



City of Seattle

Office of City Auditor

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City of Seattle Office of City Auditor

Parks Public Involvement Audit

Phase 2: Case Study of Loyal Heights Playfield Renovation

April 12, 2007

Executive Summary

City Councilmember David Della asked the Office of City Auditor to review the Seattle Department of Parks and Recreation's (Parks) public involvement practices due to his concerns about controversies in the spring of 2006 regarding Parks projects.

In the first phase of our review (online at: <http://www.seattle.gov/audit/2006.htm#parksprocess>), we examined current Parks processes for public involvement, and we polled Seattle residents on their views.

In this second phase of our review, we examined the chronology and issues related to a recent Parks project at the Loyal Heights Playfield. Overall, we found that Parks complied with the elements of their public involvement policy. However, we found a number of issues with the manner in which these steps were followed that adversely affected the public involvement process at Loyal Heights. These included administrative errors, poor facilitation, lack of clarity, and opportunities lost. Based on our fieldwork, we do not believe that there was any malicious action or intentional deception by Parks.

We have identified seven lessons learned from the Loyal Heights case study. We collaborated with Parks to develop an action plan with measures for improving Parks public involvement in three areas:

- Communication with the Community
- Public Involvement Advocacy
- Rigidity of the Process.

We also suggested that the Executive and City Council rethink the process for reconsidering Parks' decisions, encouraging development of a process that is predictable and more transparent to citizens.

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This document can be found on our website at:
<http://www.seattle.gov/audit/2007.htm#parksprocessphase2>

If you have any questions about this document, please contact the City of Seattle Office of City Auditor at 206/233-3801.

Background

Public Involvement Audit

The mission of Seattle's Department of Parks and Recreation (Parks) is to work with all citizens to be good stewards of our environment, and provide safe and welcoming opportunities to play, learn, contemplate and build community. To accomplish these ends, Parks solicits and considers public input into any decision that, in the judgment of the Parks Superintendent, will substantially modify the use or appearance of any of their properties. To ensure that this is done consistently and fairly, in 1999 Parks adopted a formal public involvement policy (amended in 2002 and 2006) for proposals to acquire property, initiate funded capital projects, or make changes to a park or facility.¹

City Councilmember David Della asked the Office of City Auditor to review Parks public involvement practices due to his concerns about recent controversies concerning Parks projects. We worked, in collaboration with Parks, to evaluate how well these community involvement processes have worked in the past and to identify possible ways for Parks to improve them.

In the first phase of our review (online at: <http://www.seattle.gov/audit/2006.htm#parksprocess>), we examined current Parks' processes for public involvement, and we polled Seattle residents on their views.

For the second phase of our review, we planned to include a case study of a recent Parks project. We chose to examine the chronology and issues related to the Loyal Heights Playfield. Loyal Heights had been a controversial project, and it had generated the most comments in our citizen audit questionnaire during the first phase of our audit.

We hope that this review will help the City Council and public gain a better understanding of how Parks engages the community in their decision-making processes, and will lead to improvements in Parks public involvement efforts.

Loyal Heights Playfield Renovation

The Loyal Heights complex is located at 2101 NW 77th St. in the Crown Hill section of Ballard. The complex is 6.7 acres (about 300,000 square feet). A little less than half of the complex (125,000 square feet) is used for athletic fields. The rest of complex includes a 16,000 square foot community center, 64,000 square feet of flat lawn and playground, and several sloped buffer areas, some of which are used for community sledding. The complex does not have any dedicated, on-site parking. The Loyal Heights playfield was created in 1942 "for park and playground purposes".²

¹ Parks' Public Involvement Policy can be found at <http://www.seattle.gov/parks/Publications/policy/PIP.pdf>

² from the files of Don Sherwood, 1916-1981, Park Historian [View the Don Sherwood History Files](#)

In the late 1990s, representatives from Parks, the Seattle School District, organized sports groups, and other stakeholders developed a Joint Athletic Facilities Development Program (JAFDP) that identified lighted athletic fields to be improved to meet the significant citywide demand for increased field use. The original JAFDP was approved by the City Council in 1999.

The plans to resurface Loyal Heights began in February 2000, with staff analysis and mention in the Seattle Park and Recreation Plan 2000. The plan called for consideration of synthetic turf at selected fields, including Loyal Heights, in order to increase playable hours on existing fields to meet growing demand.

Below is a chronology of the Loyal Heights project from February 2000 to March 2006. It is also available on our website at <http://www.seattle.gov/audit/2007.htm#parksprocessphase2>. The web version includes links to the supporting documentation for each item in the timeline. A one page version of this chronology is attached as Appendix A.

February 4, 2000

Parks staff identified Loyal Heights for conversion to synthetic turf, citing poor field condition that led to decreasing use of the field. Parks anticipated doubling the field's programming capacity by installing synthetic turf at an estimated cost of \$1,786,000.

June 19, 2000

City Council Resolution 30181 adopted the Seattle Park and Recreation Plan 2000, in which action plan item #SF9 directed Parks to "Consider the conversion of selected fields to artificial turf to increase scheduling capacity at locations such as the Lower Woodland baseball field, and Brighton and Loyal Heights Playfields."

August 4, 2000

Loyal Heights was included in Planning Level Cost Estimates in the first draft of the JAFDP update with scope: "convert field surface to synthetic", backstops and goals. Estimated budget: \$2,204,000.

The Loyal Heights Playfield Improvements project was included in subsequent drafts of the JAFDP issued in April, May, and June, 2001. All cited conversion to synthetic surface.

July – November 2000

Citizens reviewed and voted on the Pro Parks Levy.

July 10, 2000 City Council Resolution 30185 stated that the Loyal Heights project would "upgrade and improve play surfaces and field amenities. \$2.062M". Later, the Park Board, in an October 2006 letter to the Mayor, described this wording as an error.

