



Nature

Every community member is surrounded by and connected to nature, parks, and green infrastructure

Goal: Every community member is surrounded by and connected to nature, parks, and green infrastructure.

Description

Connecting everyone to nature isn't just about recreation; it's about building healthy, resilient communities that thrive in a changing climate. Trees and green spaces are powerful tools for climate action. Trees and open spaces act as nature's filtration system, cleaning our air and water. They combat the urban *heat island* effect, keeping our neighborhoods cooler. This kind of vital communal infrastructure leads to a more vibrant and healthy community, promoting physical activity, community safety, and business district vitality.⁵⁶

Access to these resources, however, is not evenly distributed in Multnomah County. Environmental injustice is clearly visible in our landscape. According to the [2023 Multnomah County Environmental Justice Snapshot](#), average tree canopy cover is significantly greater in areas home to primarily white, non-Hispanic people compared to areas primarily home to communities of Black, Indigenous, and other people of color. Since trees are linked to health outcomes like birth weight and environmental benefits like cooler temperatures during a heat wave, the lack of tree cover in certain parts of Multnomah County is a glaring example of an existing environmental injustice.

Beyond trees, access to parks and green space is vital to communal and individual well-being. While access to these resources is relatively well distributed in Multnomah County, access can be hampered if people don't feel safe traveling to a park because of dangerous streets or public safety concerns. Parks may also lack amenities that people want to use, like splash pads, seating, shade, and playgrounds. School yards and playgrounds often lack shade, which makes accessing these resources on a hot day unpleasant and potentially dangerous.

A community where everyone feels welcome and safe in their neighborhood park is a healthy community. Moreover, trees, parks, and natural areas are also vital for birds, insects, and other wildlife that call the urban areas of Multnomah County home. The health of the ecosystem is also tied to human health. Communities are eager to prioritize greening in areas with low access to these amenities. Community-based organizations are taking action like removing parking lots to plant gardens at schools and churches. Community members across the county are eager to contribute to this important work.

How we measure progress

Indicator 1: Multnomah County urban area tree canopy cover and demographic disparities.

Description: Tree canopy is the layer of leaves, branches, and stems of trees that covers the ground when viewed from above. These data are collected for the region by Oregon Metro using remote sensing technologies. Average tree canopy cover is significantly greater in areas home to primarily white populations compared to areas with the highest percentage of Black, Indigenous, and other residents of color. Tree canopy in the areas home to the largest share of communities or color is also significantly lower than the county average. Tree canopy data for the region is collected every five years.

Current data: The Multnomah County average is 25.4%; areas with higher proportions of BIPOC residents have canopy levels roughly 4.4% lower than the county average.

Data source: Oregon Metro, RMLIS, [Multnomah County Environmental Justice Snapshot](#)



Strategy 1: Prioritize the implementation of park elements in the Vance Vision Plan.

Why does this matter?

The [Vance Vision Plan](#) addresses a critical need for the Rockwood neighborhood, which is one of the most racially and ethnically diverse areas in the region. Developed through deep collaboration with local residents, the plan centers the voices of BIPOC, immigrant, and refugee communities, as well as youth, to ensure the park serves as an engine for environmental justice and community growth. By reclaiming this 90-acre site, partly a former quarry and brownfield owned by Multnomah County, the plan mitigates the impacts of formerly extractive industries and provides a safe and expansive recreational space above and beyond any asset in the area. Coupled with affordable housing and economic development opportunities, the plan offers a transformative vision for the community, by the community.

Because the neighboring demographic profile features a high concentration of large families and youth — with nearly 23% of the population under 18 — the park’s recreational elements are a necessity for community well-being. The community-led design prioritizes cultural, accessible, and family-friendly gathering spaces and multimodal transportation network improvements that integrate transit access for a population that can greatly benefit from more safe options to get around. Ultimately, implementing these park elements transforms an industrially scarred area into a regional asset that supports both the physical health of East County’s youngest and most diverse residents and the economic resilience of its residents. Vance Park is the missing puzzle piece in the greater Gresham trail network and a generational opportunity to invest in a community that has seen decades of underinvestment.

