



COUNCIL STAFF REPORT

CITY COUNCIL of SALT LAKE CITY

TO: City Council Members
FROM: Allison Rowland
Budget & Policy Analyst

DATE: April 5, 2022

RE: ORDINANCE: PUBLIC LANDS TWENTY-YEAR MASTER PLAN, *REIMAGINE NATURE*

Item Schedule:

Briefing: April 5, 2022

Set Date: April 5, 2022

Public Hearing: April 19, 2022

ISSUE AT-A-GLANCE

The Council will consider adopting *Reimagine Nature*, which the Administration has prepared as the City's twenty-year Public Lands Master Plan. This document was conceived as a City-wide, long-range vision for transforming public lands into "a vibrant system of connected public landscapes and living infrastructure that enhances the community's identity, sense of place and quality of life." In another sense, *Reimagine Nature* serves as a general workplan for the relatively new Public Lands Department itself, providing direction as it pursues the goal of creating a sustainable system of parks, natural lands, and urban forests, including special places like the Salt Lake City Cemetery and the Regional Athletic Complex. Currently, the system includes 88 parks, 86,500 urban forest trees, six golf courses and thousands of acres of natural landscapes.

Reimagine Nature is drawn from a community-driven planning process that included over 12,000 people who provided their views through an online survey, focus groups, micro-engagement events, and community partnerships designed to reach typically underrepresented groups. These provided the strategic direction and priorities for ten "transformative projects," as well as the Plan's long-term goals. From these, Department leadership and the project consultants, Design Workshop, developed detailed recommendations for policies, strategies, and specific actions. The Department notes that the scope, scale and form of implementation will be determined through development of individual projects and initiatives. For this reason, the Master Plan does not lay out specific budgetary impacts.

Reimagine Nature is designed as a flexible framework that can adapt to changing circumstances over its 20-year lifespan. It will require significant additional effort, resources, and funding to achieve. This work will begin with

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more detailed Public Lands Department Five-Year Strategic Plans, which will outline and prioritize specific implementation strategies and actions and be updated annually by staff. Annual assessments of progress toward Master Plan goals and projects will also be included. More comprehensive updates to the Master Plan will be prepared in 2030 and 2040.

Salt Lake City's Parks, Trails, Natural Lands and Urban Forestry Advisory Board (PNUT) provided a "ringing endorsement" of *Reimagine Nature*, and further stated, "We urge the City Council to embrace the foundational values and five principal goals of the Master Plan. This is a crucial step for the City Council as it helps both embed the Master Plan and ensure advocacy by current and future elected leaders to seek and support sustainable funding throughout the plan lifecycle." (See Attachment C1 for PNUT Endorsement Letter.)

The Public Lands Department began the process of developing and drafting a master plan in 2020, while it was still a Division of the Public Services Department. Previous Council briefings on the Public Lands Master Plan process were held in March and October 2020. The City's most recent previous comprehensive plan of this type was the *Salt Lake City Open Space Plan of 1992*.

Goal of the briefing: Review *Reimagine Nature*, SLC Public Lands 20-Year Master Plan, and potentially straw poll Council Members on whether to move it toward potential adoption.

ADDITIONAL AND BACKGROUND INFORMATION

A. **Background.** Previous Council briefings on the Public Lands Master Plan process included:

1. **October 2020:** Mid-process update on the community engagement strategy that the Public Lands Division (at the time) and Design Workshop had developed to inform the master plan. The update was meant to comply with the Council's *Resolution 14 of 2020, Declaring City Council Policy and Objectives for Preparing Master Plans*.
2. **March 2020:** Review of the *Public Lands Needs Assessment*, which helped set the baseline for the master plan.

