

Whatcom County Planning & Development Services Staff Report

Comprehensive Parks, Recreation and Open Space Plan

I. File Information

File: PLN2023-00007

File Name: Comprehensive Parks, Recreation, and Open Space Plan 2024

Applicant: Whatcom County Parks and Recreation (WCPR)

Summary of Request: Adoption of the 2024 Comprehensive Parks, Recreation, and Open Space plan (CPROS). This Plan guides the County and Whatcom County Parks and Recreation (WCPR) in addressing future park, trail, and recreation needs of the community and progress toward achieving the mission of the Department. It is also prepared in part as a requirement to retain eligibility for certain funding programs by the Washington State Recreation and Conservation Office (RCO).

Location: Countywide.

II. Background

The CPROS is the guiding WCPR document. This Plan guides the County and Whatcom County Parks and Recreation (WCPR) in addressing future park, trail, and recreation needs of the community and progress toward achieving the mission of the Department. The CPROS plan works together and is informed by other planning documents, including the Whatcom County Comprehensive Plan, Whatcom County 6-year and 20-year Capital Improvement Plans, the County's Natural Heritage Plan, and various trail and park master plans.

The plan was last updated in 2015 and adopted by the County Council on February 23, 2016 (Resolution No. 2016-005). The RCO requires the plan to be updated every 6-years to remain eligible for most grant funding opportunities. Because the current CPROS expired in 2021, it must be updated for Whatcom County to remain eligible.

III. CPROS Amendments

The 2024 CPROS is an update to the 2016 version; however, the plan's content has been reorganized to improve readability. For example, the 2024 version consolidates the "Community Profile" chapter into Chapter 2 – Inventory and "Public Involvement" into Chapter 3 – Demand & Need Analysis. Other minor organizational changes have been made, but the changes do not substantially change the plan's content. The following is a summary of the changes by chapter.

Chapter 1 – Introduction maintains the Parks & Recreation Department goals identified in the 2016 plan. Additional content has been included that defines a shared vision of how Department staff collaborates internally, serves the community, and defines Departmental principles that guide their work. The chapter also summarizes how the plan is organized.

Chapter 2 – Inventory has been modified to include a description of Whatcom County and has been edited to include park acquisitions and/or public recreational access agreements (e.g., Aiston Preserve, Glacier Cemetery, and Glacier Restrooms). It also identifies changes in park development status (specifically South Fork Park, which has changed from "undeveloped" to "developed" status) since the

last planning period. Likewise, the Department’s organizational structure has changed and has been modified accordingly (see page 6 of 51).

A major update to the chapter is the identification of lead contamination associated with the Plantation Rifle Range. In 2023, WCPR entered into an Agreed Order with the Washington Department of Ecology. WCPR is in the process of characterizing the extent of contamination and associated past range operations. Whatcom County is required by the Agreed Order to undertake a full clean-up of the site and will undertake planning to determine the character of future operations at the site.

Chapter 3 – Demand & Need Analysis updates county population statistics and adds additional demographic content to better understand the composition and distribution of county residents. Park visitation numbers have been updated for the planning period, demonstrating increased community demand and how events such as COVID-19 impacted visitation across various park facilities. The plan identifies currently adopted Levels of Service but recommends that these metrics be evaluated as to how well they reflect current demand. The plan includes a list of alternative Levels of Service for future consideration (see Table 3.2, page 26 of 51). This chapter also provides a summary of public comments solicited through an online park and recreation survey conducted in 2021 and multiple community meetings held in 2022. Finally, the chapter concludes with a discussion of statewide recreational trends surveyed by the Washington State Recreation and Conservation Office during the most recent update of the Statewide Comprehensive Outdoor Recreation Plan.

The 2016 plan included a detailed table of Level of Service calculations for various recreational elements. The plan indicated that the list was developed in 2008 and was based “...somewhat on standards and studies done by the National Park and Recreation Association and the Washington State Recreation and Conservation Office in the late 1980s and early 1990s.” Because multiple studies have demonstrated that “standard” Levels of Service have limited utility due to the uniqueness of individual communities, these generic Levels of Service standards have been eliminated in the updated plan.

Chapter 4 – Goals & Objectives summarizes the Whatcom County Comprehensive Plan’s planning goals related to parks and recreation. These policies are included in the 2024 CPROS in Appendix D. CPROS Goals and Objectives (page 32 of 51) are identical to those listed in the 2016 plan because they are as relevant, actionable, and consistent with community input received during the planning period.

