Seattle
Parks & Recreation

Trails Task Force: Summary of Recommendations

Background

Seattle Parks and Recreation (SPR) has 120 miles of trails within the City limits, which are a mix of developed and semi-developed trails, some in good condition and others with significant maintenance needs. In 2017, SPR staff worked with community partners to prepare a draft Soft Surface Trails Management Plan (SSTMP), which identified a set of strategies specifically related to soft surface trail maintenance. Through SPR's ongoing engagement efforts, the department hears consistent interest in preserving and enhancing our network of trails. In support of SPR's Strategic Planning process and in preparation for identifying funding priorities in the 2021-2026 Seattle Park District Cycle, SPR sought to build on the work developing the SSTMP in order consider possible enhancements to our entire trail system (soft surface and paved) to contribute to a vibrant and interconnected city.

SPR convened a small group of stakeholders to identify recommendations providing strategic direction to inform departmental investments in our trail system over the next 10-12 years. The group considered both sustainable improvements to the existing network and opportunities for network expansion and enhancement. The Task Force met over the course of two meetings in August and September 2019.

Membership and Staffing

Trails Task Force members included Weston Brinkley (Seattle Trails Alliance), Gordon Padelford (Seattle Neighborhood Greenways), Lisa Sheffer (Bainbridge Island Parks Foundation), and Jill Simmons (Washington Trails Association).

Participating SPR subject matter experts included Jacobo Jimenez, Chukundi Salisbury, Patrick Merriam, and Kathleen Conner, and Danyal Lotfi and Selena Elmer served as facilitators.

Case Statement

SPR's trail network is one of the most well-loved parts of Seattle's parks and recreation system. As Seattle continues to grow and change, SPR's soft-surface trails, paved pathways, and multi-use trails can play a key role in building connections among public spaces, providing recreation opportunities, and bringing Seattle's residents and visitors into nature. As the cost of land increases and opportunities for new substantial acquisitions become increasingly scarce, trails can be a cost-effective means to activate and provide access to existing open and green spaces. Access to nature is essential to ensure the health and wellness of our city's residents, and to further our commitment to racial equity in Seattle. As with any piece of infrastructure, SPR's trails require stewardship and care, which necessitate sustainable funding for planning, maintenance, and enhancements. As the trail system has expanded in recent years, SPR's maintenance has not grown commensurately, limiting the usability of some parts of the trail system, creating a backlog of major maintenance projects, and stretching departmental resources to the limit. The Trails Task Force sees huge potential for SPR to make the most of the extensive network we already have through strategic planning, engagement with partners, and targeted investments focused on sustaining a vibrant and well-maintained trail network.

Vision for SPR Trails System

The SPR Trails Task Force envisions a trail system for people that live, work, and play in Seattle that:

- Is safe and inviting
- Is equitable and accessible
- Is a well-used and valued asset
- Is responsive to increased density and changing demographics
- Provide access to a calm, restorative, and nature-filled urban environment, enhances connectivity throughout Seattle, and integrates with other public spaces
- Is well-maintained so that it stands the test of time
- Supports natural area stewardship and helps mitigate the impacts of climate change

Recommendations

In pursuit of the group's vision for SPR's trails system, the Trails Task Force identified a set of recommendations related to funding, maintenance, volunteerism, planning, enhancements and outreach, and accessibility, connectivity, and safety to help inform SPR's trail-related work in the coming years.

Funding

In addition to specific programmatic and targeted investments outlined in the categories below, the Task Force identified two overarching recommendations related to funding:

- Approach SPR's trail-related investments through a full life cycle approach and provide sustainable funding for trails work that balances routine maintenance, restoration, major maintenance, capital projects, staffing and staff training, volunteer and partner support, and regular planning and assessment.
- Devote staff time to exploring creative funding mechanisms including public private partnerships to leverage additional dollars beyond SPR's investment in trail work.

Maintenance

- Create, resource, and staff a maintenance program that provides a consistent level of service through which all SPR trails are adequately cared for through routine maintenance.
- Ensure an equity-driven approach to all trail maintenance work.
- Restore trails that have closed due to insufficient maintenance over time.

Volunteerism

- Better leverage the abundant volunteer interest by:
    - increasing SPR staff capacity to partner with organizations and volunteers on trails projects by identifying projects and engagement opportunities; and
    - leveraging additional maintenance through financial support of partner organizations to organize and manage volunteers and projects.
- Expand and diversify partnership opportunities with non-profit organizations and related recreation and natural area agencies.

- Use an equity lens to increase opportunities for communities throughout Seattle to connect with their local trail system, thereby increasing community awareness and ownership of SPR's trails.
    - Specific possibilities include social maintenance activities, programming like Sound Steps, and trail ambassador development, and more.

Planning

- Conduct routine assessments identifying risks, level of service, and gaps in the trail system. To maintain accountability, develop and adopt clear standards against against which the system is measured over time.
- Create a comprehensive plan for SPR's soft surface and paved trails guided by goals of sustainability, equity, and shared stewardship. This plan should explore and identify ongoing maintenance needs and opportunities for system expansion; programming and activation opportunities within the trail system; opportunities to coordinate with and leverage other departmental and community-based efforts; opportunities for the trail system to better connect with other pathways throughout the City; and performance measures to gauge progress on priorities established in the plan.
- Develop a list of the highest-need trail projects and begin design process to get restoration projects into the capital project pipeline.
- Engage with other departmental and Citywide planning efforts related to developing a grand vision for a connected City of Seattle (e.g., multi-use trail planning at the Seattle Department of Transportation (SDOT), Outside Citywide, and others).

Enhancements and Outreach

- Develop and use equity-driven criteria for prioritizing trail enhancements, focusing on gaps and barriers to access.
- Invest in features to make trails more safe, welcoming, and inviting, which could include: gateways; trailhead markers; signage along trails; improved wayfinding pointing people to trailheads; Crime Prevention Through Environmental Design (CPTED), additional information and signage about accessibility, wellness benefits, historical and ecological features; and native interpretive signage.
- Increase programming on SPR trails through relationships with partners, schools, and other SPR staff to leverage the benefits SPR's trail system can provide for well-being (e.g., Parks Rx), environmental education, youth employment, job training, and more. This programming should primarily serve communities that have historically lacked access to SPR's programs and services.
- Enhance art installations within the trail system.
- Increase common knowledge of SPR's trail system by printing trail maps and making them available at trailheads, community centers, and other facilities, and collaborating with partners (e.g., King County Metro) to improve communication about trail access in other public spaces.

Accessibility, Connectivity, and Safety

- Eliminate barriers to accessing SPR's trail system.
- Increase number of trails accessible to visitors with disabilities.

- Continue and enhance collaboration with City partners (e.g., SDOT) to build connectivity across the City's pathways, including on boulevards.
- Continue and strengthen collaboration with other City departments and municipal partners to enhance the trail system and improve access to it (e.g., Office of Arts and Culture, King County Metro, Sound Transit, SDOT, Office of Planning and Community Development, etc.).