B. **The Need.** The Master Plan outlines several types of challenges to the Public Lands Department's ongoing ability to protect and care for Salt Lake City's natural and green areas. Difficulties range from rapid degradation of local ecological systems due to climate change, to unhealthy environmental factors like poor air quality, which is fueled by expanding population. In addition, the Plan mentions competing priorities for limited City funding, aging infrastructure in public lands (63% of assets were evaluated to be in poor or fair condition), and rapid Downtown development. The Plan also notes that underlying these challenges are the legacies of racism and classism, which remain visible in the City's historic zoning and planning decisions, as well as in other inequities. For these reasons, people across the City need better access to recreation opportunities to avoid perpetuating disparities, and additional resources are needed to provide public spaces and programs that serve low and middle-income households.

Other challenges were identified within the Public Lands Department by ETM Associates, which analyzed levels of staffing, resources, and responsibilities. The Plan states that "Compared to other North American benchmark cities, Public Lands is relatively understaffed, particularly in the area of long-term management of environmental assets. For example, Urban Forestry staff is stretched at one staff member protecting an average of 10,000 trees." (Staff has requested a copy of this study.)

C. *Structure of Reimagine Nature.*

1. **Foundational Values.** The Master Plan lays out three “foundational values” on which it bases its recommendations:
 - a. **Stewardship** to protect wildlife, trees, mountains, lakes, rivers and scenic views.
 - b. **Livability** in the face of the impacts of climate change and population growth; and
 - c. **Equity** in community input and access to close-to-home, high-quality green spaces.
2. **Department Goals.** The Master Plan defines five main Department Goals for the next 20 years. Each of these is discussed in detail in Chapters 3 to 7.
 - a. **Sustain:** Environmental Health and Sustainability;
 - b. **Connect:** Accessible and Connected Green Spaces;
 - c. **Welcome:** Active, Authentic and Inclusive Places;
 - d. **Protect:** A Commitment to Stewardship; and
 - e. **Grow:** Expanding our Public Lands System
3. **Strategies, Policies, Actions and Metrics.** For each Department Goal there is an accompanying list of Strategies and Supporting Policies, along with 146 near-term possible Actions to support implementation of various aspects of the Plan. The complete list begins on the Plan’s page. Progress Metrics are listed on pages 36-40 (see Policy Question 2, below).
4. **Transformative Projects.** Ten proposed transformative projects, which were identified by community members as particularly inspirational, are laid out in the Plan. They are designed to make the Department Goals more tangible, as the means through which the Plan’s vision will be implemented. They are discussed in the Chapters 3 to 7 along with the Goals most closely related.
 - a. Put Environment First
 - b. Grow Our Urban Forest
 - c. Connect Mountains to the Lake
 - d. Just 5 Minutes from Here
 - e. Reimagine Neighborhoods Parks
 - f. Coming Soon to a Park Near You
 - g. Revive Our River
 - h. Sustaining Our Stories
 - i. Downtown Comes Alive
 - j. Welcome to the Green

D. **Community Engagement.** Extensive community engagement was undertaken at nearly every step of the Master Plan’s creation process, taking place from mid-2020 to mid-2021 (see below). Initial public surveys led to preliminary ideas that were further tested and refined in a series of focus groups with representative community stakeholders. Over 12,000 Salt Lake City community members provided input through online focus groups, University of Utah student-led “intercept interviews” and “micro-engagement events,” and through an online survey. A detailed description of the engagement process, including a summary of who provided feedback, and what they told the city, can be found in the Engagement Summaries at www.ReimagineNatureSLC.com.

- Engagement Window 1: Building a Foundation of Understanding. August-December, 2020.
- Engagement Window 2: Visioning Transformational Projects and Priority Actions. March-May, 2021.

E. Issues of Special Interest to Council Members.

1. **Equity in Parks and Park Access.** Chapter 5 of the Master Plan focuses on the Goal of *Welcome: Active, Authentic, and Inclusive Spaces*. It discusses the increased awareness among cities nationwide of the health and social benefits of living near park spaces, as well as efforts to close gaps in park access. In Salt Lake City specifically, the 2019 *Public Lands Needs Assessment* shed light on differences like the lack of City-wide festivals held on in Westside parks, the tendency of Westside residents to visit east-side parks (but not vice versa), and significantly lower visitation rates at Westside parks. It also notes that “Equal investment in parks throughout Salt Lake City’s neighborhoods does not always translate to parks that equally serve each community, nor does it make up for any historic inequities.”

