



The State of
**Eugene's Parks
and Natural Areas**
2014



Eugene has shown tremendous support for expanding its much-loved parks and natural areas. While acres of parkland, the number of developed parks, and illicit activities have grown, funding levels for their care and maintenance has decreased. This mixed with new pressures is degrading our parks and causing users to feel the effects.

Over the past 16 years, Eugene residents have passed two bond measures that almost doubled the acreage within the park system. The positive outcome of these measures can be seen across the system in the form of new neighborhood parks, natural areas, trails, and sports fields. However, this increase, coupled with a park maintenance budget that has remained at virtually the same pre-growth 1998 funding levels, has created a situation in which the dollars to adequately care for Eugene’s parks and natural areas have not kept pace — leading to deterioration throughout the system.

Over this same period, the Parks and Open Space Division (POS) has come to realize a \$2 million annual operations and maintenance (O&M) gap, due to budget reductions, deferred maintenance, and an increase in illicit activities such as vandalism, graffiti, and illegal camping. In addition there is a \$24 million capital repair backlog as wear and tear on an aging infrastructure has accelerated.

In order to help stretch limited resources, POS has implemented new ways to maintain park land, increased public/private partnerships, secured external funding sources, and utilized volunteers for many core services. POS is also putting off vital maintenance work in hopes that the future funding picture improves. In this manner POS keeps parks functioning in the short run, but defers to the future an ever increasing backlog of maintenance needs that must eventually be addressed.



The Growth of Eugene’s Parks and Open Space System

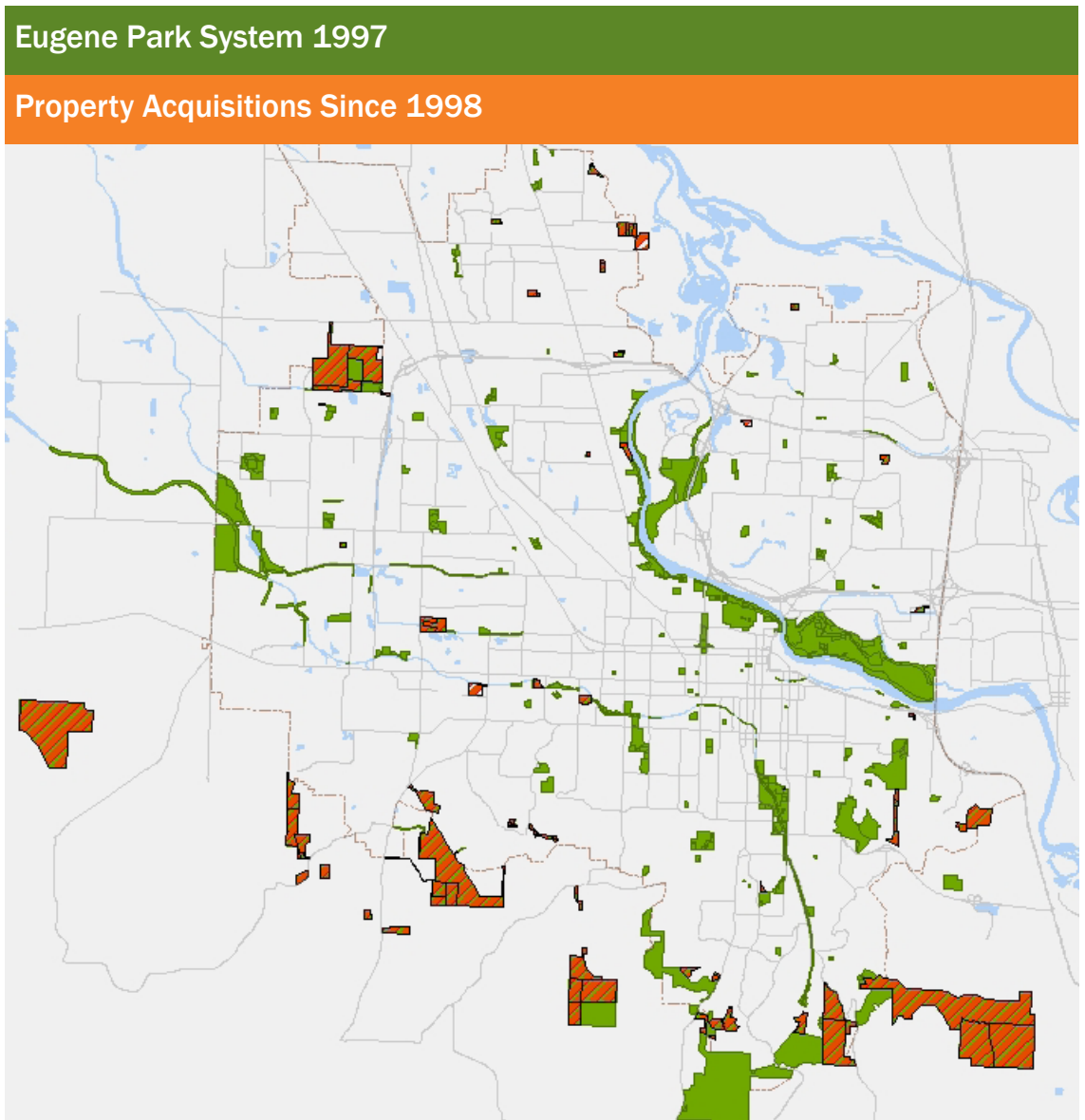
Since 1998, Eugene’s park and natural area system has undergone a significant expansion in both acreage and the number of developed parks and natural areas. This expansion was supported by approximately \$72 million in capital funding from several sources. Voters approved a \$25 million capital improvement bond in 1998, followed by a \$27 million bond in 2006. Community members have also