Chapter 5 – Recommendations & Implementation is a reformatted chapter from the 2016 plan. The previous plan identified recommendations in two different chapters (Chapter 3 - Inventory and Chapter 6 – Demand and Need Analysis), causing confusion. All plan recommendations are now located in the reformatted Chapter 5. The chapter also includes a summary of completed projects and acquisitions since the last plan update and recommendations for the next six and twenty-year planning periods. These recommendations are organized into four categories: System-wide or regional Initiatives, site-specific recommendations, planning initiatives, and acquisitions.

The “System-wide or Regional Initiatives” is a section based on work completed during the plan Inventory and Demand and Need Analysis effort that was not included in the previous plan. Specific initiatives include improving restroom facilities, wayfinding signage, and trail access for users of all ability levels, installing alternative energy system upgrades on park facilities, improving forest management activities, and responding to emerging recreational trends such as electric bikes, etc.

Site-specific recommendations are identified in the recently adopted 2023-2029 Capital Improvement Program for Parks, Trails, and Activity Centers (see Figure 5.1, page 43 of 51), which includes project priorities over the next six years.

Community-focused Planning has been identified as a major focus area for the Department. These efforts include a robust public outreach and stakeholder engagement component that should result in targeted improvements to service delivery and contribute to community resiliency by addressing

broader goals of protecting cultural and natural resources, tourism and economic development, health and wellness, and equity. Specific planning efforts identified in the plan include: the Hovander Homestead Park Master Plan (2024), Whatcom County Comprehensive Plan – Chapter 9 (2025), Lake Whatcom Watershed Forest Management Plan (2024), and Birch Bay Beach Park Phase 1 (2025).

The chapter also includes a list of high-priority land acquisitions. The list is updated from the 2016 plan and adds ongoing efforts with the Whatcom Land Trust to acquire Governor’s Point. The plan removes targeted acquisitions that have been secured since the last plan update, including a waterfront site for restrooms and beach access in Birch Bay and a public trail easement for Lookout/Galbraith Mountain.

The chapter concludes with existing and potential funding sources and strategies that should be considered in implementing the plan’s recommendations.

Chapter 7 – Plan Adoption is a chapter that is pending final County Council adoption. Once acted upon by the Council, the official resolution document will be included here.

IV. Comprehensive Plan Evaluation

The goals and objectives identified in the CPROS are consistent with those of the Comprehensive Plan. The CPROS includes a summary of relevant Whatcom County Comprehensive Plan Goals in Chapter 4. These goals are used as a framework to define further and provide guidance for Department initiatives over the six-year planning period. Additionally, the Comprehensive Plan goals are expanded and made more specific and actionable with CPROS Goals and Objectives that are categorized by facility type, such as Preserves and Open Space, Historic Resources, Trails, Greenways and Scenic Byways, Regional Parks, and Special Use Areas and Facilities.

V. Recommendation

The Parks & Recreation Commission recommended that the County Council adopt the 2024 CPROS plan on November 16th, 2023. The Parks & Recreation Commission reviewed the Planning Commission amendment and recommended that the Council adopt the 2024 CPROS Plan on December 19th, 2023. The Planning Commission recommended approval of the 2024 CPROS plan on December 14, 2023. Planning and Development Services recommends that the County Council adopt the 2024 CPROS plan.

VI. Proposed Findings of Fact and Reasons for Action

It is recommended the County Council adopt the following findings of fact and reasons for action:

1. Whatcom County Parks and Recreation Department has submitted an updated CPROS Plan.
2. A determination of non-significance (DNS) was issued under the State Environmental Policy Act (SEPA) on November 22, 2023. No comments have been received to date.
3. Notice of the subject amendment was submitted to the Washington State Department of Commerce on 12/1/23 for their 60-day review. No comments have been received.
4. The Parks & Recreation Commission reviewed the proposed 2024 CPROS Plan at a public meeting on November 16th, 2023, and recommended the County Council approve the CPROS plan.
5. The Planning Commission reviewed the proposed 2024 CPROS Plan and held a duly noticed public hearing on December 14th, 2023.

6. Following the public hearing, the Planning Commission voted to amend the 2024 CPROS, recommending the WCPR explore public and private partnerships to understand better the feasibility of developing indoor recreation facilities.
7. The Planning Commission unanimously voted to forward the proposed 2024 CPROS to the County Council with a recommendation of approval.
8. The County Council reviewed the proposed 2024 CPROS Plan and held a duly noticed public hearing on the proposed amendments on [REDACTED], 2024.
9. The amendments are consistent with the Comprehensive Plan goals and policies. There are no policies with which these amendments would be inconsistent.

VII. Proposed Conclusions

1. The amendments are in the public interest.
2. The amendments are consistent with the Whatcom County Comprehensive Plan.