



Recommendations for Forest Park Conservancy

The Partnerships Lab

May 2020

About the Institute for Urban Parks

The Central Park Conservancy Institute for Urban Parks, founded in 2013, leverages the Conservancy's history and expertise as a leader in the field of urban park management and public-private park partnerships to empower, inform, connect, and celebrate the individuals and organizations that care for urban parks so that all urban park organizations have the knowledge, leadership, connections, and capacity to create, maintain, and support great public spaces throughout New York City and across the globe.

About the Partnerships Lab

Supported by The JPB Foundation, the Institute developed and launched the Partnerships Lab in spring 2019. The Partnerships Lab is an application-based, time-limited capacity building initiative that provides targeted organizational and strategic support to urban park organizations and agencies in cities around the country. Selected partners work closely with the Institute to evaluate their long-term organizational vision, define a discrete organizational challenge, and develop recommendations and strategies to meet that challenge. In addition, partners attend an urban park leadership workshop retreat in New York City and receive a \$25,000 implementation grant to support their own implementation of the recommendations.

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All photographs by Forest Park Conservancy.

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Executive Summary and Key Recommendations

The Forest Park Conservancy, fresh off its 30th year of operation, has entered a new phase of growth and collaboration. Beginning in 2020, the Conservancy welcomed five additional staff through its new Green Jobs and Internship Training program¹, expanded its partnerships with local public agencies and non-profits, and is in the process of developing, approving, and adopting a new strategic plan.

These significant achievements continue a strong trend of collaboration with public agencies and non-profits, symbolized by the creation and first set of achievements from the Greater Forest Park Conservation Initiative.² The Conservancy is known in Portland as a strong partner, capable of mobilizing volunteers and resources not just to maintain 74 miles of trails in Forest Park, but to help sustain efforts to protect and enhance the greater Forest Park watershed.

¹ <https://forestparkconservancy.org/greenjobs/>

² <https://forestparkconservancy.org/conservancy/greater-forest-park-conservation-initiative/>

Funded through a National Partnerships Lab grant from the Central Park Conservancy Institute for Urban Parks, this report provides observations and recommendations gleaned from review of key documents, several days of site-visits, interviews, trainings, examples from other comparable cities, park systems, and park non-profits, and engagements with staff and leadership. We were asked to help determine the best ways in which the Conservancy can continue to grow to meet the challenges of improving and protecting Forest Park and the larger watershed. We have provided three suggestions that will expand the recognition of the Conservancy's great work and thus grow the Conservancy's capacity to meet the ever-growing needs of Forest Park.

While these suggestions are by no means exhaustive, we hope that they provide guidance as the Conservancy works to finalize and approve its latest strategic plan later in 2020. Given the increasing challenges that public parks, including Portland's own excellent system,³ face in terms of both increased visitation and anticipated large budget cuts, we believe that these recommendations will position the Conservancy to weather the financial storm and continue to serve as an important partner in maintaining Forest Park and the surrounding watershed.

We suggest that the Conservancy pursue three recommendations:

IMPLEMENT A FORMAL MEMBERSHIP PROGRAM

Capitalize on this challenging moment for public parks to build new and expanded connections and an additional revenue stream by engaging the Conservancy's strongest supporters—both past and present—as official members.

Membership programs are a demonstrated benefit and source of funding for hundreds of parks non-profits in cities across the United States. Establishing a membership program builds on the strong support that the Conservancy enjoys from individual, foundation, corporate and government funders, and allows the Conservancy to better "weather the storm" of the economic downturn we now find ourselves in. It also recognizes members for the level of contributions that they give and creates a pipeline for donors to be cultivated, renewed, and upgraded.

- **Recommendation:** Launch a new membership program by fall 2020 to take advantage of the end of the calendar year giving season.

ENHANCE THE CONSERVANCY'S ALREADY SUCCESSFUL VOLUNTEER PROGRAM.

Thanks to dedicated staff who manage the program, the Conservancy benefits from loyal volunteers who work to maintain and improve 74 miles of trails in partnership with the Portland Parks & Recreation. That said, the Conservancy aspires to expand volunteering while minimizing impacts to the already hard-working staff. The challenge of working with new and current volunteers amid the Covid-19 pandemic only highlights changes needed.

To expand the program without overwhelming staff, the Conservancy could create and utilize remote training efforts to enable both experienced and new volunteers to tackle projects working on their own or in small, socially distanced groups. Developing a new volunteer recognition program is a critically important aspect of an enhanced program and should include recognizing levels of contribution annually, much like the recommended member program.