POS Assets Comparison: 1998 to 2014		
Park Asset Category	1998	2014
All General Fund Parks and Natural Areas	1,607 acres	3,129 acres
Developed Park Areas	338 acres	394 acres
Natural Areas	1,227 acres	2,507 acres
Parkland “banked” for future developed parks	42 acres	229 acres
Neighborhood Parks	27 parks	46 parks
Community Parks	12 parks	13 parks
Grass Sports Fields	45 fields	46 fields
Trails	50 miles	53 miles

contributed approximately \$1.9 million in donations toward assets within the park system, and System Development Charges (SDCs) have funded an additional \$18 million in acquisitions, new development and enhancement projects.

The following park assets have been added since 1998 and **most are maintained with general fund dollars:**

- 18 new neighborhood parks
- 10 new future neighborhood park sites
- 1 new community park (Bethel Park)
- 34 acres for a new future community park site (Santa Clara)
- 1 new regional playground (RiverPlay Discovery Village)
- 180 additional acres to a community park site in Bethel (Golden Gardens)
- 1,260 acres of new natural areas that include Wild Iris Ridge, Suzanne Arlie Park, and South Eugene Meadows
- 2.7 miles of trails
- 1 new grass sports field
- An additional \$9.7 million in 2006 bond funding remains that is designated for new neighborhood and community park site acquisition, riverfront acreage acquisition, and synthetic sports fields.



