

# Parks, Recreation and Natural Areas Plan—Inclusive Engagement

## Background

The City of Renton wanted to ensure that its 2020 Parks, Recreation and Natural Areas (PRNA) Plan included public engagement by residents who may not participate in traditional planning processes, e.g., public meetings and surveys. To do this, the City enlisted its Inclusion Task Force, which comprises community liaisons who are known conversation leaders representing—and trusted by—various minority, cultural, and ethnic groups. By having these Task Force partners “meet people where they are” to solicit input for the PRNA Plan, the City was able to go beyond translated meetings and surveys for public engagement and gather valuable input from under-represented community members.

## Inclusive Engagement Process and Results

The City recruited five Community Conversation leaders from the Inclusion Task Force to conduct outreach. Each leader received training, support, materials, and a small stipend, with the charge of conducting two rounds, or a total of 19 sessions, of Community Conversations. Supporting materials were available in English, Spanish and Vietnamese (the top three languages in Renton). Public participants received vouchers for use at Renton Recreation facilities.

The first Community Conversation involved 99 residents and was organized around three questions: 1) How do you use Renton’s parks, recreation facilities, and natural areas? 2) What is important to you when you recreate? 3) What is your “big idea” for parks, recreation, and natural areas? Following is a summary of feedback:

- A majority use parks, recreation facilities, and natural areas to: 1) gather with family and friends; 2) play sports/compete; 3) relax and/or have a peaceful time alone; and 4) recreate with children.
- Participants prioritized opportunities to engage in arts and culture; they also asked for specific amenities, including open and accessible restrooms, water fountains, and benches along trails.
- Participants wanted more covered, reservable picnic areas, and amphitheaters/performing spaces.
- Water access was prioritized, whether through built or natural features.
- Improving accessibility for people with disabilities and seniors was noted. Participants also suggested access improvements through free transportation to parks, designated pick-up areas, and more parking.
- Participants would like enhanced safety and suggested more lights and adding security personnel.

The second Community Conversation involved 98 residents and focused on two questions: 1) What are the two types of events you enjoy the most?; and 2) Please allocate \$10 to types of projects that are likely to be included in the updated Plan, based on input from the first round of outreach. Following is a summary of feedback:

- Participants selected citywide events and events focused on culture and arts as their favorites. Events were seen as opportunities to bring community members—especially multiple generations—together, times to share and learn about food, culture, and traditions, and good activities during school breaks, especially in summer.
- Participants emphasized investing in existing parks and facilities as their top priority, but also mentioned the importance of continued investment in new parks, facilities, and trails to sustain Renton’s quality of life.
- Participants mentioned the need for year-round indoor recreation opportunities and all-weather fields.
- Some participants wanted materials/signs in additional languages, including Ukrainian and Chinese.

## What We Learned

City staff recognize that this effort—and it was a big effort—enhanced the overall public engagement process, resulted in a better PRNA Plan, and fostered closer connections between traditionally under-represented communities and the City. Three years after adopting the Plan, it also feels like the bare minimum to expend in future planning efforts. Some improvements for next time include providing materials in more languages, expanding voucher quantities, and improving community follow-up about how feedback was implemented. The City also wants to expand comprehensive engagement during project design/implementation, especially as community needs can change between Plan updates. Finally, more ongoing engagement is needed to make sure existing neighborhood parks are serving that community’s specific needs. The Inclusive Engagement effort’s success can be attributed to connecting to an existing, long-term program with trusted community leaders, designing outreach to meet people where they already are, and recognizing that each community group has their own specific needs and priorities. There is always more to be done in the process of community outreach and engagement; we hope our process sparks ideas for your efforts, and we welcome your input for enhancing this aspect of parks planning for Renton’s future!