November 2000, Seattle voters approved the \$198,200,000 Pro Parks Levy.

August – October 2001

Parks conducted a Citywide public process for the JAFDP update, including three public workshops (at Bitter Lake, Miller, and Jefferson Community Centers).

October 2002

The City Council did not adopt the JAFDP update. Instead, they passed Council Resolution 30530 which called for "a thorough public involvement process for specific improvements that increase the playing capacity of athletic fields." At this point, the Loyal Heights project had already been approved and funded in the Pro Parks levy.

December 2002

Parks published the JAFDP 2002 Update listing Loyal Heights Playfield as a funded project with proposed JAFDP improvements including converting its field surface to synthetic turf, and replacing its field lights, backstops and goals.

The document indicated that Parks would conduct a public involvement process to determine the final scope and any mitigation measures.

December 2002 – March 2005

No formal communication occurred between Parks and Loyal Heights neighbors regarding the playfield improvement project. (Parks officials stated that for Pro Parks Levy projects, it has been typical to engage the public in the year when the funding becomes available and the planning and design process is ready to start.)

March 1, 2005

First Community Open House. The Parks flyer for the meeting did not mention synthetic

turf. Parks meeting notes reflect that during the meeting Parks staff indicated that the City Council approved the field conversion to synthetic turf listed in the 2002 JAFDP,(In fact, the City Council had not approved the JAFDP update, see October 2002).

March – June, 2005

Parks held community meetings at the Loyal Heights Community Center on March 1, April 26, and June 14. A total of about 150 people attended at least one of the three meetings.

Project Advisory Team (PAT) meetings were held on June 1, June 13, and June 22 to discuss playfield improvements.

March, 2005 – present

Some Loyal Heights neighbors organized in opposition to synthetic turf and shared information on a web site they created, NoPlasticGrass.com.

July-August, 2005

Board of Park Commissioners conducted public process:

- July 14 Public Hearing – Parks staff described community meetings as contentious. Public testimony was primarily opposed to synthetic turf. A decision agenda was prepared by Parks staff.
 - July 28 Park Board voted (3-1) to support staff recommendation to convert field to synthetic turf.
 - August 3 City Council Parks, Neighborhoods, and Education Committee urged Parks to reconsider conversion to synthetic turf.
 - August 12 Parks Superintendent Ken Bounds upheld planned renovation and announced funding for new lights.
-

October 2, 2005

Parks completed Environmental Checklist and issued a Determination of Non-Significance, citing no probable significant adverse impact.

October – December, 2005

City Council Budget Process:

- Councilmember Della asked the City Council to consider providing direction to Parks concerning the Loyal Heights playfield, or to pursue alternative locations.
- October 19, 2005 Issue introduced to City Council Budget Committee.
- November 3, 2005 Discussion at Budget Committee. Council staff noted that the City Council did not adopt the JAFDP and stated that references to turf in the Pro Parks Levy were unclear. The Parks Superintendent indicated that Soundview was not an alternative because it was not named as a Pro Parks Levy project.

- November 10, 2005 The Park Board learned that Councilmember Della rescinded his proposal to cut Levy funding for Loyal Heights.
-

December 2005 – May 2006

Hearing Examiner Process:

- Four community members challenged Parks' Determination of Non-Significance (DNS).
- Three traffic studies were considered.
- City Hearing Examiner affirmed the DNS with certain limits on construction activities and high attendance events.

Lessons Learned and Opportunities for Improvement

Overall, we found that Parks complied with the elements of their public involvement policy. Three public meetings were held, and Parks sent notifications of the meetings to neighbors within 300 feet of the Loyal Heights Park. A Project Advisory Team (PAT) was formed as prescribed in the Parks' Pro Parks Levy communication plan, and three PAT meetings were held. In addition, the Board of Park Commissioners conducted a public hearing on Loyal Heights before making its recommendation on the project to the Parks Superintendent. The City Council reviewed the Loyal Heights project in November of 2005, and ultimately agreed to fund the project as recommended by Parks.

However, we found a number of issues with the manner in which these steps were followed that adversely affected the public involvement process at Loyal Heights. These included administrative errors, poor facilitation, lack of clarity, and opportunities lost. Based on our fieldwork, we do not believe that there was any malicious action or intentional deception by Parks.

We have identified seven lessons learned from the Loyal Heights case study. These lessons fall into three categories which may represent opportunities for improving Parks public involvement:

- Communication with the Community
- Public Involvement Advocacy
- Rigidity of the Process

Communication with the Community

Loyal Heights Lessons Learned:

1. **27 Month Gap in Communication** - For over two years, Parks did not inform community members about plans for synthetic turf at Loyal Heights. Our chronology indicates that there were no formal communications from Parks to external parties regarding the Loyal Heights playfield project between December 2002 and March 2005. Parks staff explained that this was a busy time in the implementation of the Pro Parks Levy projects, with many capital projects underway simultaneously. The Loyal Heights project was not scheduled to begin until 2005, and Parks staff indicated that they did not focus on public notification regarding the project until that time. Parks officials explained that Parks is not staffed at a level that allows assignment of a planner until funding is available for a project. However, within this 27 month period, there were potential opportunities to raise awareness in the community about field renovation plans.

Several Loyal Heights neighbors suggested that Parks could have better leveraged the ongoing communication at the Loyal Heights Community Center by sharing project information with the community through the Community Center Advisory Council or through posted signs at the site.

2. **Omission of the words “Synthetic Turf” from Pro Parks Levy Text** – Language regarding plans for synthetic turf at Loyal Height that was omitted from the Pro Parks Levy and from announcements to the community contributed to neighbors’ concerns about the public involvement process.

