

Metro is not following through on its commitment to provide more access to the parks and natural areas it owns in Multnomah, Washington and Clackamas counties, according to a report released by Metro Auditor Brian Evans on June 21.

Among other things, the report found the elected regional government has not updated its Park and Nature System Plan since voter passage of a \$475 million bond measure in 2019 intended to increase public access, especially to communities which have historically had limited access to such recreational lands.

“The audit found lack of clarity about what specific outcomes the bond sought to accomplish related to access to nature. Access was not defined, and no specific access goals were set,” said the audit.

Metro has spent \$363 million from two previous bond measures to acquire nearly 19,000 acres of parks, trails and natural areas across the metropolitan region since 1995. But, the audit found, most of the recent purchases were more intended for conservation than recreation, despite that fact that almost all of the properties are supposed to be open to the public.

“Data showed 17% of acquisitions since 2006 were ranked as high for access potential which indicates that most land purchases were not intended for public access,” the audit said.

In separate comments, Evans said, “The 2019 bond was intended to do things differently compared to Metro’s previous two bond measures. To meet that goal, the organization will need to balance its commitments to habitat conservation with its commitments to providing equitable public access across 19,000 acres of publicly-owned land.”

The audit identified eight natural areas in the three counties where public access is currently limited. They include: Arrow Creek, Grant Butte Wetlands, and Gabbert Butte in Multnomah County; Brown, Heritage Pine, and Holcomb Creek in Washington County; and Barton and Richardson Creek in Clackamas County.

According to the audit, public access to these natural area is limited for several reasons. They include: lack of information on Metro’s website; distance from transit lines, requiring private vehicles to reach them; locked gates, lack of parking, and steep terrain at entrances; and a lack of clear trails into the areas.

“These obstacles increased the risk that the access needs expressed by community members may not be met at Natural Areas,” the audit said.

The audit made eight recommendations for increasing public access to Natural Areas. One was updating the Parks and Nature System Plan to clarify how access and equitable access will be prioritized among other goals for Metro land such as stabilization, restoration, and habitat conservation, Another was using community feedback associated with the 2019 bond to evaluate and update the Parks and Nature department's program activities and capital investment priorities.

Metro Chief Operating Officer Marissa Madrigal and Parks and Nature Director Jon Blasher responded to the audit in a June 16 memo. They said steps are already underway to address many of the issues raised in the audit. But Madrigal and Blasher also said the focus of the 2019 bond measure was improving water quality and protecting habitat, not increasing access to natural areas.

"The ballot title for the 2019 Parks and Nature Bond says it succinctly: "Bonds to protect water quality, fish, wildlife habitat, natural areas." This is the direction set through the legislation that governs Parks and Nature's work, outlined and supported in the Park System Plan approved by the Metro Council in 2016, and the department's 2019 Racial Equity, Diversity and Inclusion Action Plan, and we cannot ignore it," the memo said.

Despite that, Madrigal and Blasher said they agree with the audit's emphasis on making it easier for the public to access Metro's natural areas.

"Management agrees that it must also look for ways to ensure access to nature for communities across the region, especially those who have been historically excluded from opportunities to connect with nature. This is a long-standing goal for Parks and Nature and the clear direction of the 2019 bond," the memo said.