

Parks and Politics

Public gets a chance to weigh in on future projects.

Public testimony is on the agenda Monday, April 10, as the Eugene City Council listens to what projects the city should include in the new Parks, Recreation and Open Space (PROS) Comprehensive Plan. Not only is this the public's one chance to weigh in on everything from what parks, paths, playgrounds and gardens the city will build and improve over the next five to 20 years, it's also a chance for the public to influence how much money the city allocates for acquiring land that will be turned into parks and open space.

City councilors adopted a new PROS plan Feb. 13 that replaced the 1989 Eugene Parks and Recreation Plan. But when they adopted the new PROS plan, they separated out the project list; the actual projects that make it into the PROS plan are still up in the air.

In February the City Council prioritized acquisition of park lands and natural areas in the projects list for a \$20 million parks bond measure they plan to put on the November ballot.

While approval of a parks project list might seem like a straightforward process, it's actually rife with politics, as special interest groups lobby for approval of their projects. The Eugene Homebuilders Association has already appealed the approved PROS plan to avoid paying higher parks systems development charges, which offset the burden new development places on existing city infrastructure such as sewer, water and roads.

Another particularly aggressive group, which includes former Mayor Jim Torrey, is pushing for highly developed playing fields covered in Astroturf (see News Briefs last week).

"There is a surprising amount of behind-the-scenes politics in the parks planning process," said Kevin Matthews, president of Friends of Eugene. "But the local community really cares about our parks, so it's incredibly important for people to come to this hearing and speak up for their favorite projects so the city can see how much the community does really care about parks and open space."

In the limited realm of Eugene parks funding, projects have to compete with each other for top priority. At the hearing citizens can comment on whether they agree with city staff priorities for scores of park projects. For example staff gave priority 2 ranking for about \$1 million in new maintenance buildings at Laurelwood Golf Course, but put \$1.4 million in Ridgeline Trail work at a lower

priority 3 and 4, pushing the work out beyond 10 years from now.

Staff gave a much higher priority to a new swimming pool in the Willow Creek area (within 10 years) than a new swimming pool in the poorer Whiteaker neighborhood (within 20 years).

One little-known project that could have across-the-board appeal is the "renovation of the Alton Baker Canoe Canal for kayaking, recreation and natural resource benefits." Whitewater

kayakers dream of a whitewater park with re-circulating holes perfect for doing tricks. Local river-surfer Elijah Mack has visions of standing waves that surfers and boogie boarders can ride. Anglers hope for improved fish habitat for endangered species including steelhead and Chinook salmon. Environmentalists would love to remove the current structures in the river that block the natural migration

of the fish, and rebuild riparian zones.

Ed Fredette is the trip facility manger for the UO Outdoor Program, and also wrote his master's thesis on turning the Canoe Canal into a water park as a way to improve both recreation opportunities and restore damaged aquatic habi-

tat. "The concrete structures they put in place [to build the Canoe Canal] block juvenile fish from accessing the Canoe Canal side channel, which is critical habitat for winter steelhead and Chinook salmon," he said. "If we're looking at developing a park with features that are good for board sports like kayaks, surf boards, boogie boards and body boards, let's also take care of the safety hazards that are out there, and while we're at it, replant and repair the damaged riparian zones."

In the original project list, the renovation of the Canoe Canal was a top priority project, but in the most recent version, it was bumped to priority 2. But Fredette is optimistic because the city has prioritized two other related projects, a study to determine the best way to promote non-motorized water recreation on the Willamette and restoration of the Willamette River corridor, as priority 1 projects.

Regardless of which projects end up on the final list, Matthews has one major concern for this public hearing: "On April 10 there will be several special interest groups fighting for their priority projects. It's really important the City Council hear how important parks and open space are to the community overall, above and beyond the specific projects being advocated by different contingencies."

The hearing is 7:30 pm Monday, April 10 in council chambers, City Hall, 777 Pearl St. For more information about the PROS Comprehensive Plan or the projects list, log onto the city website and look in the right hand column under "City Highlights."

EW

Additional reporting by Alan Pittman

Dove Miller surfs on a standing wave, one of the features that would be included in a water park.



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