In the text of the Pro Parks Levy legislation, the description of the Loyal Heights Playfield renovation project read, “Upgrade and improve play surfaces and field amenities.” It did not specify synthetic turf. Synthetic turf was indicated for Loyal Heights in the JAFDP update that was finalized by Parks in December 2002.³ However, specific language about synthetic turf was not included in the Pro Parks levy language that was approved by Seattle voters in November 2000.

Parks staff said the omission was an administrative error. “Synthetic turf” was similarly not included in the levy language describing the other Pro Park levy projects for which synthetic turf was planned.⁴ Also, invitations from Parks for the first public meeting regarding the project did not include language indicating plans for synthetic turf.

3. **Tensions Among Groups** – Communication errors and poor facilitation of public meetings contributed to tensions among stakeholder groups at Loyal Heights.

For neighbors and other community stakeholders who attended the first public meeting regarding the Loyal Heights playfield renovation, on March 1, 2005, many were surprised to learn of the plan to replace the field surface with synthetic turf. According to the Loyal Heights neighbors, their surprise was due, in large part to the 27 month communication gap and the omission of the term “synthetic turf” from Parks’ materials. The neighbors’ surprise about plans for synthetic turf affected the tone of the three public meetings.

The briefing document for the July 14, 2005 meeting of the Board of Park Commissioners indicated that the “three community meetings were contentious, and divided between community members who preferred to leave the athletic field as grass and those who preferred a synthetic field replacement.” Also, Parks staff, Loyal Heights neighbors, and sports advocates all reported disappointment

³ The City Council did not adopt the JAFDP update. Alternatively, they passed [CR 30530](#) which called for "[a thorough public involvement process for specific improvements that increase the playing capacity of athletic fields](#)" (Section 6).

⁴ Fields including those at Genesee, West Seattle Stadium, Magnuson, and Georgetown were/will be resurfaced with synthetic turf with Pro Parks funds. The levy language does not indicate synthetic turf for any of these sites. The levy description for Georgetown, for example, was, “Improve landscaping and field surface.”

to us that the process seemed to ‘pit neighbor against neighbor’. Some process participants indicated that the lack of professional facilitation was a key contributor to the tension expressed between stakeholder groups.

Public Involvement Advocacy

Loyal Heights Lessons Learned:

4. **Reconsideration Period** – Parks officials indicated that the Parks Superintendent revisited the Parks staff recommendation regarding the field surface and ultimately concurred with the staff recommendation. This process was conducted informally, and the project stakeholders did not receive clear information about the reconsideration period.

The Pro Parks levy ordinance provides the Parks Superintendent with the authority to determine the scope of the levy projects based on public input and staff recommendations.⁵ In the case of Loyal Heights, staff reported to the Superintendent the concerns that they heard voiced at the spring 2005 community meetings regarding the plans for synthetic turf. The Superintendent indicated that, in response to the concerns, he was open to considering an alternative to the staff recommendation.

Parks officials indicated that this reconsideration period occurred between May and August 2005. A Loyal Heights neighbor reported that he had participated in two private meetings with the Superintendent in May and June 2005. During those meetings, the Superintendent indicated that he would revisit the staff recommendation for synthetic turf, according to the neighbor. However, Parks officials noted that the Parks project staff did not share this information about the Superintendent’s reconsideration with the other process participants.

We found no documentary evidence of a formal process or public outreach for this reconsideration period. Parks officials indicated that during the reconsideration period they were open to any information from the community that might “change (their) mind” about resurfacing. Parks officials also indicated that they received hundreds of communications in favor of and opposed to the artificial turf during the process.

⁵ Section 3.B.1. of the Pro Parks Levy Ordinance (#120024) states:
“The scope of each project and program will be determined by the Superintendent after considering the descriptions in City of Seattle Resolution 30185, public input, and staff recommendations. Projects or programs may be deleted only by a three-fourths (3/4) vote of the City Council after considering the recommendations of the Mayor and the oversight committee established in Section 5.”

However, information was not formally solicited from the community or from other stakeholders. We found evidence of a contradictory message conveyed from Parks staff to the community during the reconsideration period. During the reconsideration period, at the June 22, 2005 PAT meeting, Parks staff indicated that “the decision to convert the field to a synthetic surface came from the Pro Parks Levy and the JAFDP, and that decisions about the field surface were beyond the scope of the PAT.”⁶ Citizen members of the PAT countered that the Superintendent had indicated that the resurfacing was “not a done deal” and asked that the resurfacing issue be considered by the PAT. However, the June 22, 2005 meeting was the third and final PAT meeting, and no further discussion of the surfacing decision occurred

The reconsideration period concluded with an August 12, 2005 letter from the Parks Superintendent to interested citizens. In the letter the Superintendent indicated that, after careful review of each issue the community had raised, he concurred with the recommendation of Parks staff and Park Board, and he directed his staff to proceed with the project.

Issue for Further Consideration by Executive and City Council

The reconsideration period for the Loyal Heights project was informal, unclear, and not well-publicized. While this audit case study examined only one Parks project, we believe that this issue is worthy of further review by the Executive and City Council.

To improve future Parks public involvement processes, we would encourage the Executive and City Council to develop a reconsideration process that is predictable and more transparent to citizens. Parks officials have suggested that one possible way to address this would be to amend the Parks public involvement policy to include a process for a formal reconsideration period.

Rigidity of the Process

Loyal Heights Lessons Learned:

5. **Facilitation** – The public involvement process at Loyal Heights would have benefited from professional facilitation. Both those stakeholders who favored synthetic turf and those who opposed it expressed concerns about the facilitation

⁶ See minutes from PAT meeting 06/22/05
<http://www.seattle.gov/audit/docs/LoyalHeightsPATsummary06-22-05.pdf>

at the public meetings. Process participants also reported that the public meetings were hampered by inadequate public address equipment, debates over the use of the terms, “plastic” versus “artificial” or “synthetic”, and unproductive meeting structures.