Funding Impacts

While support has been very strong

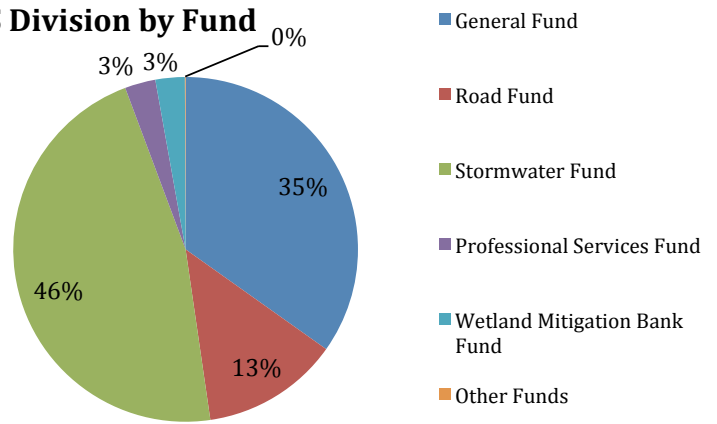
in providing capital funding for new projects, these sources of funds are restricted in their use. According to Oregon state law, general obligation bonds and parks SDCs cannot be used for the operation and maintenance of parks. Virtually all donations received are designated by the donor for specific projects and are almost always unavailable for O&M. Capital funding may only be used for projects that result in the creation, expansion, or restoration of park infrastructure and may not be used to maintain that infrastructure. For example, building a playground could be financed with capital funds; however performing the monthly safety inspections on that playground equipment, or maintaining restrooms cannot be paid for with capital funds.

Park operation and maintenance core services are primarily funded through the City's general fund. Over the past few years, to help achieve a balanced general fund, some O&M services, that improve stormwater quality, were transferred to the stormwater fund. As assets have been added to the park and natural area system through the capital program, it is primarily the general fund dollars that are stretched to meet the increase in O&M needs. It is these dollars that are used to provide the core services that maintain playgrounds, restrooms, waterlines, hard infrastructure, and all other services that keep our parks safe, clean and green. They are also stretched to address emerging challenges that threaten the overall health of the system.

Growing Deferred Maintenance and Aging Infrastructure

As the result of a cumulative \$1.2 million reduction in general funds and a reduction in work force, POS has incrementally cut back on services and renovations and had to defer maintenance by spreading resources over a much larger area— the result being a rapidly growing number of aging assets getting less and less attention. In the short term, new assets typically require less maintenance at the beginning of their life cycle. For the long term, these assets require cumulatively more and more maintenance as they age and deteriorate through use. The age and needs of park infrastructure vary across the system. Even parks developed since 1998 have begun to age and require more maintenance attention to keep from becoming unsafe or unusable.

POS Division by Fund



Total Budget= \$ 11.2 million



While successes have been achieved through efficiencies and volunteerism, team members are cleaning less frequently, deferring preventative maintenance activities, and having to remove equipment versus replacing it. The combination of aging assets and deferred maintenance in Eugene's parks and natural areas is leading to increased and noticeable deterioration throughout the system that is poised to grow even larger.

Deferring Maintenance

- Aging playground equipment is not being replaced.
- Jogging trails are not inspected or maintained on a regular basis.
- The regular replacement and cleaning of light fixtures in parks has been deferred.
- Regular inspection and maintenance of trees near playgrounds and other high-use park amenities has been deferred.
- General cleaning (e.g., power washing) of hard surfaces such as sidewalks has been reduced.
- Routine pruning of actual and potential hazardous tree limbs along the riverbank bike paths has been deferred.
- Picnic tables and benches are no longer regularly painted in order to extend life.
- Regular aerating and fertilizing of many turf areas has been discontinued. Over time, lawns may not provide adequate cover for the intended use.
- Annual shrub bed mulching applications have been discontinued.
- Barked trails within the system are not being refreshed on a regular cycle.



Service Reductions

- ▼ 3 park restrooms closed (one of the three currently remains open due to volunteer support)
- ▼ 25 percent reduction of trash pickup in neighborhood parks.
- ▼ 50 percent reduction in mowing frequency in neighborhood parks.
- ▼ 75 percent reduction of turf irrigation in neighborhood parks.
- ▼ 50 percent reduction in dog off-leash park maintenance.
- ▼ 35 percent reduction of materials and supplies and contractual services funding for Ridgeline Park and dispersed natural area maintenance.
- ▼ 25 percent reduction of material and supplies for soft surface trail maintenance.