- **Recommendation:** Develop a training program that supports "solo volunteers," a trail zone volunteer program to help Conservancy staff maintain and brush the 74 miles of trails as the Covid-19 pandemic continues.

DOCUMENT THE CONSERVANCY'S SUCCESSES AND SHARE THOSE SUCCESSES WITH OTHERS.

The Forest Park Conservancy should not be the "best kept secret" in Portland. The Conservancy could expand efforts to document successes on an annual (or more frequent) basis and share them by website, social media and through more traditional means including members newsletters, e-newsletters, and earned media.

- **Recommendation:** Develop a "year in review" of events, achievements, and supporters for 2020 and use to promote the Conservancy by website, social media, e-newsletter, member newsletter, and in earned media.



Forest Park Conservancy: Background

The Forest Park Conservancy is a non-profit corporation that works in partnership with the City of Portland Parks and Recreation Department, Verde, Inc., a non-profit workforce development corporation, the West Multnomah Soil and Water Conservation District, and the Columbia Land Trust, among others. The Conservancy has a full-time staff of 7, which includes an internship coordinator to support 4 recently added 12-month interns and a new program focused on workforce development and equity inclusion efforts.

In its most recently completed fiscal year, the Conservancy raised and spent over \$700,000 for critical programming, maintenance, and operations, growing 20 percent over the past five years. The Conservancy's work ranges from educational offerings to visitor engagement to care and maintenance of the 47 miles of soft-surfaced trails in the 5,200-acre Forest Park. Additionally, the Conservancy provides outreach and advice to surrounding communities to adopt "best practices" for appropriate environmental stewardship of privately-owned land.



Green Jobs and Internship Training Program

The Conservancy is catching its collective breadth following several significant moments: the crafting of a landmark memorandum of agreement (MOU) with three other organizations; a generous gift from Portland Gas & Electric to fund the green internship program; the departure of several long-tenured Conservancy staff; and the continued fiscal challenges of the public Portland Parks & Recreation Department, with an annual deficit expected to reach \$6 million in the upcoming fiscal year. While Forest Park accounts for nearly half of Portland's park acreage, the amount spent for all natural areas

management by the Department is less than \$3.38 million. This includes Forest Park (5200 acres), the Powell Butte Nature Park (612 acres) and Oaks Bottom (161 acres).

The Conservancy and its partners provide a considerable amount of resources and support to maintain Forest Park, with additional improvements through a combination of staff and volunteer efforts managed by the Conservancy on an ongoing basis. The organization will finalize and approve a new strategic plan later in 2020. This report is intended to provide both general guidance and specific recommendations for consideration as the Conservancy prepares their new strategic plan.

Key Recommendations for Forest Park Conservancy

IMPLEMENT A FORMAL MEMBERSHIP PROGRAM.

The Conservancy pulls evenly from a variety of sources for revenue to finance its operations, ranging from individuals to corporate support to government grants and has increased revenue 20 percent in the past five years. The Conservancy experienced recent success in funding new programs through growing numbers of corporate and philanthropic donors. While the Conservancy offers a loyalty circle program⁴ for recurring donors, the organization has not created a formal membership program. Based on successful practices⁵ both observed and experienced at other urban park non-profits, we recommend the following:

- Create a tiered membership program with benefits, including recognition on the Conservancy's website, at events, and in newsletters. Ensure that anyone can join via the website, including the current loyalty circle, with options for monthly and annual contributions. As a perk, list members at a specific tier on the website and update annually.
- Name the member levels. Use names for each member level that speak to popular trails, special places or locations in the park, or type of work performed, like "culvert clearer."
- Raise the minimum contribution level of the current loyalty circle, which should also be named. Allow individuals to join automatically on the website, without the requirement to call or email.
- Consider a combination volunteer/donor category. At some of the organizations we've worked with, we found that often volunteers aren't asked to donate OR aren't recognized as both donors and volunteers—they should be acknowledged as both. *(See also recommendation #2: Enhance the already successful volunteer program, p. 5.)*
- Conduct an online survey with current Conservancy supporters to get feedback, generate new ideas, and understand the types of benefits members want, including existing perks, types of events, or potential offerings. Consider sharing the survey with the public via social media platforms for additional insight.
- A repeatable benefit for all members is to share a special or seasonal e-news/newsletter that features a few "in-depth" stories that the Conservancy would make available later via the website or via general e-news.⁶ Potential examples include profiles of staffers, interns, or volunteers, updates on new and completed projects, or connections with park history and present day. The goal is to go beyond the annual "ask" to members and give an inside look at the Conservancy, what it does, and how member support makes it all possible. *(See recommendation #3: Document successes and share them with others, p.7)*

⁴ The Conservancy does have a loyalty program in place that recognizes individuals that give a minimum of \$250 per year for three years. This is arranged with development staff via phone/email.