Parks officials stated that at the time of the Loyal Heights public meetings, they were concerned about meeting project budget and schedules targets. They indicated that City departments are under constant pressure to spend capital dollars expeditiously in order to avoid cost overruns, and noted that public process is not generally specified as a cost element for a capital project. They indicated that these concerns might have affected their ability to take additional time to rethink the process and perhaps to apply some additional resources for facilitation.

It should be noted that facilitation is an area in which Parks has recently made process improvements. The August 2006 revision of the Parks public involvement policy led by the Board of Park Commissioners encourages Parks to consider professional facilitation for controversial projects.⁷ And Parks has begun to put this into practice. In November 2006, a professional facilitator was hired for a public meeting at Loyal Heights to discuss the Illumination Management Plan. Several Loyal Heights neighbors reported to us that this improved the quality and tone of the public meeting.

6. **Project Advisory Team (PAT) Minutes** – Input from the Loyal Heights PAT was not completed and/or finalized in time for consideration by the Park Board and other decision-makers.

The PAT for Loyal Heights was comprised, as prescribed by the Pro Parks Levy Communication Plan, of representatives from Parks staff and various stakeholder groups (see Loyal Heights PAT member bios <http://www.seattle.gov/parks/pro Parks/projects/LoyalHeightsPAT.pdf>). In 2005, they held meetings on June 1, 13, and 22. All of the PAT members that we spoke with, including representatives of Parks staff, organized sports, and the Loyal Heights neighbors, indicated that there were issues getting the PAT minutes completed and approved.

Some PAT members indicated to us that they were disappointed that the Board of Park Commissioners did not have an opportunity to read the minutes of the PAT meetings while deliberating the Loyal Heights playfield issue. PAT minutes were not completed until after the July 28, 2005 Park Board vote on the project. Commissioners received draft minutes of the first two PAT meetings and a verbal

⁷ Parks Public Involvement Policy as amended August, 2006

(http://www.seattle.gov/parks/projects/public_involvement_policy.htm) states, “If the project may generate or has generated controversy, or if it appears there may be disagreement about it within the community, Parks may at any point in the process hire an outside facilitator to conduct a meeting. (They may also decide to hire a facilitator for later meetings, if disagreement arises during the public review process.)”

summary from Parks staff of the final PAT meeting. None of the three sets of minutes were approved by the PAT and are, as of this writing, still considered draft.

Staff availability, a tight timeframe, and lack of agreement on content all contributed to the inability to finalize these documents. Although the role of the PAT is advisory, a more accurate and complete accounting of the input from the PAT could have been helpful to the Park Board and other decision-makers.

7. **Community Center Staff** – The public involvement process might have benefited from more communication between Parks planning staff and the Parks staff at the Loyal Heights Community Center.

The Community Center Coordinator for Loyal Heights indicated that she was not included in planning meetings or PAT meetings for the project. Community Center staff members are a primary, frontline contact between Parks and the community. In the absence of any coordination with the Parks planning staff, Loyal Heights Community Center staff adopted a “neutral stance” on the resurfacing issue. However, this lack of coordination and communication between Parks planning and Community Center staff resulted in an opportunity lost to gain and deliver information through these frontline contacts.

Proposed Action Plan

This action plan addresses issues identified by the audit. Some of the action items are intended to improve Parks' overall public involvement process, while others address improving the relationship between Parks and the Loyal Heights neighbors.

Executive and City Council

As discussed in Lesson Learned #4 above, the reconsideration period for the Loyal Heights project was informal, unclear, and not well-publicized. While this audit case study examined only one Parks project, we believe that this issue is worthy of further review by the Executive and City Council.

To improve future Parks public involvement processes, we would encourage the Executive and City Council to develop a reconsideration process that is predictable and more transparent to citizens. Parks officials have suggested that one possible way to address this would be to amend the Parks public involvement policy to include a process for a formal reconsideration period.

Seattle Parks and Recreation

This action plan represents a consensus between the Office of City Auditor and Seattle Parks and Recreation. A number of these action items were developed based on suggestions received from the community stakeholders at Loyal Heights (Appendix C contains a list of suggestions for improvement from Loyal Heights neighbors).

These new action items are in addition to the 16 action items included in our Parks Public Involvement Phase 1 audit. A report on the status of those 16 previous action items is included in this report as Appendix B.

Communication with the Community

Parks' Action Items:

1. **Provide More Visibility to Field Schedules** -- Parks will post weekly field schedules for Loyal Heights on its website as a "pilot" initiative.

The Loyal Heights neighbors indicated that they would like more visibility over field schedules. They would like to be able to plan personal activities with a better understanding of what parking conditions might be like, for example.

Currently, Parks' field scheduling office faxes the field schedules to the Loyal Heights Community Center for posting on the bulletin board. Parks has agreed to post weekly field schedules on the Parks website for Loyal Heights as a "pilot" initiative. They will also explore the possibility of posting schedules for all Parks fields on the web. Parks indicated that field schedule information is subject to change and can change frequently. This "pilot" initiative at Loyal Heights will help Parks assess the feasibility of providing current, accurate field scheduling information for all Parks fields.

2. **Provide Customer Service Information on Signage** -- Parks will provide important customer service information (including the phone number to request that lights be turned off when a field is not in use) on permanent signs at the Loyal Heights fields. Parks will explore the possibility of posting this information at other fields as well.

Public Involvement Advocacy

Parks' Action Items:

3. **Public Involvement Advocacy Improvements** -- Parks will closely examine the Mayor's new customer service initiative to see whether it will offer Parks tools to help citizens resolve issues and gain access to information about Parks projects.