- ▼ 40 percent reduction in community garden maintenance and coordination.
- ▼ 50 percent reduction in contracted ornamental rose pesticide applications (fungicides).
- ▼ 20 percent reduction in tree maintenance in parks.
- ▼ 50 percent reduction in sports field mowing frequency.
- ▼ 30 percent reduction in maintenance at the City's two floral gardens – Owen Rose Garden and Hendricks Park.



Deferred Capital Maintenance



As the decline in asset maintenance continues, the cost of repairing them grows until eventually they must be replaced. The total cost of such replacements or renovations that are needed throughout the park and recreation system is estimated at more than \$24 million. These renovation needs include projects like addressing accessibility improvements related to the Americans with Disabilities Act (ADA), replacing aging lighting and electrical systems to improve their safety and efficiency, and renovating old restrooms that are unsafe and challenging to maintain.

This backlog has created an impediment to the development of new neighborhood and community parks. Adding new parks now would spread the existing inadequate resources even thinner, exacerbating the issues described above. For this reason, future park sites the City has acquired are sitting idle rather than being designed and developed to provide parks to the underserved neighborhoods.

2014 Developed Parks Condition Assessment

Since 2010, a team of parks and open space staff from diverse work areas have come together every two years to rate the conditions at developed parks in Eugene. These parks are given a grade ranging from A to F. In addition to showing parks in need of repairs or renovations, this assessment provides valuable data on the overall health of Eugene’s developed parks.



Rating Categories

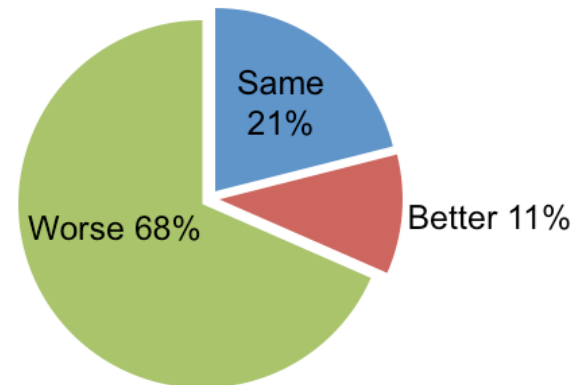
<input type="checkbox"/> overall cleanliness	<input type="checkbox"/> inappropriate uses
<input type="checkbox"/> hard infrastructure	<input type="checkbox"/> open grass areas
<input type="checkbox"/> park amenities	<input type="checkbox"/> landscaping



Findings that lead to lower grades include:

- Numerous pieces of aging playground equipment that, although safe, were not in compliance with national standards and guidelines.
- Park lights in poor condition or non-functional.
- Evidence of illicit activities such as various forms of vandalism, alcohol consumption in “dry parks,” and overnight camping.
- Aging irrigation systems that need high levels of maintenance.
- Many turf areas were brown and in a distressed condition.
- Paved surfaces such as parking lots, sidewalks, pathways, sports courts, and picnic shelter floors were aging and cracked.
- Picnic shelters needed renovation, painting, or improved lighting.
- Turf areas, landscape beds, unpaved paths and trails, and floral garden areas were weedier.

2009 to 2014 Letter Grade Change



The assessments showed that park cleanliness is holding steady or in some cases improving in some parks while inappropriate uses (vandalism, illegal camping, etc.) have been increasing in others. The decline in overall scores is largely a result of the degradation of assets that are not being renovated, replaced or cared for at the levels required to achieve maximum life span.



