



SPORTS vs. NATURE

WHAT ARE THE CITY'S PARKS FOR? BY ALAN PITTMAN

Most people in Eugene use city parks for walking and bird watching more than playing baseball or soccer, according to a city survey this year. Most want the city to balance parks between natural areas and developed sports fields.

But that's not what the city is doing, say a growing number of critics. The city plans to spend more than 80 percent of the 1998 \$25 million parks and open space bond on sports and other active recreation development rather than natural areas.

"It's been hijacked," says Tom Pringle, of the bond measure. "I didn't vote for this." Instead of natural areas, the city is developing "billiard-table" fields, with closely cropped, chemically intensive turf devoid of wildflowers and cover for animals, he says. "It's green asphalt."

The sports vs. nature war in city parks has reached a pitched battle over Amazon Park, where 120 people packed a city meeting last month. Sports advocates say they need more fields to serve thousands of players, and city officials say they're following directions established by a city parks committee six years ago. But natural parks proponents oppose city plans to develop new ball fields in an Amazon park wetland and have raised big questions about what people want out of their parks and how the city has decided to spend millions of dollars in public money.

THE PEOPLE'S PARKS?

To bolster their case, natural parks proponents point to a scientific survey the city did in February that shows a large majority of people favor natural parks.

Survey respondents said providing opportunities to enjoy nature or the outdoors was the most important benefit of parks (32 percent). Protecting the environment came in third (14.2 percent), while sports didn't make the top nine list of benefits, and presumably fell in number 10, "other" (1 percent). Outdoor/environmental programs ranked second in the top choices for parks programs people would most like to see increased. Sports came in fourth.

When asked what is the right proportion of parks for Eugene, 52 percent favored an equal distribution of natural and active/sports parks. When asked what outdoor recreation elements are most needed in Eugene, respondents rated trails for biking and walking first (27 percent) and river access second (14 percent). Sports fields didn't make it into the top eight responses and presumably fell in the "other" (3 percent) category.

The survey also asked what kinds of activities people engaged in. Walking for pleasure ranked first for highest participation, bicycling ninth, wildlife watching 11th, hiking 13th and bird watching 15th. Organized sports ranked far lower with soccer 29th, baseball 34th, and softball 35th. The survey then asked what kinds of activities people would like to do more often if the facilities were available.

Bicycling ranked first followed by walking for pleasure. Basketball ranked 19th and other organized sports didn't make the top 20 responses.

"That survey is quite telling," says Mary O'Brien of Citizens for Public Accountability. "There's this impression there is this huge need for ball parks but that's hardly what the community wants."

But Randy Rogers, sports director for Emerald Kidsports, a local non-profit group that serves 20,000 local kids with a budget of \$1.6 million, says ball fields are in great demand. He questions whether the city survey captured the opinions of the many kids that need fields to play on.

The scientific survey, with a 5 percent margin of error, did include kids aged 10 to 18. The survey indicated that kids may want natural areas even more than adults. While 32 percent of the adults surveyed rated providing opportunities to enjoy nature or the outdoors as the most important benefit of parks, 42 percent of the kids did. Walking and cycling made the top 10 list for youth's favorite park activities, unlike organized sports.

A separate, non-scientific city survey involved 647 local high school and middle school kids who chose to fill out parks surveys. In that survey, organized sports were given higher rankings. Kids said basketball (ranked 5th), soccer (14th) and football (15th) were among the activities they most frequently engaged in. They said they wanted more basketball (1st), football (7th) and soccer (17th). But natural parks

activities like biking (2nd) and hiking (16th) also ranked high.

In another non-scientific survey, 400 people who filled out questionnaires at the Eugene Celebration strongly favored natural parks over ball fields. Almost three-quarters of respondents said they wanted parks balanced more toward natural open space rather than active recreation/sports. Sixty percent said the current park system was weighted more towards developed active/sports parks than natural areas.

SPORTS BOOSTERS

Andrea Riner, the city's parks planning manager, agrees "there's absolutely a high priority that the citizens give to natural areas and passive recreation." But she argues the city "absolutely" already adequately meets that demand with the many acres of natural parks along the ridgeline trail, at Spencer Butte and Delta Ponds and in the West Eugene Wetlands property owned by the federal Bureau of Land Management.

"There're 140,000 people that want 140,000 different things," Riner says. Citizens should realize, "maybe I don't get to have what I want at park X, but within the parks and open space system there's something for everyone."

Riner questions whether the "balance" citizens call for in the surveys between sports and nature parks means that city funding for the competing needs should be more equal. "Is balance 50-50?"

Riner says in deciding how to spend public money, parks staff are following the direction of the 1988 Mayor's Parks and Open Space Committee which recommended the \$25 million bond measure. "It's a pretty good indicator of the balance this community has asked for."

The committee recommended more than 80 percent of the \$25 million should be spent on sports and other active recreation rather than natural areas. The city has spent \$19 million of the money so far. But natural area proponents point out the committee recommendations weren't what citizens overwhelmingly passed in 1998. The question on the ballot asked only whether the city should issue the bonds "to purchase parkland, build parks and youth sports fields and replace Amazon Pool" and didn't go into details.

In fact, the city has spent money from the measure on sports facilities never even recommended by the committee. About \$1.7 million went to help local high schools build four new football stadiums with artificial turf, for example.

The 1998 committee's recommendations for spending the money were sent out in a flier received by about a third of city residents before the vote. But the flier noted that the spending allocations were recommendations only and "fund allocations, land acquisitions, locations, and improvements may change based on a public review process."

Members of the 1998 committee were appointed by Mayor Jim Torrey, himself a long-time former Kidsports coach, and natural parks proponents say the committee was heavily biased towards sports over natural areas.