Rigidity of the Process

Parks' Action Items

4. **Further Engage Community Center Staff in Parks Planning and Public Involvement:** Parks has updated their planning documents and practices to ensure that Community Center coordinators and other staff are included in the development of the Public Involvement Plans for Parks projects. For controversial projects, special coordination meetings will now be held between Parks planning and operational staff.

Appendix B: Parks' Public Involvement Phase 1 Action Plan

This action plan was developed in September 2006 as part of the Phase 1 Parks' Public Involvement Audit. It represents a consensus among the Office of City Auditor, the Department of Finance, and Seattle Parks and Recreation. The status of each item is indicated below.

Reaching Hard-to-Reach Communities

Parks Action Items:

1. **Use Census Information:** Parks will use the results of a recent Parks report, Census 2000: A Demographic Overview of Seattle's Communities, prepared pursuant to Seattle Parks and Recreation Plan 2000, to determine the unique populations in various Parks service areas in order to identify and reach out appropriately to those populations.

Status: Underway. Parks has convened an executive team in response to the audit and to the Mayor's Executive Order and is in the planning stage of this work.

2. **Consultant Study of Unique Populations:** Parks plans to hire a consultant to examine unique populations in service areas and make recommendations about how to do effective outreach to each, based on study of cultural customs, traditions, and relationships with government. The results of the study would bring benefit all City departments. An example of a similar study performed in Boston can be found at:

http://www.barrfoundation.org/usr_doc/Immigrant_Engagement_in_Public_Open_Space_final.pdf

Status: Funding request was denied by the Department of Finance.

3. **New E-Mail Lists:** Parks staff have developed new e-mail lists that include the chairs of the city neighborhood councils, and are developing e-mail lists of contact people for community organizations, in an effort to increase participation in Parks processes, especially in neighborhoods where participation is sparse.

Status: Underway.

4. **Citywide Effort on Public Engagement:** Parks is participating in a citywide effort on public engagement, coordinated by the Office for Civil Rights that will include recommendations on translations and other efforts to reach out to underserved populations.

Status: Underway. Parks is continuing to participate in this initiative led by the Office for Civil Rights.

5. **Citywide Effort on Translation:** Parks is participating in a citywide effort now under way, led by the Office of Policy and Management, to draft and

implement a policy and procedure to guide translation and interpretation by city departments.

Status: Underway. See #1 above.

- 6. Outreach to Organizations Serving Unique Populations:** Parks will, after identifying the unique populations in various service areas, search for organizations representing these populations, and will contact them to let them know of Parks happenings in their sectors of the city.

Status: Underway. Parks is currently searching out organizations that represent unique populations.

Using Tools and Technology for Better Public Involvement

Parks Action Items:

- 7. Create E-mail Groups:** Parks has already begun to expand and improve upon its e-mail lists, and plans a citywide survey that will invite citizens to sign up for e-mail groups for which they indicate interest: a group for each of the city's 13 neighborhood districts and a group for each major interest area (open space, athletics, etc.). Parks will post an invitation on its web home page, inviting citizens to sign up for one or more of the above-mentioned e-mail lists. These lists, along with contacts with city neighborhood councils and community organizations, will help with outreach for planning processes.

Status: Some are completed (generic community organizations, neighborhood district councils); others are underway.

- 8. Web-casting Park Board Meetings:** Parks plans to webcast Park Board meetings and will be testing this at an upcoming meeting in the Boards and Commissions Room at City Hall, which also has the benefit of access to a "listen-line." Parks staff are currently exploring technical options. Some of the options would cost less than the average \$5,600 per year paid in overtime to the Park Board staff person to prepare detailed minutes.

Status: Working with Seattle Channel. Parks piloted this approach at a December 2006 meeting of the Park Board.

- 9. Electronic Polling Devices for Selected Meetings:** Parks will test electronic handheld devices that "poll" meeting attendees on preferences, tabulate results instantly, and generate a report. These devices can be useful to draw out people not used to talking in a public setting and to gather "outlying" opinions. Parks will also consider use of the Zoomerang web survey tool for planning processes that cross neighborhoods and areas of interest.

Status: Parks has not yet had occasion to use the devices, but will consider them as a part of their public meeting tool-kit.

10. Newspaper Ad to Announce Meetings: The Park Board has asked the Mayor to look into the possibility of a weekly paid ad in one or both of the daily newspapers, announcing all City-sponsored meetings and events taking place in the upcoming week. Parks found examples of other cities that do this. Should the City decide to do this, there would be a budget impact in the future.

Status: Parks has not yet followed up on this.

11. Scrolling Information on Seattle Channel: Parks will speak with Seattle Channel staff to investigate the possibility of a “crawler” tape running along the bottom of the viewer’s screen, much like CNN and other news channels do, with pertinent information about upcoming meetings.

Status: Parks has had an initial conversation with Seattle Channel and plans to follow up.

Maintaining the Integrity of the Process

Parks Action Items

12. Redesigned Public Involvement Tracking Tools: Parks has created a new template specifically to accommodate all of the written information the revised Public Involvement Policy requires in preparation for each public meeting: project history (source); factors that may have an impact on it (safety, City Council actions, voter-approved measures, prior adopted plans); an explanation of how decisions are made and how public input will be incorporated in them; how “majority” opinions will figure in decisions; details of the process to date on the project; a reminder that input is welcome in any form; details of whatever process(es) led to an adopted plan that was the source of the project (e.g., neighborhood plan, park master plan); and a summary of outreach efforts for the current meeting. This will be used in conjunction with a checklist for each project to identify completion of each element in a project’s Public Involvement Plan. These materials will be distributed at public meetings and made available on the web.

Status: In use for all projects.