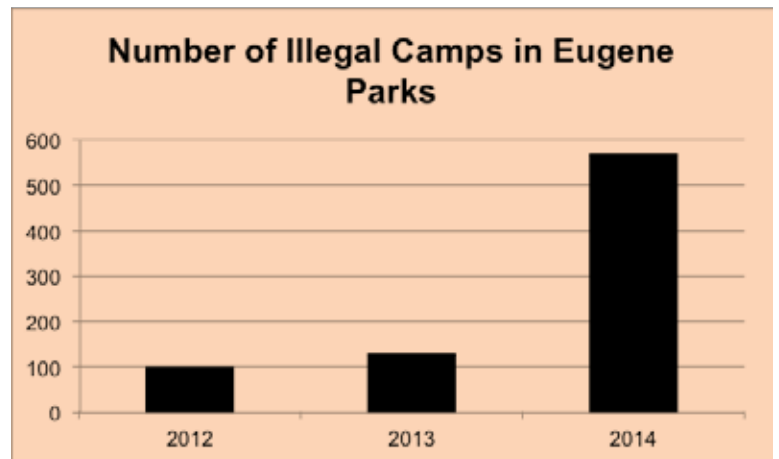
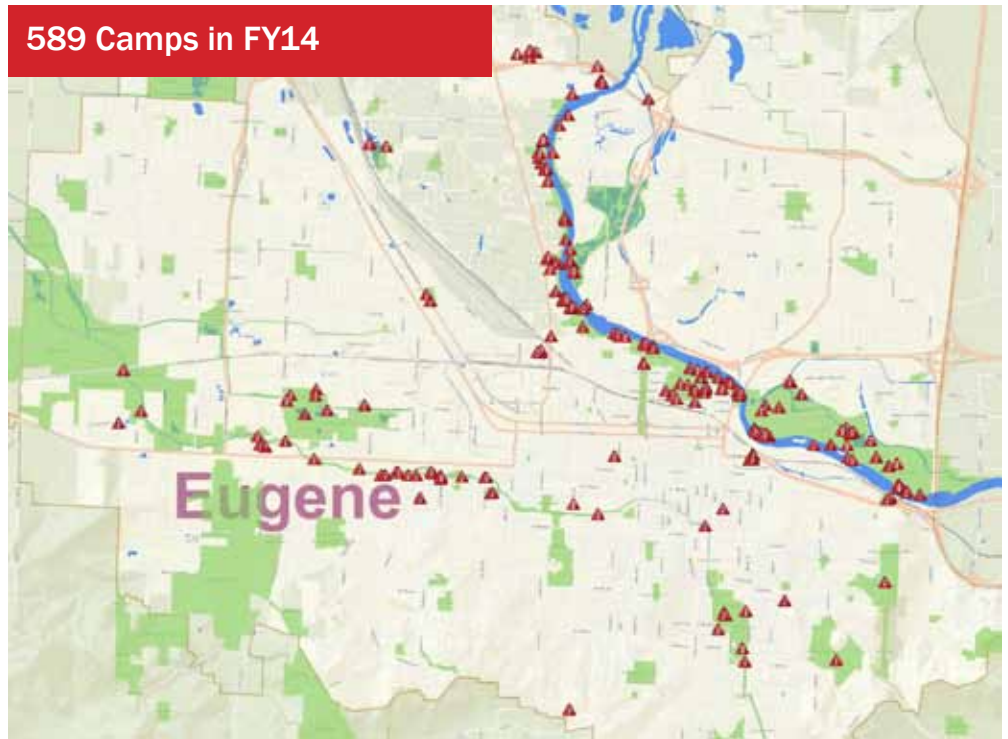
Increasing Illicit Activities

During the past five years, the park and natural area system has been impacted by increasing levels of illegal activities. For example, since 2012, the number of camps in our park system has grown six-fold, from 101 in 2012 to almost 600 in 2014.

Camps often pose a threat to public health and safety due to the presence of human waste and hypodermic needles. Many occur in natural areas along the banks of the Willamette River and Amazon Creek and have a negative impact on water quality and fish and wildlife habitat. Each week, POS staff discovers new illegal camps and responds by letting campers know of the park rules, giving them time to remove their items, cleaning up the camps, and providing campers a place for them to retrieve non-illicit items left behind.