To help address these problems, the Public Lands Department is committed to working with neighborhoods to ensure that parks and natural spaces better reflect diverse cultures and histories. This will mean a careful examination of how Department resources are allocated across the City and targeting investments to historically underserved neighborhoods. The Department also understands that extra efforts will need to be taken to ensure that underrepresented and underserved populations are involved in the park planning process which, in turn will ensure that their local knowledge will contribute to each park’s unique character, uses, and enjoyment.

The Plan also makes clear that the Department is aware that “Strategies that are beneficial to some communities, such as ‘Friends of the Parks’ groups, can put communities who do not have the time or money to spend at a disadvantage.” It also cites the Urban Institute’s report *Investing in Equitable Urban Park Systems* which states, “All funding models have equity implications: some are explicitly designed to address equity and meaningfully engage all residents, some risk deepening inequities and fueling displacement, and most depend on how they are used.”

Specific strategies mentioned in the Plan include partnering with local organizations for art, education and recreation programs, community-driven approaches to public lands improvements, and physical improvements that represent the style, history, and recreation preferences of each neighborhood.

2. **Homelessness and Unsheltered People in Parks.** During public engagement for the Master Plan, the most common topic raised was concern for and about people who are experiencing homelessness and use public lands as places to shelter. Opinions ranged across a full spectrum on the kinds of approaches the City should take to addressing the issue, but it is clear that this is a larger social issue that the Department of Public Lands cannot resolve on its own. Although the impacts on public spaces operated and maintained by the Public Lands Department are significant, the Plan recommends a compassionate approach to people experiencing homelessness, including facilitation of access to information about available services and resources, hotlines, community partners, and opportunities to engage in cross-community dialogue to help make City parks welcoming and safe for sheltered and unsheltered people alike. This would include quarterly training for Public Lands staff and park maintenance workers regarding homelessness resources, understanding of homelessness, and appropriate engagement with people experiencing homelessness. (See Policy Question 4, below.)
3. **Preparing for Continuing Population Growth.** *Reimagine Nature* acknowledges that meeting the needs of Salt Lake City’s quickly growing population will be challenging, especially because the potential for acquiring additional City green space is limited. It recommends upgrading amenities and enhancing environmental quality as strategies that will allow existing parks to serve more people. This is particularly the case on the Westside, which has higher per capita levels of park and natural land acreage than elsewhere, as well as the asset of the Jordan River.

The Public Lands Master Plan also notes (page 70) that providing “public green space” on the Fleet Block would fill a gap in the City’s park system. The 2019 *Public Lands Needs Assessment* identified the Central Community as having the lowest level of park service, and yet it is expected to experience the most future growth. *Staff note: the Council will be briefed on the Administration’s plans for the Fleet Block on April 19.*

4. **A Pending Correction.** In Chapter Seven, *Welcome to the Green*, the Public Lands Department plans to correct a statement about Golf Division finances that erroneously asserts that the Golf receives no funding from the City’s general fund (page 171). In fact, in FY20, FY21 and FY22, the general fund provided over \$5 million to the Golf Fund, according to the Council’s *FY22 Budget Staff Report for the Golf Enterprise Fund*, dated May 25, 2021. The Department has indicated that it will correct this oversight in the final version of the Master Plan to read as follows:

“As an Enterprise Fund, Golf does receive some supplemental funding from the general fund. The majority of their budget is required to cover its annual operating costs and capital repairs with revenue from golf activities.”

F. Next Steps.

1. **Short-Term Steps.** Once *Reimagine Nature* is adopted, the Department of Public Lands will organize its year-by-year actions and project priorities around the Master Plan’s recommendations. The Department plans to request support in the FY23 CIP process for the development of a five-year strategic plan that will identify the specific projects, initiatives, activities, and organizational focus areas needed to facilitate and accelerate plan implementation.
2. **Future Plans.** *Reimagine Nature* identified the following additional City plans whose development the Department plans to lead in coming years.

