

# WRPATODAY

THE OFFICIAL QUARTERLY PUBLICATION OF THE WASHINGTON RECREATION & PARK ASSOCIATION

WINTER 2012



2012 LEGISLATIVE  
AGENDA 6

ANNUAL REPORT 14

2012 ANNUAL  
CONFERENCE &  
TRADE SHOW 18

# INTEGRATING PEOPLE AND NATURE THROUGH DESIGN



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In an overlooked area of Tacoma, adjacent to tribal lands and a public housing project, Metro Parks Tacoma (MPT) and Pierce County co-own a 383-acre property known as Swan Creek Park. The park is an irregular-shaped, sparsely developed greenspace that protects the riparian corridor. It's also a place with a unique WWII history that is extremely important to nearby residents and groups, including school children, volunteers, recreation enthusiasts, the Puyallup Tribe, and immigrants from around the world who live in the adjacent Salishan Redevelopment Community.

In 2010, MPT initiated efforts to develop a master plan that reflected community needs while keeping the focus on nature. MPT

enlisted the help of MIG, Inc., whose expertise in outdoor recreation, ecological restoration, public involvement and park design made them especially well-suited for the task. The resulting Swan Creek Park Master Plan, completed in five months, won a 2011 Oregon ASLA Design Award of Merit for Planning & Analysis just weeks after its adoption.

What makes for an award-winning project?

## Collaborative Planning and Community Outreach

MPT and MIG worked together throughout planning process, using a collaborative approach to make the most of available funding.



Reaching out to such a diverse group of stakeholders required a concerted and dedicated effort of door-knocking, phone calls and follow-up. MPT Chief Planner Lois Stark (now retired) and Project Outreach Intern Meghan Howey championed the on-the-ground and online efforts to involve the community, using project materials created by MIG.

MIG focused its resources on holding workshops targeting kids/families and recreation/environmental education providers, open houses, and monthly meetings with the Project Steering Committee and Agency Advisory Group. By working together, MPT and MIG were able to reach a broad spectrum of the community in a short time frame, including:

- Community participants speaking many different languages (Korean, Vietnamese, Cambodian, Spanish, Ukrainian);
- Local children and youth (schools, scouts, daycare and youth groups);
- Local interest groups (trail and bike clubs, permaculture groups, and others);
- Nearby neighbors and families (neighborhood organizations, workshop and open house participants);
- Environmental education providers, stewardship groups, and natural resource experts;
- Steering Committee members (19 project stakeholders);
- Agency Advisory Committee members (representatives from MPT, Pierce County, and the City of Tacoma); and
- Hundreds of people who checked out the Swan Creek Park page of the MPT website, including photos, project materials, and an online questionnaire.

By the end of the five-month effort, more than 1,400 people had participated in the planning process, contributing their vision for the park.

### Community-Supported Vision and Design

Across all cultures, interests and age groups, a consistent vision emerged: respect the land, preserve the creek and forest, and provide a place for healthy community and family activities. Connecting people to the outdoors became an overarching priority, a need underscored by the fact that many nearby residents lack the resources to leave the city and travel to nearby national forests and parks.

MIG worked with MPT to create a site design that grew from these values. It included elements to foster volunteerism, which is a key part of the park today. It also included flexibility to allow the park to grow, shrink and evolve over time in response to changing

levels of community interest, volunteerism and funding. As a result, the park was organized into distinct use areas that were designed to support the following:

- **Neighborhood Gathering Place:** With pedestrian and bicycle entries providing access to the park from the Salishan neighborhood, the *Gathering Place* revives and expands a once-popular community garden, adding a fruit orchard, berry shrubs, and place to cultivate native plants for park restoration. It includes a shelter for family/neighborhood activities and gardening classes and is connected to the rest of the park via the Promenade—a wide pedestrian and bicycle avenue on a historical road that was built when this site was used for WWII war-worker housing.
- **Regional Outdoor Recreation:** At the main park entry adjacent to Lister Elementary School, the *Lister Uplands* is a regionally-focused area designed to meet outdoor recreation needs. Here, the Promenade links to a historical street network, a grid of ADA-accessible pedestrian trails that also provides a starting point for local races and events. The area includes a dog park, ropes course, permaculture demonstration area, large-group picnic shelter, police vehicle training ground, and cross-country mountain bike course. Additional highlights include a green building with classrooms for environmental education and programs, as well as an urban camping area that gives organized groups and classes a place to teach and learn outdoor skills.
- **Environmental Protection and Stewardship:** In four use areas, the focus is on nature preservation, stream restoration, and trail enhancement. Each area also includes elements to support access to nature (for children and adults) and to promote volunteerism and stewardship. The *Pioneer Way Portal* includes a bus turn-around, loading/unloading zone, and rustic shelter for volunteer and school programs. The trail through the *Swan Creek Canyon* is improved to support hiking and increased use, while protecting the creekside canyon. The *Douglas Fir Forest* and *Waller Road Uplands* support forest restoration, wildfire mitigation, rare species protection, and the provision of a vegetative buffer to enhance water quality.

### Realistic and Achievable Implementation Plan

A park design without an implementation plan is just a pretty drawing of a potential future park. The Swan Creek Park Master Plan also included implementation strategies for site programming, forest management, riparian corridor enhancement, natural resource management, pedestrian/bicycle access, and land acquisition. Importantly, it identified the necessary staffing, partnerships, interagency coordination, and costs for priority projects so that MPT and partners could selectively identify which projects had the necessary funding and support to move forward first.

The *Swan Creek Park Master Plan* was adopted unanimously by the MPT Board of Park Commissioners in July 2011 at a crowded public hearing, where attendees testified passionately in favor of approval. Beginning in 2012, the highest priority projects will be implemented using \$1,000,000 in bond funds as seed money, but also relying on the involvement of community members and partners who have shown a vested interest in creating a park that integrates people and nature. <sup>WPT</sup>

*Lauren Schmitt, ASLA, AICP and Cindy Mendoza work for MIG, Inc., specializing in comprehensive and strategic planning and design for parks, recreation facilities, and natural areas. See our website at [www.mig.com](http://www.mig.com).*