Other common illegal activities in parks and natural areas that are on the rise include vandalism of park facilities (e.g., restrooms, playground equipment, and kiosks) and graffiti. Vandalism of park restrooms, along with prostitution, drug use, and defecation on restroom floors, is an ongoing problem that creates unsafe and unsanitary conditions for park users. Furthermore, due to the precautions that must be taken, it takes immense staff resources to clean and sanitize these areas.

The combination of illicit activities in parks and natural areas generates fear among many community members. POS staff interacts regularly with community members who express fear of using certain parks or paths because of the presence of illicit activities.



Meeting the Challenges

In order to help mitigate unmet O&M needs resulting from system expansion, reductions in the general fund, increasing illicit activities, and growing wear and tear on park infrastructure, POS continues to work on several fronts to try and ensure many core services are kept as whole as possible and that the community continues to find joy in and be proud of their diverse parks and natural areas.

Parks Capital Projects

To avoid exacerbating the unmet O&M liability discussed above, POS is postponing park capital projects that develop new infrastructure with high O&M needs (e.g., construction of Ferndale, at right, and Grasshopper Meadow neighborhood parks). POS is targeting available capital funding toward renovation projects that reduce O&M costs or are O&M neutral, and restricting new property acquisition to acquiring land for future park use that will have minimal maintenance requirements in the near term.



Finding New Ways to Manage Parks and Natural Areas

Park operations and natural areas staff have had to continually adapt to the challenge of maintaining Eugene's parks and natural areas system with smaller teams and fewer resources. Three years ago POS began implementing a series of changes in the way parks are maintained. The first step was to reorganize the structure of the park operations section from having specialist crews with expertise in areas such as irrigation and turf mowing who were responsible for all parks throughout the system, to having three regional generalist crews. Regional crews are focused on core services such as servicing restrooms, trash collection, litter patrol and landscape maintenance. Similarly, in the natural areas section, two work units are performing a broader suite of activities at each site they visit than they did in the past. For example, the waterways crew has added illicit camp clean-up to their duties, and the meadowlands mowing crew now routinely collects litter that is dispersed throughout meadow sites. These changes mean fewer work teams travel to each site and savings are seen from reduced time, travel and fuel.

The next step underway is determining a standard for turf areas and landscape beds to realistically be maintained and the most essential custodial services needed. Previous maintenance standards and service levels were based on the specialist crew system. The revised standard will be tailored to the regional crew approach and stay focused on keeping parks safe, clean and green.



Public/Private Partnerships - A Growing Part of Funding Park Improvements

When tight budgets have not allowed park development to occur by traditional means, individuals and community groups such as the Eugene Rotary and Eugene Parks Foundation have stepped up to lead the charge.

While some park development projects are completely funded with privately raised funds, such as Fairmount Park Spray Play and the Nobel Peace Park in Alton Baker Park, most are a successful collaboration. Public capital funds are being maximized by leveraging private contributions, in-kind donations and grant funds. Prominent examples include the Riverbank Path way-finding project, Washington Park Spray Play and WJ Skatepark + Urban Plaza. In all cases, privately raised funding for maintenance endowments and the realization that O&M presents the biggest challenge to our division are front and center. Over the past five years, POS brought in over \$744,000 in donations and grant funding for park projects.

Creative resource development models are currently being tested, seeking to capitalize on national trends such as food cart vending and large events. Moving forward, business enterprise partnerships aimed at funding a full range of activities—including development, renovation, O&M, events and programming—will be key to the health of Eugene’s rich park system.



Aiming Volunteer Efforts at Core Services

In recent years, POS has redeveloped and strengthened its volunteer program in order to involve community members in caring for parks and natural areas. In calendar year 2013 alone, 4,117 Eugene Park Steward (EPS) volunteers contributed over 10,000 hours in service, which amounts to an in-kind donation of over \$200,000.