13. New Position to Support Parks’ Public Involvement Processes: Parks is requesting the creation of a new position to support public involvement activities. The responsibilities for this position would include:

- Ensuring that elements of the public involvement process for each Parks project are completed in compliance with the Parks’ public involvement policy.
- Ensuring that information about public involvement for each public process (including information available on the web) is appropriate and of consistent quality.

- Ensuring that Parks staff have access to and utilize appropriate public involvement tools including e-mail lists, outside facilitators, translators, desktop publishing support, etc.
- Supporting Parks' efforts to reach hard-to-reach communities.

Status: Funding request was denied by the Department of Finance.

14. Expand Notification through E-Mail. A 2004 study sponsored by the City's Department of Information Technology indicated that 83% of Seattleites have access to the Internet, and 83% have a personal computer. In addition, the City is looking for efficiencies in paper use, staff time, and postage costs, so Parks will rely heavily on e-mail and will take extra steps to reach populations who do not have it.

Status: Please see #7 above.

15. Outreach for Citywide Planning Processes: In the revisions to the Public Involvement Policy approved by the Park Board on August 24, Parks added sections that address outreach for planning processes (the original policy spoke only to funded capital projects). These planning processes generate records of desired improvements by various constituencies, including neighborhood groups and user groups—often long before any of those improvements is funded as a project. Parks believes that this will provide citizens with an opportunity for public input earlier in the life of a project.

Status: Discussions are underway about public outreach for the Strategic Business Plan, Parks' vehicle for addressing issues resulting from the end of the Pro Parks Levy.

16. More Information About How Decision Are Made: Included in the revisions to the Public Involvement Policy recommended by the Park Board is language that calls for the presentation of a variety of information in documents that Parks staff present at public meetings and publish on the web. It calls specifically for:

- a. A history of the project that includes all factors that may have an impact on the nature and issue areas open to public participation including: safety issues, City Council actions, Mayoral priorities, voter-approved measures, inclusion in an adopted plan and the public process that led to that plan, the project's budget limitations, and regional need;
- b. An explanation of how decisions are made during the process, including how Parks uses information from the public and how it affects decisions, and how "majority" opinions will figure in decisions;
- c. A detailed description of the process to date, including milestones and decisions made to date and the number of people who attended previous meetings, so that the public is "caught up" on decisions possibly made at meetings they did not attend;

- d. A reminder that written, telephoned, and e-mail comments bear equal weight with attendance at a meeting;
- e. A detailed description of the public process that led to the plan that is the source of the project;
- f. A summary of outreach efforts for the current meeting;
- g. The project budget (amount and sources) and how it may limit the project scope;
- h. The timeline for the process;
- i. The points at which comment has been/will be invited;
- j. If applicable, the elements of the project that are open to public comment (e.g., required elements such as ADA-accessibility elements, are not negotiable; levy projects have been approved by the voters and adopted by ordinance); and
- k. A statement acknowledging that even if there is disagreement within the community, Parks will need to make a decision and move forward on the project, and that some participants may not be satisfied with the decision.

Status: All this information is now included in the Public Involvement Plan for each project.

Appendix C: Scope and Methodology

This audit was conducted in accordance with Government Auditing Standards, as prescribed by the Comptroller General of the United States.

Scope

This audit work was divided into two phases. Phase 1 was concluded with a report published in September 2006 (on the web at: <http://www.seattle.gov/parks/Publications/policy/PIP.pdf>)⁸, and Phase 2 concludes with this document published in the spring of 2007.

The Phase 1 document focused on internal Parks processes (Audit Objective A below) Phase 2 was originally focused on Audit Objectives B and C below.

Audit Objectives

Objective A: Parks' Processes. Determine the adequacy and effectiveness of Parks' internal processes that support public involvement. Methodology included incorporation of citizen input, coordination with Board of Parks Commissioners and Parks' staff. It also included examination and testing of Parks' public involvement process elements such as: staffing, management oversight, supporting tools and systems, and processes for collecting and communicating public input.

Objective B: Public Involvement Policy. Determine the appropriateness and effectiveness of Parks' current public involvement policy. Methodology will include incorporation of citizen input, coordination with Board of Park Commissioners and Parks' staff, and information-gathering from other jurisdictions. This will include ideas already generated by Parks staff and Park

⁸ **Note About Phase 1 Audit Firefox Issue:** We have now concluded that the Phase 1 Parks Public Involvement Audit questionnaire results are final. Due to a browser problem that may have affected some responses, we encouraged respondents to contact us by October 31, 2006 to verify that their questionnaire results are complete. Two respondents contacted us. We reviewed their results, which were accurate. We concluded that this potential browser problem did not affect the Phase 1 results.

The potential problem was limited to respondents that use Firefox as their Internet browser and who did not initially complete the mandatory zip code question. These conditions may have created a problem with the data for questions that indicate "check all that apply," by dropping some of the respondent's check marks. This problem was called to our attention by a citizen questionnaire-respondent. We reported the problem to Zoomerang, the company that makes the software tool that we used to develop the questionnaire. They indicated that the issue is unique to the Firefox browser's security settings. To estimate the potential extent of the data problem we considered that approximately 12% of the page views on the City's website are performed using Firefox, and assumed that 25% of Firefox users missed the mandatory zip code question. This would result in an estimated exposure risk of 3% for incomplete data on questions 3, 4, 6, 7, 9, 19, and 20.

Board members. It will also include a review and reporting on the detailed comments and letters offered by citizens during Phase 1.



Objective C: Case Studies.

Develop a “lessons-learned” report based on a detailed case study of public involvement for a selected recent Parks’ project. We will begin with a case study of the Loyal Heights playfield project, and possibly include additional case studies.

Aerial photo of Loyal Heights playfield from Parks’ website at:
<http://www.seattle.gov/parks/proparks/projects/loyalheightsplayfield.htm#overview>

Methodology

Objective B

Note: In planning the Phase 2 audit, we determined that the majority of Objective B had been addressed through Parks’ efforts concurrent to our Phase 1 audit, which are described below:.