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| • Public Lands 5-Year Strategic Plan | • Capital Facilities Plan | • Climate Resilience Plan |
| • Public Lands Strategic Acquisition Plan | • Financial Plan | • Drought Management Plan |
| • Asset Management Plan | • Fiscal Management Procedures | • Water Budget Plan |
| • Cartegraph | • Impact Fee Spending Plan | • Operations Management Standards/Plan |
| • Capital Replacement Projects | • Urban Forestry Master Plan | • Development Standards |
| • Irrigation Renovation Plan | • Golf Master Plan | • Public Outreach and Communications Plan |
3. Additional City plans for which the Public Lands Department plans to collaborate with other departments are:
 - Area Master Plans/Neighborhood Plans
 - Long-range Planning Efforts
 - Homelessness Response Plan

POLICY QUESTIONS

1. The Goals and Transformative Projects presented in *Reimagine Nature* vary substantially in terms of scope, cost, logical sequencing, and other characteristics. In addition, work on some of these items is already underway. The degree to which any of these Goals and Projects further the values of Equity, Stewardship and Livability also varies. ***Given this complexity, the Council may wish to ask the***

Administration to discuss their thoughts on how they will balance among competing priorities in terms of allocating funds and staff time, as well as unexpected funding opportunities, scheduled work by other departments, etc.

2. **The Council may wish to ask for more information on the Progress Metrics listed for each of the Plan's Goals** (pages 36-40). For example, will the Council receive information on the process of meeting these Goals in the annual Mayor's Recommended Budget, and/or in the Five-Year Strategic Plans? Will allocating work among the Department Values be used to help prioritize funding requests?
3. Budget estimates were not included in Reimagine Nature, since its focus is more conceptual, and the estimates would become outdated even more quickly than usual in recent years. **The Council may wish to request that at least some indication of relative costs of different projects be included in each of the upcoming five-year plans.** For example, a simple notation like \$, \$\$, \$\$\$, \$\$\$\$ could be developed to provide some indication of relative costs and help with the prioritization of individual projects. This may be particularly helpful if the Administration is considering a GO Bond relating to parks and public lands in the near future. The Council may also wish to discuss with the Administration how potentially transformative projects will be maintained in the future, given ongoing funding pressures.
4. **The Council may wish to discuss with the Administration how the newly-formed park ranger program could help mitigate issues associated with people who are experiencing homelessness who shelter on public lands, and whether metrics will be tracked to assess how the park ranger program affects concerns from the public.**
5. Several items mentioned in the Master Plan would have implications beyond the Public Lands Department. The Council may wish to consider asking for more information on how the Department is working with its counterparts on these. For example:
 - a. As part of the Green Loop discussion, on Figure 31 (page 90 of the transmittal's PDF file) there is a label titled "Rio Grande Festival Street." **The Council may wish to ask whether and how this concept would be affected by the RDA's Station Center Project Area planning efforts.**
 - b. The Fleet Block is mentioned in several places in the Plan as an advantageous location for a future green space. **Would the Council like to request that the Administration include specific discussion of this possibility in the Council's Fleet Block update, which is scheduled for April 12?**
6. The Master Plan contains several ideas for expanding the use of City golf courses to a wider public and increasing their role in providing local environmental services like native species habitat and storm water drainage. The ideas for increasing Golf Enterprise Fund revenue are less concrete and tend to involve large financial investments, including some that could put some public funds at risk. These ideas will be further developed in a future Golf Master Plan, but given the longstanding record of revenue shortfalls and the resulting lack of capital investment resources in the Golf Fund, **would the Council like to request additional information in the shorter term about how the Administration plans to improve the financial sustainability of the Golf Fund?**

ATTACHMENT

Attachment C1. Endorsement Letter from the Salt Lake City Parks, Trails, Natural Lands and Urban Forestry Advisory Board (PNUT).