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Report fears for Forest Park's future

By Joe Rojas-Burke, The Oregonian

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Portland's Forest Park, a 5,000-acre wilderness within the city, needs new management, concludes a report being released today by City Club of Portland.

"Despite the professionalism and hard work of Parks Bureau staff, the perpetual budget shortcoming has led to an unavoidable conclusion: the city of Portland has failed to properly maintain Forest Park," the report's authors say.

To secure the park's future, the report recommends the creation of a regional park authority to assume ownership and management.

"We have very strong feelings that the very health of the park is at risk," said Spencer Ehrman, a community activist and member of the volunteer committee that spent 10 months researching and writing **the report**. Other recommendations include:

Enhancement and expansion wildlife corridors linking Forest Park to the Coast Range and the Willamette River. Investment of \$2.6 million a year for 5 years to eliminate invasive plants and restore Forest Park. Completion of a survey of park users to provide objective information about competing interests in recreation and wildlife conservation. City Club members have **yet to take a position** on the report. And even if they endorse it, it has no official authority. But city officials are paying attention.

"It's highlighting that even this crown jewel of our system that is so well loved by the public, it is under constant pressure and needs more funding," says Portland Parks and Recreation director Zari Santner.

Lack of funding has allowed **invasive plants** and **other problems** to worsen, according to the City Club report. Forest Park comprises about half of the total park area in the city, but gets less than one half of one percent of the parks budget, Ehrman says.

Creation of a regional park authority, the report asserts, would establish a way to raise more money, drawing on sources beyond Portland.

"Parks of regional significance would be better cared for and better paid for by a broader regionally based organization," Ehrman said.

Santner disagreed. "The issue is really finding the regional sources of funding rather than creating another organization, another bureaucracy," she said.

The Forest Park Conservancy, a private, nonprofit stewardship group, declined to take sides on question of who should run the park. "For us, it isn't about governance, it is about regionally resourcing Forest Park," said the group's executive director Michelle Bussard.

She said the conservancy is preparing to launch a fundraising campaign that will seek donations from individuals who use the park, regardless of where they live, and from corporations who benefit from having nearby wilderness amenities that help them compete for top employees.

"We all share in the stewardship of this," Bussard said.

Beyond funding problems, the City Club report questioned the adequacy of the Parks Bureau's effort to balance competing demands of recreational users, citing the recent **push to expand mountain biking** access in the park. A 17-member Forest Park off-road cycling advisory committee is mulling how the park might add single-track trails.



Rob Finch/The Oregonian

Forest Park, an urban wilderness sprawling across 5,157 acres in Portland, is under increasing pressure from recreational users.

Weighing in on the bike trail question, the City Club panel asserts that the Parks Bureau hasn't followed its 1995 management plan to assess such requests. "Instead, the city established a committee whose stated goal is to increase biking in the park, without having first done the studies required in the 1995 plan," the report says.

Santner said the Parks Bureau won't know how to evaluate possible impacts until the cycling advisory committee completes its work and makes a recommendation.

"If there is a substantial increase, we need to put it into context," Santner said.

Meanwhile, she said the bureau has asked Portland State University to conduct a survey of park users this summer. The survey will provide objective data about how people use the park and how they want it to be maintained.

To further the debate, the City Club will hold an informational town hall meeting Wednesday, May 26, 5:30-7:00 p.m. at City Club Commons.

-- **Joe Rojas-Burke**

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