



OregonLive.com

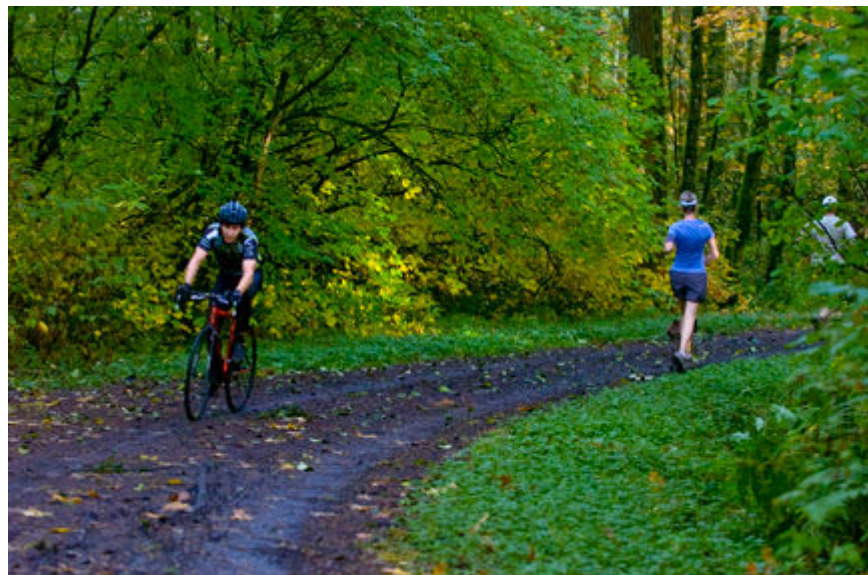
Everything Oregon

Portland leaders need to rethink how to maintain Forest Park

Published: Tuesday, July 06, 2010, 4:39 PM Updated: Tuesday, July 06, 2010, 4:50 PM



Anna Griffin, The Oregonian



[View full size](#)

Olivia Bucks/The Oregonian

Bikers and joggers pass each other on the Saltzman Trail in Forest Park.

John Charles Olmsted saw this coming.

At the start of the last century, the landscape architect -- nephew and adopted son of the legendary Frederick Law Olmsted, designer of New York's Central Park -- mapped out Portland's parks system and suggested that the city buy a lush wooded stretch of the West Hills for future use and preservation. He urged city fathers to think big, but predicted they would struggle to support open space: "The landscape is fine, and the possibilities for parks, as far as land is concerned, are excellent," he mused to his wife in a 1903 letter. "But I fear the money will be deficient."

Yes and yes, particularly when it comes to the city's signature swath of green.

Forest Park, a rogue thumb of the Coast Range ecosystem that through our eternal good fortune points the way to Portland, remains unique: 5,000 acres of wilderness just a solid stone's thrown from the urban core. It is also seriously imperiled.

The worst-case scenario -- condos with mountain views! -- won't happen. As a city and a region, we're smarter than that. But with each passing year, the park suffers more long-term damage from ivy, garlic mustard and other invasive plants; careless humans who let their dogs roam off-leash; and **the occasional thoughtless mountain**

biker who carves his or her own illegal trail. The heart of the forest remains as Olmsted envisioned it -- when the summer heat finally hits this week, the coolest non-air-conditioned spot in town will likely be beneath a tree somewhere deep within the park -- but the edges are withering.

"Different people have different opinions, but the consensus is that Forest Park is threatened," said Michelle Bussard, executive director of the **Forest Park Conservancy**, a private nonprofit that helps maintain trails, pull weeds and lobby elected officials. "Do we appreciate this asset the way it deserves? We absolutely do not."

Maybe that's because Forest Park is easy to overlook, despite its prominent place in the city's skyline, and counterintuitive to think that the wild needs protecting.

The forest represents almost half the city's parkland, but receives one 0.5 percent of the city's annual recreation budget. The city and the conservancy together contribute about \$1 million a year, way short of the \$2.6 million a year experts say we should be spending just on invasive species removal and prevention. There's no main entrance to Forest Park, no obvious place to go to find a map or report a problem. This spring, city ecologists pooh-poohed **the work of a Linfield College professor who says young trees in the park are dying at an alarming rate.**

During the past decade, most of the serious conversations about **Forest Park have been debates about specific uses -- most recently, whether to increase access for mountain bikers** -- rather than the forest's broader health.

Pardon the expression, but that's missing the forest for the trees. A **new City Club report wisely suggests that regional leaders rethink how our signature green space is run, to consider whether Metro, the conservancy itself or a new regional parks authority might be a better steward.** Metro leaders have no interest in the job, however, and city leaders don't want to lose control.

Commissioner Nick Fish, who oversees the Portland Parks Bureau, has promised to hire a full-time ranger, complete a study of recreational use in the park and establish an annual work plan for the park's upkeep. Those are nice gestures, but merely a start toward a much longer-term comprehensive strategy for both preserving and enjoying our crown jewel.

You don't need to be an Olmsted to know that we must do more.

-- **Anna Griffin**

© 2010 OregonLive.com. All rights reserved.