

I. Introduction

The City's Park, Recreation and Open Space Plan (PRO Plan), an element of the City's Comprehensive Plan, is the overarching document that guides the expansion of our park and recreation system as the community grows. The PRO plan must be updated every six years in order for the City to remain eligible for grants under the Washington Wildlife and Recreation Program. The PRO Plan outlines the steps to continue to achieve a quality parks system for the future.

Mission Statement: Support a healthy community by promoting high quality parks and recreation services.”

1.1 Growth Management Act and Plan Components

The Growth Management Act (GMA) establishes goals for cities and counties to ensure that their quality of life is sustained as their communities grow. One of these goals is to “retain open space, enhance recreational opportunities, conserve fish and wildlife habitat, increase access to natural resource lands and water, and develop parks and recreational facilities” (RCW 36.70A.020(9)).

This plan contains the following components:

- Establish Goals and Objectives – Identify the goals to be met and objectives to carry out those goals as the PRO Plan is implemented.
- Inventory the Existing Park System – List the lands and facilities owned and operated by the city or other public agencies within the City limits and the urban growth area.
- Analyze Needs & Opportunities – Determine the needs for future park, recreation, and open space facilities or programs.
- Adopt a Level-of-Service – Based on the existing park system and the identified needs, establish level of service standards to help guide development of the park system over the next 10 to 20 years.
- Create an Implementation Plan – Estimate the overall cost of achieving the proposed level-of-service, based on the community’s recommendations, prioritize those recommendations, and develop a plan to implement the priority recommendations through a six-year Capital Improvement Plan (CIP). In addition, develop general strategies to be considered for the projected population growth over the next 20 years.



Overlooking South Bay Trail at Taylor Dock. Photo by Kenni Merritt.

1.2 Principles, Goals and Objectives

Principles

These six principles demonstrate the collective community values regarding Bellingham’s park system:

- **Protective:** Preserves habitat and open space, enhances native species and creates opportunities to learn about and interact with nature.
- **Connected:** Supports connectedness and cohesion of the community by enhancing physical and mental health and well-being and protecting natural corridors.
- **Playful:** Inspires imagination and joy.
- **Equitable:** Quality and quantity of amenities equally distributed and easy to safely use year-round and access by all modes of travel.
- **Sustainable:** Stewards a park system that endures for the long term and supports adaptable spaces that accommodate traditional, emerging and future uses.
- **Inclusive:** Responsive to the entire Bellingham community: all ages, abilities, languages, genders, cultures and levels of income.



Couple dancing at Boulevard Park. Photo by Dex Horton.

These seven goals and their corresponding objectives reflect the community’s desired outcomes and provide a strategic framework for recommendations in the PRO Plan.

Goal 1: Provide high-quality facilities and services that are accessible, inclusive and distributed equitably across Bellingham.

Objectives:

- a. Provide a system of parks, trails and open space so that all residents live within one half mile safe walking distance of a developed park or trail. (Add footnote for how this is measured)
- b. Proactively upgrade and restore existing facilities to improve resiliency and protect long-term health of park assets.
- c. Provide adequate staff year-round to maintain and enhance park facilities and services.
- d. Target new park acquisition and development in areas that are under-served.

Goal 2: Enhance the capacity, quality and variety of uses of the existing system of parks, recreation and open space facilities and services.

Objectives:

- a. Evaluate park facilities and infrastructure to ensure adequate capacity is available to support appropriate uses.
- b. Incorporate art into park facilities as funding and opportunities arise.

- c. Design system upgrades that respond to community vision and preferences and use best available science to protect the environment.
- d. Improve and add off-leash dog areas in existing and new parks to provide a variety of dog areas (fenced, open, water) with pet waste stations.



Bellingham Farmers Market. Photo by Cynthia St. Clair.

Goal 3: Create environments that encourage regular active and passive activities to support health, sense of safety, wellness and social connections.

Objectives:

- a. Conduct a Community Recreation Needs Assessment and implement recommendations.
- b. Participate in Parkscriptions programs and other organized activities that activate underserved populations.
- c. Work with other City departments and organizations to discourage illegal camping.
- d. Provide more small gathering spaces, especially in the urban area as infill occurs.
- e. Provide larger event spaces such as enclosed meeting rooms and outdoor shelters suitable for family gatherings, weddings, festivals, charity and corporate events.
- f. Acquire or develop new or improved town square or plaza space downtown and in urban villages such as Old Town, Samish and at Fountain Plaza.

Goal 4: Preserve and integrate nature, natural systems and ecological principles throughout Bellingham.

