Seattle
Parks & Recreation

Seattle Olmsted Legacy Task Force: Summary of Recommendations

Background

In November of 2017, the former Superintendent of Seattle Parks and Recreation, Jesus Aguirre, asked for the assistance of the Friends of Seattle's Olmsted Parks to assist Seattle Parks and Recreation in creating a task force with the goal of preserving Seattle's rich and beloved Olmsted park heritage and to sustain it for future generations1. In response, the Friends of Seattle's Olmsted Parks Board of Directors offered to participate in and to support the creation of the Olmsted Legacy Task Force. The Friends of Seattle's Olmsted Parks confirmed its commitment to Seattle Parks and Recreation's goal of developing a long-range approach to preserving Seattle's historic Olmsted parks and boulevard system. This work was intended to provide a common-sense approach to rehabilitation, protection and curation of Seattle's historic landscapes. 2 In its invitation to establish the Task Force, Seattle Parks and Recreation specifically described the purpose of the Task Force to "explore and develop strategies that enhance and preserve the Olmsted parks system through core principles based on equity, access and inclusion."3 With an understanding of and a commitment to applying these core principles, the Task Force was formed.

While the charge of the Task Force was to focus on the rehabilitation of Seattle's Olmsted system of parks and boulevards, both Seattle Parks and Recreation and the Task Force recognized the long history of the Native people who were the original inhabitants of the area now known as Seattle and whose legacy dates back far beyond the Olmsted Brothers arrival in Seattle in 1903. The Task Force acknowledges Seattle Parks and Recreation's recognition and engagement with various community groups with the intention of telling many stories from Seattle's past and present. The Task Force further acknowledges the efforts by Seattle Parks and Recreation to elevate the voices of everyone in Seattle and, with this goal in mind, the Task Force encourages Seattle Parks and Recreation to continue to work with all groups to tell a more complete story of Seattle, which at times has come at great benefit to some and at a great cost to others.

Membership and Staffing

The Olmsted Legacy Task Force was comprised of various stakeholders from the City of Seattle and the community. The Task Force was staffed by Strategic Advisor Danyal Lotfi and its members included:

- Tom Byers, Seattle Board of Park Commissioners Representative, Task Force Co-Chair
- Doug Luetjen, Friends of Seattle's Olmsted Parks Representative, Task Force Co-Chair
- Lyle Bicknell, Seattle Office of Planning and Community Development Representative
- Nyah Curcuruto, Student Representative
- Ed D'Alessandro, Seattle Youth Soccer Association Representative
- Donald Harris, National Association of Olmsted Parks Representative
- Mark Jaeger, Seattle Public Utilities Representative
- Zoe Kasperzyk, Associated Recreational Council Representative
- Susan McLaughlin & Aditi Kambuj, Seattle Department of Transportation Representatives
- Andy Mitton, Friends of Seattle's Olmsted Parks Representative
- Jennifer Ott, Volunteer Park Trust Representative
- Dewey Potter, Park District Oversight Committee Representative
- Jenifer Rees, Friends of Seattle's Olmsted Parks Representative
- Eugenia Woo, Historic Seattle Representative
- Jeremy Wood, Seattle Human Rights Commission Representative

Recommendations

The Task Force decided to divide their report into two sections; first, the challenges facing the Olmsted Legacy in Seattle, and, second, their recommendations addressing those challenges. The Task Force made a total of 18 recommendations, 11 of which correspond to the maintenance of the Olmsted Legacy and another 7 of which relate to the expansion of that Legacy. The full report is available at https://www.seattle.gov/Documents/Departments/ParksAndRecreation/OlmstedTaskforce/Olmsted_Legacy_Task_Force_Final_Report.pdf.

Below is a summary of the recommendations from the Seattle Olmsted Legacy Task Force.

Maintaining the Olmsted Legacy

Recommendation 1: Create an Historic Parks "Curator" Position at SPR, responsible for coordination of educational programming about Seattle's historic parks and boulevards. This position would serve as the contact point for SPR, FSOP and other stakeholders and advisor on projects impacting Seattle's Olmsted Legacy.

