, it will likely not be a total solution to filling gaps at all agencies.

Models and Case Studies

The task team narrowed their focus to explore two types of viable funding models: a **Metropolitan Park District (MPD) and a Regional Levy.** Either of these models would allow for the County to share part of the tax revenue with cities. This section summarizes each type of model and discusses the potential implications if either model were implemented for Clark County.

Metropolitan Parks District

An MPD is a special-purpose local government entity established by voter approval under Washington's statute RCW 35.61 to fund a defined district that can cross multiple governmental jurisdictions. The MPD funds can be used to acquire, develop, maintain, and operate parks, trails, recreational facilities and other related amenities or programming. Establishment of an MPD allows for a permanent property tax levy that does not require periodic renewal votes from the public. Once created, the MPD is governed by a board or legislative authority, who would control the property tax levy rate on an annual basis.

Currently, Clark County contains one MPD, the GCPD, which generally has a boundary limited to Vancouver's unincorporated urban growth area (as defined in 2005 when the MPD was formed). The GCPD was established with a property tax levy cap of 27 cents per $1,000 of assessed home value, and County Council was designated as the governing body. The rate of the levy has decreased over time because, even though housing prices have increased rapidly, Washington State limits the annual revenue growth of local governments to one percent annually (plus new construction). The levy rate is adjusted each year based on total revenue projections. As of 2026, the levy rate is approximately 13 cents.

One viable option would be an expansion of the GCPD boundary into a County-wide district. This would allow money generated by the MPD to be used throughout the county, including regional parks. The County could also share portions of the tax revenue with cities utilizing intergovernmental agreements. At approximately 13 cents per $1,000 of assessed value, a County-wide MPD would generate an estimated $15 million dollars annually.

To initiate a ballot measure for expansion of the GCPD, petitions within each jurisdiction must be signed first. In accordance with RCW 35.61.020, a petition for a new city to join an MPD must be signed by 20 percent of the registered voters residing within the territory proposed to be annexed into the MPD. If the petition effort is successful, then annexation requires a simple majority to be approved by voters.

Regional Parks Levy

A county-wide property tax dedicated to parks, if approved by voters, could be levied for a six-year period, per RCW 36.68.525. Washington's statute limits the levy amount to 60 cents or less per thousand dollars of assessed value of property and requires a voter approval rate of at least 60 percent. Levy revenues may be used to acquire, build, operate, maintain, or regulate parks, trails, recreational facilities and other related amenities or programming. The levy would be governed by County Council, who would be allowed to increase the rate up to one percent annually without voter approval.

The levy provides more flexibility to cities that might consider a city-wide MPD in the future. The levy's six-year term limit might be more palatable to tax-sensitive voters but would not provide a permanent solution for the problems facing parks systems. Additionally, levy renewals would likely require some level of investment in public education every six years. If a County-wide levy were established, it would not change the existing GCPD tax rate and boundary. Many task team members brought up an equity concern regarding overlaying a park-levy on top of the GCPD. The GCPD populus would be paying two property taxes dedicated to parks, while the rest of the County population would only be paying one. Without additional benefits within the GCPD, this approach may be seen as inequitable by some taxpayers within the GCPD. Some task team members have concerns about the County-wide levy option, as it would result in a layered park tax for some residents.

Conclusion

Based on the information presented herein, the task team developed the following facts and findings:

Park Systems Value:

1) The benefits of parks, trails, natural areas, and recreational facilities extend beyond the land, helping to strengthen the local economy, make our region more desirable for businesses, workers, families, individuals, and visitors, as well as supporting public health and wellness and creating spaces that reflect the needs of all residents.[i]

2) Community members across our region place high value on parks, trails, and recreation. Parks, natural areas and trails are consistently ranked among the most important public infrastructure in our region. [ii]

Challenges:

1) Every park system in our region is funded below the national median of peer agencies of similar population size. [iii]
2) Communities throughout our region are projected to see continued rapid population growth. [iv] Current funding sources are limited and insufficient to meet

present needs.[v] Due to the continued rapid population growth coupled with existing gaps, agencies across the region will not be able to meet future needs without a new approach and additional funding.

3) Clark County has valuable recreational trails, but lacks an interconnected regional trail system, which contributes to our area's health, wellness and future economic development goals. [vi]

Findings and Next Steps

City- and County- owned parks serve all community members, regardless of their residential location. The Regional Funding Task Team finds that it is important to consider a regional funding source to fund all park and recreation systems in our region. Similar regional funding models are utilized around the country. [vii] The Task Team acknowledges that ultimately this will be a voter decision, but believe it is important for the cities and county governments to work in concert with one another.

Recommended Actions

The task team reviewed models that might meet this future funding need and identified impacts and implications for proposing each model in Clark County. The task team recommends that County Council take the next steps to further explore these funding models and how revenue could be shared with interested cities, by:

1. **Conducting market research** to provide the data, feasibility evaluations, and **conducting public education** and other preparatory work needed for County Council to make a decision on a potential future ballot measure.
2. **Determining viability and process** for adopting either funding mechanism by conducting formal legal reviews.
3. **Developing a framework for revenue sharing** by directing county staff to continue to work with city representatives so that city park providers can also benefit from a potential revenue source dedicated to parks.

Process for Decision-Making

The potential next steps of this process are outlined below:

- County Council consideration of Recommended Actions
- Present public information on need and benefits of funding dedicated to parks
- Market research prior to potential ballot measure, with the following outcomes:

  - Ballot measure feasibility
  - Levy price sensitivity
  - Community values and motivations toward parks, trails, and recreation
  - Strategic timing of a ballot measure
  - Accountability benchmarking and baseline data for future evaluations of levy success
- Cities and County staff work to develop a framework for revenue sharing and draft the terms of interlocal agreements (ILAs), including:
  - Mechanics of revenue sharing
  - Calculation of revenue share
  - Clarification of intended use of funds
  - Articulation of autonomy within a shared purpose
    - Specific mutual investment (regional parks, regional trails)
    - Synchronization with City goals from County investment
    - County commitments to cities
- Draft interlocal agreements are presented to City Councils for consideration
- Possible ballot measure in Fall 2027

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[i] Washington State Parks Economic Impact Report: Economic Benefits of Parks | Washington State Parks
Earth Economics Report: Economic Analysis of Outdoor Recreation in Washington Stat
Trust for Public Land Report: The Power of Parks to Promote Health - Trust for Public Land
UW Report: https://rco.wa.gov/wp-content/uploads/2020/01/HealthBenefitsofNature.pdf
[ii] City of Camas:findingsreport_camaswa24120624.pdf
City of Battle Ground: 2025-Battle-Ground-Survey-Findings-Report
[iii] Regional Funding Task Team, Data Summary Infographic
[iv] Washington State Office of Financial Management, Growth Projections: gma_2022_5yr.xlsx
[v] Clark County Council Meeting, 3/26/25: 032625-sustainable-future-parks-and-nature_0.pdf
[vi] Clark County Bicycle and Pedestrian Master Plan: Clark Cover OCt
Regional Transportation Council, Active Transportation Plan: RAPT2021-Report.pdf
[vii] King County Parks Levy: Parks Levy - King County, Washington
Sonoma County Parks Levy: Measure M FAQ