Putting this into practice

- Work with community partners to identify and pursue funding to complete the design of the park.
- Assemble funding, including grant funds, necessary to implement the park designs.
- Establish partnerships with the City of Gresham for the long-term maintenance and management of the park.

Lead department(s)

Department of County Services

STRATEGY CATEGORY

- ☐ County Strategy
☒ Investment Opportunity
☐ Community Leadership

STRATEGY TYPE

- ☐ Advocate ☐ Research
☐ Convene ☒ Implement

COUNTY CAPACITY

- ☐ Existing ☐ Additional ☒ New

COUNTY CONTROL



COUNTY INFLUENCE



COUNTY PRIORITY



Strategy 2: Prioritize street improvements adjacent to parks to increase safe access for pedestrians and cyclists.

Why does this matter?

Access to parks in terms of geographic distance is relatively well distributed in Multnomah County,⁵⁷ but less is known about how easily community members can access parks that may be blocked by busy roads and other barriers in the urban environment. If you don't feel safe letting your child walk alone to the park because you are worried about them crossing a busy road, then even a closeby park is not accessible.

This issue may be more acute in east Portland, west Gresham, and East County cities where the street network is less complete. Neighborhoods with a higher proportion of Black, Indigenous, and other community members of color bear a disproportionate burden of unwalkable streets.⁵⁷ The [East County Transportation Safety Action Plan](#) (TSAP), for example, aims to address safety barriers by improving dangerous street crossings, but funding street improvements is a persistent challenge.

STRATEGY CATEGORY

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- ☒ **Investment Opportunity**
- ☐ Community Leadership

STRATEGY TYPE

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COUNTY CAPACITY

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COUNTY PRIORITY



Putting this into practice

- Invest in safer routes to parks by implementing the East County Transportation Safety Action Plan. Planned upgrades include better lighting, high-visibility crosswalks, raised crosswalks, protected bike lanes, and ADA-compliant sidewalk repairs.
- Inventory streets near parks in priority neighborhoods to assess access barriers and potential road crossing safety improvements.
- Conduct qualitative research on the experience of people who live near or use parks and their perceptions of safety.

Lead department(s)

Department of County Services, Transportation Division; Health Department, Environmental Health; Office of Sustainability



Strategy 3: Prioritize investment and maintenance of parks in communities with the least access to quality green space.

Why does this matter?

Parks offer environmental health benefits for those living nearby through improved air quality, reduced noise, stormwater management, moderation of temperatures, and the reduction of urban heat island (UHI) effects.⁵⁸ Proximity to urban parks also provides opportunities for physical activity, with research suggesting that people living within walking distance of parks are three times more likely to meet recommended amounts of daily physical activity.⁵⁹

While access to parks (measured by proximity) is well distributed in Multnomah County, less is known about the quality of park amenities and perceptions of public safety. Multnomah County tree canopy data may indicate disparities in investment and park quality, or depict recent investments in parks that have yet to experience tree growth and corresponding increases in canopy cover.⁵⁷

Amenities, including good walking paths that are well-lit at night, playgrounds, exercise equipment, playing fields, and shade, along with other features people want for their parks, are important. These amenities can mean the difference between a well-used park and a space that is avoided because it does not feel safe. Prioritizing investment means moving beyond basic lawn maintenance to creating parks that serve as high-quality “climate refuges.”

Putting this into practice

- Add amenities to undeveloped parks, including play structures, shade and covered areas, lighting, benches, splash pads, etc., and address maintenance issues.
- Identify parks in high-need neighborhoods and assess current levels of investment to determine priority projects.
- Research and develop metrics to measure park quality and biodiversity that would provide information on the nature-based benefits of parks.

Authorizing agencies

City of Portland, Parks & Recreation; City of Gresham, Parks and Recreation

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Strategy 4: Prioritize tree planting in low-canopy neighborhoods.

Why does this matter?

Tree canopy is a life-saving public health infrastructure, yet it remains one of the most visible indicators of systemic inequity in Multnomah County. Currently, canopy coverage is significantly lower in neighborhoods with higher concentrations of Black, Indigenous, and people of color, as well as cost-burdened households. This is particularly true east of 82nd Avenue. This “canopy gap” leaves some residents disproportionately exposed to extreme heat and poor air quality.