⁵ The Trail Foundation (<https://thetrailfoundation.org/give/ways-to-give/membership/>), the Emerald Necklace Conservancy (<https://www.emeraldnecklace.org/donate/>) and The Fairmount Park Conservancy (<https://myphillypark.org/support/become-a-member/>)

⁶ This is much like how media outlets are handling content—first 3-7 days for subscribers, then making information available to the broader public web-surfing audience. This way, members are informed first.

- When rolling out the program, assign all recent donors (within 3 years) the named level that they last donated at, thank them for their continued support, and encourage them to upgrade by donating at the next level. For those who have sent a contribution in the last 12 months, simply thank them, remind them of their member tier and benefits, and ask them for referrals.
- Develop short profiles of members for use in promoting the membership program, the Conservancy, and its programs and initiatives.
- Make two “asks” a year. Simplify membership management and hold two membership drives a year—one just before Thanksgiving for the holidays and the other in late May or June. This minimizes mailings and contacts, catches any lapsed donors at 6-month intervals, and avoids bombarding individuals with too many emails or mailings. Consider hiring a mailing house to support this effort.

Recommendation: Launch a new membership program by fall 2020 to take advantage of the end of the calendar year giving season.

ENHANCE THE ALREADY SUCCESSFUL VOLUNTEER PROGRAM.

During the Institute’s staff and leadership interviews in Portland, we heard of developing plans to restructure and expand the volunteer program. The Conservancy has been successful in recruiting volunteers at both weekday “regular” events, as well as corporate events, but is looking to grow the program—finding new volunteers that can expand the Conservancy’s reach—without taxing already limited staff capacity even more. Given that the Covid-19 epidemic stopped most park volunteer activity across the U.S., the program must adjust to the new reality that this will no doubt continue for a year or more. Our specific recommendations include:

- Grow a strong base of volunteer leaders that can support the roles of Conservancy staff (volunteer coordinator, trails manager) to organize, lead, and evaluate groups of volunteers. This volunteer position requires a certain level of training and knowledge about managing groups, ensuring safety of participants and making sure that the work site is left in good condition at the conclusion of the volunteer event.
- Create alternative training methods. Volunteer training does not always need to be in-person or on-site. Use of inexpensive video conference tools such as Zoom or development of “how-to” videos, distributing them via the Conservancy website or YouTube, are two ways to share knowledge. This could replace “in-person” training sessions until the Covid-19 pandemic is better understood and under control.
- Expand the volunteer pool. While the Conservancy has a dedicated core group of volunteers that work nearly every Thursday, we heard recommendations from Conservancy staff that the bulk of volunteer days shift to weekends to widen the potential pool of volunteers. Similar efforts have yielded positive results in many urban parks across the country.⁷ In a growing number of non-profit supported parks, general volunteer workdays occur on Saturdays, while corporate volunteer events take place on weekdays. A successful volunteer plan and schedule allows for adequate staffing, ensuring that sufficient time off for staff working on weekends is built into the weekly or monthly calendar to avoid the potential of burnout.
- Develop a recognition program for volunteers. There are a number of web-based databases and tools⁸ being used by different parks non-profits to track hours and recognize the most dedicated volunteers. Conservancy staff has suggested a similar approach to membership, where volunteering 40 hours a year results in a volunteer title of “*rock hauler*” while volunteering 80 hours a year is a “*culvert clearer*.”⁹ Consider a combination of member/volunteer that is unique to recognize those who give both time and money.
- Identify and assign specialized “zone” volunteers. For committed volunteers who may be more interested in applying technical skills instead of leading volunteer group, consider assigning regular one-on-one volunteers to work with a staff member for a half-day per week or better yet, on their own (with necessary guidance and support). A zone volunteer would be assigned a trail segment for a year, review the segment with staff on a regular basis, and

⁷ A good example of weekend trail volunteering is the work done by the Austin Ridge Riders: <http://www.austinridgeriders.com/programs/trail-stewardship/>

⁸ Popular examples include Give Pulse (<https://www.givepulse.com>) and Volgistics (<https://www.volgistics.com>).