Benchmarking: Parks performed a survey of other jurisdictions on behalf of the Board of Park Commissioners in the fall of 2006. They interviewed staff in Denver, Vancouver B.C., Baltimore, Portland, and found that, among these cities, Seattle has the most thorough and extensive public involvement policy.

Policy Improvements: In August, 2006 the Board of Park Commissioners amended Parks public involvement policy adding additional requirements in concurrence with our Phase 1 recommendations. We observed two Parks public

meetings, in October and November 2006. We noted that the process changes required by the amended public involvement policy had been implemented for those meetings.

It should be noted that the public involvement policy as amended now has 16 process elements and at least 44 sub-elements. With any process at this level of detail, there can be a potential for bureaucratic oversight. Parks' Action Items #12 (Redesigned Public Involvement Tracking Tools) and #13 (New Position to Support Parks' Public Involvement Processes) in our Phase 1 audit report (on the web at: <http://www.seattle.gov/parks/Publications/policy/PIP.pdf>) were designed to control the risk of any process details "falling through the cracks."

Extended Comments: During Phase 1, we received extended comments regarding Parks public involvement from 18 citizens. Due to time constraints, we planned to publish these comments in Phase 2. They are included here as Appendix D.

Objective C

For the second phase of our review, we planned to include a case study of a recent Parks project. We chose to examine the chronology and issues related to the Loyal Heights Playfield. Loyal Heights had been a controversial project, and had generated the most comments on our citizen audit questionnaire during the first phase of our audit.

Specific components of our methodology included:

1. **Loyal Heights Renovation Web Chronology** – We assembled the documents that described or recorded the development of the Loyal Heights Playfield project from January 2000 through May 2006. We linked the documents to a project timeline and made these documents available on our website for review by the Loyal Heights neighbors, sports users and other stakeholders, and Parks staff. Additions and modifications were made to the timeline based on input from the reviewers.
2. **Focus Group with Loyal Heights Neighbors** – We conducted a focus group meeting with ten Loyal Heights neighbors on February 6, 2007. This included three members of the Project Advisory Team (PAT) and three appellants in the Office of Hearing Examiner appeal regarding Loyal Heights. Process observations and suggestions for improvement were discussed and recorded. Specific suggestions from the group included:
 - Create a public involvement advocate for Parks projects.

- Provide more information about the implementation of the tree management plan for Loyal Heights.
 - Provide an opportunity for Loyal Heights residents to speak with a representative from Field Turf.
 - Explore ways to offer some flexibility in the field striping at Loyal Heights.
 - (Parks) provide an apology to Loyal Heights neighbors for its handling of the public involvement process at Loyal Heights.
3. **Input from Loyal Heights Sports Users and Other Stakeholders** – Via e-mail and phone, we solicited comments on the web chronology, observations on the process and suggestions for improvement from 22 additional process participants. This included sports advocates and the remaining members of the PAT.
4. **Information-Gathering with Parks Staff** – We interviewed eight Parks officials and staff members including the Parks Superintendent and the current project manager for Loyal Heights. We conducted a focus group meeting with five Parks staff on February 13, 2007 to review the web chronology and gather process observations and suggestions for improvement.

Appendix D: Extended Comments on Parks Public Involvement from Phase 1

During the first phase of our audit regarding Parks public involvement (online at: <http://www.seattle.gov/audit/2006.htm#parksprocess>) in addition to our questionnaire results, we received extended comments from 18 citizens. Those comments are summarized here.

Concerns:

- The process as currently designed seems to favor the "professional parks activist" (or, in some cases, "parks lobbyist") who knows the process and can allocate plenty of time to affect it to advance his/her pet project.
- Don't confuse "notifying the neighborhood council" with "notifying the neighborhood."
- The Parks dept is indeed engaging in deceptive tactics to get around having to deal with neighbors who do not like what is happening in their neighborhood parks (including oversight in posting large on-site sign).
- Parks has an unfortunate tendency to use the word community instead of the word neighborhood.
- Parks has been extremely neglectful when it comes to Public Surveys about how people use the Parks and what amenities they would like including in regards to skateboarding.
- The Board of Park Commissioners persists in holding meetings at times and places that make it difficult for people to attend.
- Parks fills public meetings with their favored sport clients to the detriment of neighbors. Parks sends its particular favored sport group to local Community Council meetings to advocate for whatever specific amenity they want. Unfortunately, not all Community Councils are good about informing their local neighborhoods.
- Public Involvement really needs to take place BEFORE projects are designed or funded.
- Parks does a poor and often duplicitous job when it is up to something it knows park neighbors and the general public wouldn't like.
- Parks is NOT a good neighbor- won't turn lights off at the proper times, doesn't clean drains, so locals get to drive flooded streets, lets Baseballers scream and yell at 10:30 pm so one can hear them 5 blocks away.
- Neighborhood associations are controlled by a very small number of people who repeatedly misrepresent themselves as being "voices of the community" and will not tolerate different opinions.
- Very limited notice about public meeting on Sept 7 to discuss a new addition at Green Lake Park.
- The Lower Woodland skate park represents a back-room deal at the behest of a handful of skateboard lobbyists.
- Park Board of Commissioners were professional and gracious, although it might have felt a bit more effective had they asked questions or otherwise interacted with the public.
- Lower Woodland neighbors were not informed of a change in meeting location.
- Phase I is not even CLOSE to being contained within the originally planned "Chips" site.
- Special interests have joined the planning process at a late phase proposing major changes. Examples are Magnuson Park, Ballard Commons, Gasworks Park, and the Zoo Garage.
- High impact designs are put to public comment after it's too late to have any influence. An example is the information about the height and intensity of sports field lighting coming known, it seems, after the Joint Athletic Fields Plan was issued and even after the vote on the ProParks Levy.
- In order to be heard citizens are obliged to take legal action. It makes no sense that tax payers must pay twice to be heard (3 times if you count City Attorney payroll). Above all, we deserve respect enough to engender public discourse before decisions are made.
- Seniors attended a Parks' meeting at Pritchard Beach Field House to voice opinions about the starting time for Senior activities. However, the next morning when we went to Van Asselt Community Center we were told the decision had already been made. There was no notification about how the decision was made or if the public comments had any input on the Parks' decision.
- The PAT team for the Jefferson CC new gym provided architect with specifications for pickle ball. However, when the actual project was completed, there weren't any standards put in for pickle ball.
- Too few restrooms at Myrtle Edwards
- I have always appreciated the Parks' Department staff's responsiveness to my concerns.
- MLK park on MLK and Walker is steeply sloped and not used much.