Recommendations 2 & 3: Develop Educational Resources and Programming for SPR Staff and Seattle Residents, in order to achieve better understanding and appreciation for the Olmsted Legacy in Seattle. These recommendations would aim to better maintain the historic character and features of the Olmsted park and boulevard system.

Recommendation 4: Develop and Maintain Strong Interdepartmental Relationships, in order to strengthen cross-departmental partnerships on better maintenance of the Olmsted Legacy. In particular, the Task Force recommends increasing cooperation with SDOT and SPU on projects impacting the Olmsted Legacy in Seattle. In partnering with other departments, Seattle Parks and Recreation should work with these partners to create a better understanding of critical Olmsted design principles and their benefits so as to increase greater awareness, understanding and use of these principles.

Recommendation 5: Develop Programs for Stronger Community Support Organizations, in order to enhance the activities of these "Friends of" groups and equalize resources, both volunteer and paid, for their work.

Recommendation 6: Assess and Analyze Adequacy of Existing Policies and Tools and Adopt New/Revised Policies. Seattle Parks and Recreation should examine how existing policies affect historic landscapes and structures and to what extent these policies acknowledge and consider these historic resources. A "best practices" approach should be developed to bring historic designs into compliance with current policies while also conforming to "historic rehabilitation" goals as set forth by the US Secretary of the Interior, the acknowledged source for such best practices.

Recommendation 7 & 8: Assess Current Conditions and Develop Rehabilitation and Succession Plans. The Task Force recommends that SPR conduct a thorough assessment of Seattle's Olmsted parks and boulevards and develop comprehensive rehabilitation policies and procedures consistent with the Olmsted design principles.

Recommendation 9: Develop Maintenance Plans, specifically those impacting historic properties, such as the Olmsted parks and boulevards. Plans should establish a practice for rehabilitating Olmsted features and sites to comply with current code requirements in ways that protect overall historic character.

Recommendation 10: Expand the System of Interconnected Parks and Boulevards. (See the next section, "Recommendations for Expansion," for more detailed approach to achieving this goal.)

Recommendation 11: Increase Funding for the System's Maintenance and Rehabilitation, creating a mechanism to address current funding shortfalls for maintenance of Seattle's Olmsted parks and boulevards.

Expanding the Olmsted Parks System

Recommendation 1: Develop a Plan for Expansion of the Olmsted Parks System. SPR should create a comprehensive plan for the expansion of the Olmsted system of parks and boulevards, and which also responds to the needs for equitable distribution and access.

Recommendations 2 & 3: Utilize and Incorporate Olmsted Design Principles and Strategies. The expansion plan should adopt and reflect the Olmsted design principles, exploring ideas and recommendations from previous plans, studies and drawings, including the Olmsted Brothers' reports of 1903 and 1908. These Olmsted principles should be utilized in the design and planning of new parks.

Recommendation 4: Incorporate Other Infrastructure into Plan, increasing interagency cooperation on projects impacting parks as well as utilities and other infrastructure needs. Reservoirs, storm water detention facilities and street right-of-way improvement projects are a few examples.

Recommendation 5: Build the Expansion Plan Upon Principles of Social and Race Equity, by identifying historically underserved neighborhoods by either proximity or ease of access and locating parks and green connections to maximize equitable access.

Recommendation 6: Create Clear Process for Designating New Viewpoints. A clear, manageable process for identifying and designating new viewpoints should be established, thus fulfilling and expanding on Olmsted's vision for Seattle "borrowing" distant views for a greater sense of expansiveness within a physically constrained parks system and building on the Olmsted Brothers' idea to recognize "genius of place."

Recommendation 7: Increase Funding and Develop New Funding Sources for Park System Expansion, including development and maintenance of new sites. New funding sources should be explored, particularly related to land development, as the development of new housing relies on parks as a local amenity, creates greater demand for and use of parks, and directly affects acquisition and development cost for new parks.