Planting and establishing trees can be a powerful intervention for cooling the surrounding area, among many other benefits. By treating tree canopies as a core component of public infrastructure, communities can ensure that every resident, regardless of zip code, has access to the cooling benefits and ecosystem services essential for survival in a changing climate.

Planting trees, however, is not enough. Asphalt and concrete removal may be necessary to create space for planting trees and making other landscape improvements. In addition, trees need to be watered and structurally pruned for the first few years after planting. The cost of tree care, which is typically the responsibility of the adjacent property owner even when the tree is in the public right of way, can be a major barrier for some households. Tree code requirements for tree planting with new development, the protection of existing canopy trees, and code enforcement are also important elements of a successful urban forestry program.

STRATEGY CATEGORY

- ☐ County Strategy
- ☐ Investment Opportunity
- ☒ Community Leadership

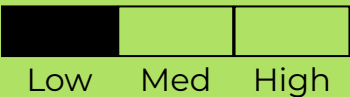
STRATEGY TYPE

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- ☒ Research
- ☐ Convene
- ☐ Implement

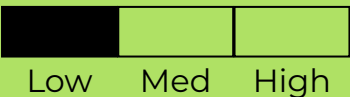
COUNTY CAPACITY

- ☐ Existing
- ☐ Additional
- ☒ New

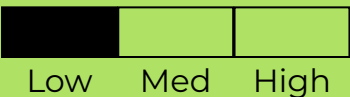
COUNTY CONTROL



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COUNTY PRIORITY



Putting this into practice

- Fund tree planting in low-tree canopy neighborhoods and develop strategies for maintaining trees in the public right of way in high-priority areas.
- Look for partnership opportunities where the County can help catalyze focused tree planting efforts in high-need neighborhoods, like the Green Gresham, Healthy Gresham project.
- Implement Action 1 (Heat Resilience Focus Areas) from the [2025 Multnomah County Climate and Health Resilience Plan](#).
- Work with the Multnomah County Department of Community Services to develop street tree planting and maintenance strategy for County-owned rights-of-way.
- Continue to monitor disparities in tree canopy distribution.

Authorizing agencies

City parks & recreation, transportation, and public works departments

Lead department(s)

Office of Sustainability; Health Department, Environmental Health

Strategy 5: Develop innovative approaches to providing shade and outdoor refuge from heat.

Why does this matter?

As summer temperatures continue to rise, shade has shifted from a public amenity to a critical health necessity. Many historically disinvested communities face a significant lack of shade, with bus stops, parks, and sidewalks that become dangerous or inaccessible during extreme heat. Prioritizing strategic tree planting around vital assets, such as playgrounds and TriMet bus shelters, can help to mitigate extreme heat and improve climate resilience.

Some communities have also looked to sun shades, solar panel canopies, and reflective coatings to reduce urban heat islands. These strategies may become increasingly urgent as high-heat days threaten the safety of everyday activities. Declines in insect⁶⁰ and bird populations — leading indicators of a biosphere under severe stress from climate change — also show that wildlife is suffering. Deliberate interventions in the built environment can help protect people and the natural world we depend on.

Putting this into practice

- Host design competitions with students, academics, landscape architects, and community to identify innovative interventions that can create cooler streets, neighborhood amenities, and wildlife refuges.
- Identify grant funding to implement pilot projects and assess the projects for success.
- Develop best practices for creating shade in school yards, bus stops, playgrounds, and other important community gathering locations.
- Develop strategies to create wildlife oases in parks to help insects and birds withstand extreme heat.

Authorizing agencies

City public works agencies; Soil and Water Conservation Districts

Lead department(s)

Office of Sustainability



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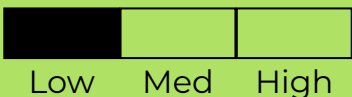
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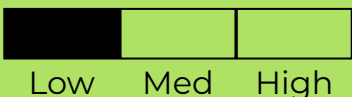
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