- There is no way for the public to comment on permit applications. The supplemental use policy that the Parks Department has gives the superintendent the authority to override the Seattle Municipal Code if he chooses. That's why we have a model airplane event at Magnuson Park and why it is displacing the parking area for the Junior League Playground, the Off-leash area and the Magnuson Community Garden!
- After the public has been involved and after the public has been told what is to happen in a particular project, Parks can change things with NO other public participation (e.g. Eliminating irrigation systems from Magnuson's North Shore Recreation Area).
- I don't learn of Parks' plans to remove trees to make room for playgrounds or ball fields unless someone from People for Open Space or Save Seattle's Trees or another like-minded group gets the message out.
- I could not get electronic copies of a DNS nor was there an email list that I could sign up for to get notification of key steps in the process.
- For the Lower Woodland Park (LWP) skatepark project, the key decisions - the need for a skatepark, its size, and siting it at LWP - were made without public input or notification. It was very difficult to even find out what those decisions were (i.e., the size and exact location of the skatepark within LWP). Input from the public was only solicited on the design of the predetermined size of the skatepark at the pre-selected site. No needs assessment was done. The process was marked by a complete absence of negotiation. No attempt was made to address concerns raised by either the neighborhood or the skatepark advocates in a way that would provide a "win-win" scenario.
- City-wide skatepark siting criteria: There was no opportunity to refute the misinformation presented by the city's contractor. And the siting criteria have not been revised in any way to address community concerns raised during the public comment period.
- Ballard Bowl and Dahl Playfield skateparks: Both these skateparks (one built; one planned) were forced on the community AFTER the community had developed their own plan – through a public process – and had obtained funding to realize their vision for their neighborhood parks.
- Zoo parking garage: City should have re-opened negotiations with community.
- Simple maintenance tasks should not be contingent on citizens' begging Parks to do their job on behalf of the community. Moreover, neighborhood volunteers should not be forced to tackle jobs for which Parks is rightly responsible. Simply put: Give us results, and we'll give you interest and involvement in "the process."
- Concerned about Parks conditions including litter, sleeping area for homeless, drug use and drug related garbage, after hours teenage parties, loud and open bonfires, and nudity.
- Seattle already has too much public involvement so suffers from paralysis by analysis. It is infuriating that park neighbors can get whatever they want by whining loud enough.
- The "no dogs on beaches law" was sneakily passed in 1983.
- Disappointed that the City allowed Seattle Prep to expand use of the Montlake Play Field over objections by the residents regarding absence of parking, potential presence of blinding night lights, dangers to small children whose parents bring them to play in the park, and general recreational use by local residents.
- Concerned the decision to use the park for Seattle Prep was clearly coming from on high, and residents were forced into a rearguard and ultimately losing effort to keep the balance of park use for local residents.
- I do not think the City should be bending over backward to assure that a local park serves as the playfield for a private school.
- Changes in park use, maintenance, horticulture and staffing are difficult to influence. Indeed, the public doesn't usually even know about such changes until after the fact, and usually only if an organized group has challenged a change.
- Concerns about construction at the Colman playfield including length of construction schedule, lack of information about construction schedule, parking issues, lack of completion of field, path and grass maintenance, and traffic issues.

Suggestions:

- Extending the mail "notification radius" beyond the 300-foot mark beyond a park boundary to 1500 feet.
- Late arrivals who present major revisions should result either in a re-start of the process to have everyone take a fresh look at the alternatives, or be directed to other avenues for pursuing their aims.
- High impact designs (like tall, bright, late evening sports lighting, relocated parking garage, summer concepts) deserve an enhanced public process in which full information is provided at the start and the participants are given a meaningful opportunity to influence the decision.

- Follow community driven examples of public involvement, for example, Friends of Flo Ware Park and the Powell Barnett Legacy Park.
- Keep all restrooms and water fountains open all year round.
- Parks should put the plans on their web site, much as DPD does for applications, we at least would be able to browse the site and check out our interests.
- Participants should feel that their needs are at least heard, if not addressed, and should leave the process feeling that there has been give and take. At its best, the public process, by listening carefully to all participants, identifies ways to create a situation in which all parties are satisfied (if not happy) with the outcome. Sometimes significant change is made in the original plan based on public comment. At a minimum, the decision process is transparent and participants understand why unfavorable decisions are made.
- For Parks to recruit and then sustain community interest and involvement “in the process,” several criteria first must be demonstrated by Parks:
 1. Experiential cooperation and support—not dangling carrots.
 2. Reasonable judgment.
 3. Observable results.
 4. A minimum of hoops.
- The Parks Dept. maintains a hotline for wading pools. Would a hotline for current issues be possible?
- Raising issues in local community newspapers would also help.
- Occasionally, perhaps a sign or two in the affected parks asking for input might help.