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The Landscape: Forest Park

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Forest Park
by Sarah Heinicke

For its many yearly visitors, 5,000-acre Forest Park exemplifies regional values of commitment to dedicated open space and connections to a resource-based history. It also showcases constraints that those values place on regional growth. As development encroaches, pinch points to wildlife migration become inevitable. Invasive species threaten the habitat and quality of the landscape. Areas of the park closest to dense development are threatened by overuse. But despite the challenges facing Forest Park, its status as an icon of the region remains undisputed.

Forest Park’s hard fought, hard won history is a testament to persistent, inherited civic vision and a reminder of how hard that vision can be to maintain once it is accepted. Only 50 years ago, when what is now Forest Park was called the Tualatin Mountains and the forest was still being used as a source of timber and wood fuel, William Clark catalogued many of the same plant and animal species that persist today—the Douglas fir, western hemlock, salal, trillium, bleeding heart, black tailed deer, and red fox. Early visionaries zealously wished to protect such natural beauty for the benefit of the growing City of Portland. Thomas Lamb Eliot was among the first to advocate for a citywide park. The Olmstead brothers were hired to plan the project and concluded that the area eventually transformed into Forest Park should be preserved as a “public reservation.” Although no funding was set aside to acquire the land, other advocates emerged to support the idea. Among them was Chicago city planner E. H. Bennett, who advocated funding for a “forest park.” However, a 1913 bond measure to finance the land acquisition failed, and in the following year the City set up a wood cutting operation to provide fuel and work opportunities for the poor.

That same year real estate developer Richard Shepard promoted the development of a scenic drive from NW Thurman to Germantown Road along Hillside Drive (Leif Erickson Trail as it is now known). The lands surrounding Hillside Drive were platted and assessed to pay for the construction. Many property owners who were outraged with the assessments refused to pay, and the City soon acquired most of the property through assessment liens.

The 30’s witnessed more threats to the establishment of the park through more logging, forest fires, and even an oil drilling operation that was eventually abandoned in 1946. Despite these obstacles, popular support grew for the park, and in 1945 a report out of the City Club of Portland recommended that a 6,000-acre municipal park “should be preserved for public forest park use.” The City Club further recommended that the park should be “primitive in nature” rather than designed to accommodate heavy public traffic. In 1948 the park was created out of 1,100 acres donated from Multnomah County, the addition of the tax delinquent parcels, and other donated lands.

Efforts by Friends of Forest Park, a non-profit organization whose mission is to preserve forest habitat and wildlife, are addressing the ongoing threats to the health of Forest Park. Land acquisition, habitat restoration and protection, and trail maintenance are their biggest projects. Recently they acquired key parcels to eliminate several pinch points in wildlife migration paths to and from nearby coastal mountain habitat. Combating invasive species of pests and non-native plants such as ivy and clematis remains ongoing labor for Park staff and volunteers.

Forest Park lies within the jurisdictional authority of Washington County, Multnomah County, Metro, and the City of Portland. Each plays various roles in park management. Deteriorating funding requires the Park and its advocates to develop alternative ways of addressing maintenance issues. Currently the Legislature is considering a proposal to designate Forest Park as an Area of Special Concern. This designation would give the Department of Land Conservation and Development (DLCD) more authority to coordinate efforts to manage the Park, in contrast to the current situation, which allows gaps to grow where jurisdictions have greater or lesser authority and control.
Friends of Forest Park doing trail maintenance. Photograph by Marshall Miller.

"20-mile walkers" below. All photographs courtesy of Friends of Forest Park.