EPS volunteers have been tackling everything from picking up litter and repairing picnic tables to clearing invasive ivy and spreading gravel. Groups and service organizations can also now adopt a park by entering into a two-year partnership and committing to a certain number of work parties a year. POS will continue to harness this goodwill and steer volunteer projects toward core services that help mitigate the effects of mounting deferred maintenance practices and a reduction in work force.



New Technologies Bring Efficiencies to Field Work

The creation and use of new technologies is on the rise at POS and staff members are finding efficiencies in their time while providing better customer service. Today, instead of spending hours in the office each week hand separating work orders into different regions, vegetation enforcement

staff members are able to look at a city map and separate their work orders in the field with a single click on their iPad. Staff members can now inspect, collect data, and download pictures directly into the maintenance management system without returning to their offices and handle emerging issues while in the area.

In addition, POS is utilizing the Geographic Information System (GIS) to map as much key infrastructure as possible in order to help the division do its job better and more efficiently. Currently, 24 data layers are available at staff member's fingertips and include everything from playgrounds, water features and park lights to irrigation and trails. With this new access to information staff members are better able to address park needs. For such things as a broken water line, staff can now quickly see exactly where all the lines are underground. For a broken bench, staff members can pinpoint its exact location and what it's made of so the proper repair supplies can be brought into the field.

Staff members are also getting alerted about park maintenance needs such as play equipment in need of a repair or broken glass on a path before they even arrive at a local park. The easy online reporting function of the new Park Watch program allows community members to keep POS informed of park maintenance needs while also keeping staff safer as they are able to review the Park Watch reports headed to police patrol.



Seeking External Funding to Care for Natural Areas

With the significant increase in natural area acreage since 1998 has come the associated responsibility to manage the lands to maintain public safety, prevent wildfires, address illicit activities, control invasive species, and maintain habitat quality. Since the general fund O&M budget has not kept pace with the increase in natural area acreage, POS has made substantial efforts to obtain external funding to pay for critical needs in these newly acquired natural areas. These efforts have resulted in over \$4.7 million in grant funds since 2009. For example, POS partnered with the Long Tom Watershed Council to obtain three grants from the Oregon Watershed Enhancement Board to manage invasive species and remove hazardous fuels from 200 acres in Wild Iris Ridge. In addition, POS partnered with the U.S. Bureau of Land Management to apply for National Fire Plan funding to reduce hazardous fuels at Wild Iris Ridge. POS also acquired federal stimulus funds through the Oregon Youth Conservation Corps to make numerous improvements to the Ridgeline Trail system and Ridgeline Park.

Conclusion

POS is meeting the challenges faced throughout the park system and continues to deliver a high level of service to the community. We have accomplished this by deferring maintenance activities; reducing service levels; being innovative in how we manage land; and utilizing volunteers, grant funding and partnerships.

Despite these efforts, our parks are showing visible signs of decline, and continued budget reductions have accelerated this decline. Looking longer term, the strategies implemented to date are not sustainable under the current pressures the system is experiencing. Deferring maintenance within an older park infrastructure will ultimately lead to higher costs to bring the system back to optimum condition. In FY14, choices had to be made to begin reducing service levels in ways not seen in prior years — such as closing restrooms. If budget cuts continue, strategies to meet these cuts are likely to include greater loss of entire services and will more significantly impact the usability of the parks by the public.

POS will continue to be innovative in how we manage resources and work to maximize efficiencies. We will also continue to ask partners and volunteers to participate even more to help meet these challenges and to minimize the effects of service reductions. But, there is a limit to these strategies and what volunteers are willing to do. Also there is a limit on how much partner support can be generated.



Eugene has a wonderful park system well worth the investment to optimize the values and benefits it brings into the community. The hope is the community understands the challenges we currently face and will support improvement to the system in ways that we can be proud of and everyone can enjoy well into the future.

