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Care lacking in Forest Park

City Club report says massive park's ecology is in danger

BY PETER KORN

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Portland Parks and Recreation has neglected Forest Park, and the park would be better served if it eventually were transferred out of the city's control, according to a report released Wednesday by the City Club of Portland.

The report, "Forest Park: A Call to Action," says that unchecked invasive species, as well as increasing use of the park by mountain bikers and off-leash dogs, have contributed to a steady degradation of the park's ecology.

According to the report, the 5,000-acre park receives only about one half of 1 percent of the city's parks and recreation annual budget. Forest Park comprises 47 percent of parks bureau land.



L.E. BASKOW / TRIBUNE FILE PHOTO

A City Club of Portland report released this week says that unchecked invasive species, such as English Ivy, have contributed to a steady degradation of Forest Park's ecology.

[Click here to read the City Club report.](#)

The report also notes that the same problems were detailed in a 1995 Forest Park management plan, and that the bureau has done virtually nothing to address them since then.

The report makes it clear that long-term, somebody other than the parks bureau is needed to take care of the park, but finding a new steward with enough funding to maintain the park properly appears to be a stumbling block.

Zari Santner, director of Portland Parks & Recreation, acknowledges that low funding has put the park at risk but says the entire Portland parks system is underfunded, not just Forest Park.

In addition, Santner says some progress has been made in addressing the 1995 management plan, and that the parks and recreation department is pursuing regional funding to help it shoulder the costs of Forest Park.

A logical new caretaker would be regional government authority Metro. Metro actually owns 926 acres of the park and areas next to the park. In addition, Metro has assumed responsibility for a number of Multnomah County parks.

But Metro officials say they have no interest in taking control of Forest Park.

The city has looked to the nonprofit Forest Park Conservancy to take on more responsibility for running the park. The conservancy has a \$406,500 budget for park projects in 2010 — a number steadily approaching the approximately \$630,000 that parks and recreation is spending on the park.

The report says the park would need \$2.6 million per year just to rid itself of invasive weeds that take over in place of native trees and shrubs and contribute to erosion and poor water quality. The weeds also provide less food for wildlife than native vegetation.

But the conservancy does not have the capacity to fully take over management of the park, according to the City Club report. And the conservancy does not want full responsibility for the park, according to

Michelle Bussard, the conservancy's executive director.

Eventually, the City Club report says, a regional parks authority should be developed to take control of Forest Park and other parks and trails that serve a wide base of metro-area residents.

In the interim, the report says, the parks bureau should retain control. A City Club minority report advocates removing the park from the control of parks and recreation immediately — possibly by transferring authority to Metro.

“The city of Portland has not shown that it is going to do what’s necessary in order to restore and preserve Forest Park,” says Spencer Ehrman, a co-signer of the minority report.

But Metro Council President David Bragdon says Metro does not want to run Forest Park, and a new regional parks authority might not be a great idea.

Bragdon agrees with the concept of regional responsibility for Forest Park.

“People elsewhere in the region should contribute to it because they use it,” he says.

But the only way that’s going to occur, he says, is a regional tax. And he says other governments in the metropolitan area aren’t likely to agree to a tax increase to support Forest Park in the near future. If some day they do commit to contributing tax money for the park, Bragdon says, Metro could administer the money and deliver it to Portland Parks and Recreation.

The report failed to make a definitive statement on the park’s overall health. A recent study by Linfield College Associate Professor Nancy Broshot cited an unusually high death rate for young trees in the park.

But Bussard, executive director of the Forest Park Conservancy, says the park’s future, without a change in management practices, is clear.

“We risk losing a forest,” Bussard says. “Over time, ivy will weaken the trees and pull them down. Garlic mustard will out-compete the native plants so the wildlife will look elsewhere. Slow attrition adds up to a forest that is no longer Forest Park.”