

The North Clackamas Parks & Recreation District (NCPRD) has the least funding of any urban parks district in Oregon. Indeed, NCPRD's funding level is approximately one-third that of the Tualatin Hills Parks & Recreation District, a district that is bigger than NCPRD, but with a far greater number of larger and more varied facilities to serve the needs of their community.

Back in 2014, the Board of County Commissioners (BCC) recognized that the funding rate — 54 cents per \$1,000 of assessed value — was insufficient and sought to raise it to 89 cents per \$1,000 of assessed value. That ballot measure passed in Milwaukie but failed in most other parts of the NCPRD area. While serving on the NCPRD District Advisory Committee over the past several months, it has been clear to me that those committee members recognize the need to increase the funding to meet the needs of our community.

Thus, I was quite surprised to learn that the BCC is considering reforming NCPRD as a district with an independent board (an excellent idea with which few, if any, disagree), but doing so at the same 54-cent rate. Under state law, the rate must be set at time of formation of the new parks district and cannot later be raised. Establishing a new district at the 54-cent rate would be a recipe for a district that continues to fail to meet the needs of residents.

Because NCPRD has never had adequate financing to buy available properties and develop needed parks, the city of Milwaukie has, on its own, for at least a quarter century, bought properties and developed our own parks. In that time, the city bought properties that now comprise Milwaukie Bay, Balfour, Ball-Michel, Bowman-Brae and Homewood parks. In that same period, the city has developed playgrounds and other amenities in Homewood, Spring and Ball-Michel parks. The city also built larger projects, including the boat ramp and current placeholder configuration of Milwaukie Bay Park, plus the elevated path in Kronberg Park. This was all accomplished by a city without a dedicated parks department.

What has NCPRD built in Milwaukie in that same time frame? The district completed the long-unfinished Wichita Park, the play area and ballfields at North Clackamas Park, and enhanced the natural areas in Spring and Kronberg Parks.

Kudos to NCPRD for leveraging federal and state money to get improvements going at the Concord School site. But it's long past time to get going on Milwaukie Bay Park, for which NCPRD led the development of an excellent concept plan that the community embraced back in 2018, but which has been delayed by the BCC since late 2020. And note that the price tag for Milwaukie Bay Park is only a fraction of the amount being spent on the Concord property, and that the delay is jeopardizing \$2 million in state funding. It's also important to note that we have an estimated \$900,000 in deferred maintenance in Milwaukie parks — mostly

playgrounds and picnic shelters that are past the typical replacement date. The same is surely true in other NCPRD properties, as well.

The newest County Commissioner Ben West was very insightful at the BCC's May 17 policy meeting when he observed, "I don't see (NCPRD) as really financially viable and supported in the way it needs to be — there are funding issues." Later in the meeting, West concluded, "I don't want to pass on something that is not doing well and isn't performing (up to expectations) to a new independent body. I don't want to pass the buck."

Commissioner Martha Schrader noted that directors of any new parks district would have a "rude awakening" when they discovered the new district was locked into the same 33-year-old tax rate.

Yet, at that May 17 meeting, NCPRD Director Michael Bork and Commissioner Schrader dismissed the idea of seeking a higher rate because such an effort failed in 2014. That vote, however, was a very confusing mishmash of changing the governance structure, electing new board members, and establishing a higher rate — all against the backdrop of the city of Happy Valley threatening to leave the district (which that city later did). It is far too simplistic to attribute the failure of that effort as being all about the proposed increase in tax rate.

I recognize that residents are tired of bond measures and levies. But I do believe that our community deserves parks and recreational facilities just as good as those in Beaverton, Wilsonville and other communities. Many people to whom I have spoken — including members of the NCPRD District Advisory Committee — are willing to pay more to have improved facilities. [Whether Milwaukie stays in or leaves NCPRD](#), I do think we have to look at the long-term picture. Creating a new district at the same inadequate rate is not building the park system that our children and grandchildren deserve.