⁹ These volunteer titles/levels are sample ideas. Consider recognition involving some of sort of t-shirt, patch, or pin that could be awarded at an annual volunteer celebration for committed volunteers. One of this report’s authors is a zone volunteer at an urban park and gets invited to the annual “stuff-off” where staff make Thanksgiving-themed dishes and about 10-15 volunteers are invited to attend and be recognized.

be provided a specific checklist to address on each volunteer visit¹⁰). Working together can build institutional knowledge between long-serving staff and volunteers and create bonds that can last for years. This method is used in a growing number of non-profit-managed parks in U.S. cities—pairing 1–2 volunteers with staff working in the same section of the park (or performing a similar task throughout the park) on a weekly basis. This could be a way to address the annual 47-miles of trail brushing that needs to occur each year in Forest Park.

- Use solo volunteers as a key to bridge the Covid-19 pandemic. Taking the concept of the Trailhead Ambassador Program one step further, another way to tackle ongoing maintenance is with solo volunteers. These are experienced and trained volunteers who can work on their own, without accompanying staff. One task well-suited to solo volunteers could be annual brushing needs as well as regular “trail sweeping.”
- We recommend creating a trail steward program, allowing experienced volunteers to “adopt” a portion of the soft-surfaced trails annually, agreeing to follow the stewardship checklist mentioned above, completing the Conservancy trail report form, as well as walking the trail with Conservancy staff on a regular basis¹¹ to assess and review work performed. Using documented techniques, volunteers can work on a solo basis for an agreed to number of hours per year on a specific trail segment or trail miles. For one (or many) examples of such a program, visit the Friends of the Fells website: <https://www.friendsofthefells.org/trailadopter/>

Recommendation: Pilot and implement ways for volunteers to be trained and work independently, given continuing Covid-19 pandemic challenges.

DOCUMENT THE CONSERVANCY’S SUCCESSES AND SHARE THOSE SUCCESSES WITH OTHERS.

As the saying goes in non-profits across the U.S., the Forest Park Conservancy should not be the best kept secret in Portland. The Conservancy could expand efforts to document successes, share them by website, social media, and more traditional means like a member newsletter and earned media.

The Conservancy recently overhauled its website and broadened its efforts in social media, publishing stories via a blog feature on the website, as well as utilizing Facebook, and more recently, Instagram and Twitter. The Conservancy website is currently up to date, with names, bios, and photos of all staff, including the interns who joined the organization in January 2020. This recognition and ongoing maintenance of web and social online tools is great practice and critical to success of the organization’s image and brand. Given that the Conservancy plans to add a development and a communications intern in the coming months, more resources can be applied to keeping the website and social media channels up to date. We recommend that the intern focus specifically on communication, allowing the current Development & Communications Manager to focus the majority of time on fundraising, including the proposed recommendations for a membership program.

In the past, the Conservancy enjoyed some mainstream media coverage, including a package of features in Portland Monthly Magazine¹² in June 2017 (with \$1 from each issue sold donated to the Conservancy.) That said, we heard in interviews with staff and leadership that the Conservancy struggles with a lack of “awareness,” especially vis-à-vis the work performed by the Portland Parks and Recreation Department.

Concurrent with the recommendations for membership and volunteer programs, we recommend an increased focus on documenting successes and sharing those successes via a variety of web, social media, and earned media methods. A few examples we would like to highlight include:

- Create profiles of staff, volunteers, or members on blog. Speaking with staff and interns demonstrates that each individual performs a wide variety of tasks in a given day, week, month, and year. A photo of them in action with a short “interview” could include three or four questions each with a short one-or-two-line response. For example:

Q: What was your day in Forest Park like?

¹⁰ The volunteer segment checklist should include removal (or notification) of trail obstacles (e.g.: fallen trees or rocks), flooded areas, ensure that the segment is properly “brushed” and noting/addressing any vandalism.

¹¹ Interval for staff/volunteer trail work review should be at least annually or more frequently for heavily used trails. Walks can involve a number of regular individual volunteers as a training and learning opportunity.

¹² <https://www.pdxmonthly.com/best-of-the-city/forest-park-guide>

A: We hiked from trailhead X to remove a culvert and perform some restoration.

Q: Was it hard?

A: Yes, we had to haul about 15 wheelbarrows full of gravel from the trailhead to the work site about 1/3 of a mile down the trail. It was muddy and humid.