Objectives:

- a. Preserve and enhance a system of open space, habitat corridors and trails.
- b. Protect environmental features that reflect Bellingham's natural character.
- c. Participate in development of Urban Forestry Master Plan to proactively assess and protect urban tree canopy.
- d. Expand dog-waste program and provide additional trash receptacles to improve self-maintenance and litter control.
- e. Implement low impact development measures and integrated pest management to reduce environmental impacts.
- f. Steward and protect open spaces from invasive species, illegal activity, and inappropriate use.
- g. Provide environmental education opportunities such as interpretive signage or other educational programs to promote the value of the natural environment throughout the park system.

Goal 5: Develop innovative programs, services and strategies for expanding the system and improving accessibility.

Objectives:

- a. Involve the community in habitat restoration and maintenance activities through the Parks Volunteer Program.
- b. Explore partnerships that expand services or leverage support for specific projects.
- c. Evaluate scholarship program for low income families with the goal of expanding participation.
- d. Ensure new development invests in and dedicates new parks, trails, street trees and open space.
- e. Target improvements that connect trails with transit stops, key destinations, bike routes and sidewalks to improve non-motorized transportation options.
- f. Coordinate with Public Works to identify opportunities for better trail, sidewalk and bike route connectivity

Goal 6: Connect and unify the community with trail and greenway corridors.

Objectives:

- a. Provide an interconnected system of trails so that all residents are within a one-half mile safe walk of a trail.
- b. Balance the demand for public access and interpretive education with protection of environmentally sensitive areas and historic sites.
- c. Implement the Greenways Strategic Plan and pursue recommended future trails.
- d. Provide safe street crossings and improve wayfinding.
- e. Continue to explore new trail surface alternatives that balance the natural character of Bellingham's trail system with accessibility requirements, long-term maintenance, sustainable development practices and availability of local materials.

Goal 7: Manage Bellingham's park land and programs effectively, efficiently and sustainably utilizing quantitative and qualitative measures.

Objectives:

- a. Design and develop facilities that reduce overall maintenance, operation requirements and costs, while improving resiliency and efficiency.
- b. Establish baseline conditions and maintenance standards for park assets and evaluate progress towards meeting standards and improving conditions.
- c. Prioritize capital improvements based on safety, condition, socio-economic factors and population served.
- d. Analyze options for long-term financial sustainability.
- e. Explore options to improve enforcement of park rules.
- f. Provide staff with adequate training, resources and equipment to increase productivity and efficacy.

(From Community Setting) Intense park activities should be separated from sensitive areas by maintaining and enhancing buffers to protect habitat function. Access to select sensitive areas may be provided through low impact trails, only when public access does not impair ecological function.

1.3 Public Involvement



Fairhaven Village Outdoor Cinema event. Photo by Kenni Merritt.

Public input is important to a community-based parks and recreation plan. The citizen members of the Parks and Recreation Advisory Board (PRAB) served as the Steering Committee to help oversee the process, provide input and evaluate the recommendations. Greenways Advisory Committee members tackled the updates to recommended trails and open space. A web-based survey, public work shops and public meetings were also conducted to augment and inform the Committee’s discussions. Public hearings were held with the Planning

Commission and City Council prior to final adoption. The public involvement process included the following:

Meeting/Action	Topic	Month
2019		
Steering Committee/PRAB	Project Launch	April
Public Workshops		
Online Public Survey	Community Survey	June-July
City Council	Project Update	
Public Open House	Overview of key elements	September
Steering Committee/PRAB	Review Major Changes	September
Steering Committee/PRAB	Final Recommendation	October
Planning Commission	Work Session	October/November
Planning Commission	Public Hearing	November
City Council	Public Hearing	January
City Council	Preliminary Approval	February

1.4 Plan History and Boundary

This PRO Plan, updated every six years, builds on previous comprehensive planning efforts and is an element of the Comprehensive Plan for Bellingham. The PRO Plan considers parks, recreation and open space land, trails, facilities and programs. The planning area for this process includes the Bellingham City Limits and the adopted Urban Growth Area (UGA).

Whatcom County is responsible for planning the area outside of the UGA, however, the planning efforts of each agency must be coordinated. Also, for the purposes of the PRO Plan, it is assumed that residents who currently live within the UGA are served by existing parks, and that by the end of the 20-year planning period, or 2040, all UGA areas will be incorporated into the City. The proposed facilities, population, level-of-service and any other recommendations projected to the year 2040 include both the existing City and the entire UGA. If all of these areas are not annexed, some of the recommendations would not be implemented.



Boulevard Park. Photo by Brian Pitzen.

Projects prioritized during the planning process are included in the City's six-year Capital Budget, which is updated at least bi-annually.