Q: Who worked the hardest?

A: Jonathan, he made four wheelbarrow round trips with 50 pounds of rock in each trip.

Q: What type of work are you doing tomorrow?

A: We have classroom time; we're talking to a junior high school class about water quality monitoring.

Or, alternatively:

Q: From your point of view, what sets Forest Park apart from other urban parks?

A: It's a massive, mysterious, magical forest right in the city. I don't know if there is anything else like it.

Q: How do you see volunteering with Forest Park Conservancy fulfilling your company's mission?

A: We are passionate about establishing our roots deeply in the communities where we live and work. We are homegrown in Portland, and corporate volunteer days allow us to connect internally as an organization and with our community. Also, it helps support a wonderful non-profit that is all about enhancing and preserving Forest Park. One of our core values is to care for our communities and the environment. These volunteer days help accomplish both.

Q: Funds raised through your sponsorship will go back to Forest Park. What future Forest Park projects are you most excited for?

A: Our customers actually voted on what they'd most like to see in Forest Park, and aside from bathrooms, more identifiable access points were a clear choice.

Q: If you had to (not that we would make you choose), would you pick brushing a trail, searching for trillium and pileated woodpeckers, or visiting Skyline Tavern?

A: Can I do it all?! Forest Park is incredible.

These can be simpler or more complicated—a photo and a brief caption for some, maybe a short video showing a trail ambassador in action on a busy Saturday or Sunday or the summary of an event or a volunteer work party. Each profile should close with a tagline that underscores the importance of members and volunteers. One such example: *"The Forest Park Conservancy is grateful to its xx members that allow to remove culverts and repair trails. Please join them by becoming a member today. Visit www.forestparkconservancy.org/member."*

- Increase frequency as well as the content of Forest Park project summaries—Park visitors, users, and communities love stories and photos of their parks. These project summaries could range from work-in-progress to completed projects. The Conservancy already posts updates on their website, as well as photos from projects in process on Instagram and other social media platforms. These can then be used to review and take stock of accomplishments as well as provide publicity.
- Pursue opportunities to present at professional or industry conferences. The Conservancy should be known more widely for its work in Forest Park and for its collaborations with public and non-profit partners. Building on the increase of interviews, stories and photos mentioned above, the Conservancy could benefit from submitting presentation proposals for professional conferences. These opportunities could increase attention, recognition, and networking with other possible funders and partners. Among the conferences to consider include the City Parks Alliance Greater and Greener International Parks Conference (July 2021), the National Recreation & Parks Association Annual Conference (Oct 2020, October 2021), the Natural Areas Association Annual Conference (October 2020, September 2021), and the American Trails & Outdoor Recreation Conference (May 2021)¹³

¹³ We know that conferences are looking likely to be postponed or cancelled for the balance of 2020 and maybe into 2021, but virtual opportunities are on the rise.

- Host virtual events. Volunteer training isn't the only event that can be done via Zoom or other web-based meetings. Consider virtual tours of a newly re-constructed trail, a "meet the trail ambassadors" session, or host virtual board meetings. Pilot with small, manageable virtual events and learn and adapt from the challenges you encounter.
- Post, publish, and repeat. Given these challenging times, people love to hear good news. With the Covid-19 pandemic limiting access to a growing number of park programs and amenities, trail networks are, by and large, still open and being widely used. With an increase of more visitors walking, running, or biking in Forest Park, many of them may be new to the park and its trails. The Conservancy could leverage this clear and present need for the park by sharing and celebrating its efforts, the strong partnerships with City, Metro and like-minded non-profits like Verde, their dedicated volunteers, and their amazing members, who help fund all of this work. The key is to celebrate and talk about specific successes and what makes them possible, namely support by members and volunteers.

Recommendation: Develop a "year in review" of events, achievements, and supporters for 2020, and use to promote the Conservancy by website, social media, e-newsletter, member newsletter, and in earned media.

Conclusion

As noted, the Forest Park Conservancy has made great strides in collaborating with a wide variety of public agencies, non-profits, volunteers and funders to protect, program, and restore Forest Park and the broader Forest Park ecosystem. It has done so through increases in funding, collaborative agreements, and shared knowledge. We want to see the Conservancy expand its efforts and our recommendations focus on expanding capacity through increased revenue, sharing lessons learned with other partnerships looking to do the same, amplifying the work already completed, and securing funding for the work that is yet to come.