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**A Review of the “Vision 2000” Symposium**

**Framing a Community Vision  
for Open Space in Vancouver  
and Clark County**

**Prepared by Vancouver-Clark Parks and Recreation Services  
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*“I don’t think we can think too big.”  
- Citizen participant at “Vision 2000”*

On March 23, 2000, more than 200 citizens of Vancouver and Clark County gathered to take part in “Vision 2000” – a symposium dedicated to planning for the future of open space in Southwest Washington. Individually and in groups, they were asked to consider questions like these: What do we want Clark County to look like 50 and 100 years from now? What elements of open space are critical to maintaining our quality of life here in Southwest Washington? How do we go about creating the community we want for our children, our grandchildren, and their children?

Above all, they were asked to let their imaginations go ..... to think big ..... and not to be hampered by political realities and budgetary constraints. It was a unique opportunity to let their voices be heard.

What emerged was a framework for planning from which commentator Scott Campbell said “a thousand seeds will spring.” The following pages contain a roughly prioritized review of suggestions made that night. On some issues there was no clear consensus, even wide disagreement (e.g., high- vs. low-density development, access to riparian areas). However, it is fair to say that these were the concerns that were uppermost in the minds of those who were there that night to envision the future of our community at the dawn of the 21<sup>st</sup> Century.

- **Build a better connected trails system.**

Developing more trails throughout the County, especially along rivers and greenways, was a high priority and key focus for discussion. Trails were called the “the backbone of the system,” “a connection to our past” and “a source of re-creation.” According to one group, trails in an urban setting can have unexpected value by serving as a buffer for recreational spaces, wetlands and wildlife habitat, even preserving clean water and the aquifer.

“Connectiveness” and “connectivity” were words used frequently. Participants asked for better public access to shorelines, streams and wildlife areas, linkages among green spaces, and cross trails connecting all parts of the County. Pedestrian trails/networks through golf courses and berry fields were proposed as examples of the opportunities to be gained by adding agricultural land and developed private land to the mix.

Two groups suggested that the Chelatchie train line right now offers a natural pathway from urban to rural areas and should be developed as a trail. It was also suggested that the Old

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Evergreen Highway be turned into an urban trail, preserving its beauty from the past instead of opting to re-pave.

Among other suggestions:

- Create major interconnecting regional trail loops/links.
- Make trails suitable for multipurpose use wherever possible.
- Build a trail from Vancouver Lake along the Columbia River (Lake River) corridor to Ridgefield.
- Extend the Columbia River waterfront trail to Washougal and beyond.
- Connect the Lewis River and its tributary systems to Lacamas Lake greenway.
- Build a trail west from I-5 to Flushing Channel.
- Connect the end of Lower River Road by trail to Ridgefield.
- Connect the Erwin O. Rieger Memorial Highway to Lower River Road, creating a loop in the Vancouver Lake area.
- Connect the Lewis River Trail to the Columbia.

The group making the latter suggestion acknowledged it was “thinking big” and closed with this comment: *“Think about when this country was built. Roads went out first, and towns were established on the roads. Open space, greenways, and parks are established on trails. Trails are the backbone of the system.”*

More comments from participants:

*“We need trails, we need trails bad.”*

*“Focus on open-space systems, not just isolated areas.”*

*“We want greenways and trails around virtually every lake, stream and river corridor in the County.”*

*“Link the green islands.”*

*“Maintain availability of open space to interconnect open spaces.”*

*“Don’t pave all the trails.”*

*“No hard surfaces by the streams”*

*“Maybe we should pursue the Chelatchie Prairie Extension with the same zeal as the Mill Plain Extension.”*

*“Trails connect our historical places. And by connecting our historical places, they give us back our identity, and that is important to all of us.”*

*“Let’s aim to be an internationally celebrated community for birdwatching and walking.”*

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- **Protect wildlife habitat.**

This was the most-mentioned topic on the individual surveys, with unanimous support for habitat protection. The Youth Ambassadors in particular put it high on their list of open-space considerations. A freshman from Mountain View High School said she wants her children and their children to see the same mountains, trees and wildlife she sees today.

Looking ahead, one group proposed that environmentally non-sensitive areas be marketed immediately for industrial use and job creation. By providing for these needs now, there may be less risk of sacrificing sensitive areas that are home to wildlife, are covered with old-growth forest, or drain directly into the aquifer.

It was also recommended that the community implement the Open Space Commission's report findings fully and completely, and that all public agencies plan and work together to acquire and protect the most sensitive wildlife habitat.

Finally, the suggestion was made that the nation acquire the lowlands around Vancouver Lake to commemorate the Lewis & Clark 200<sup>th</sup> Anniversary and provide a legacy for future generations. This area includes Vancouver Lake and Frenchman's Bar Parks plus an equal amount of lowlands on the Oregon side of the Columbia River, all of which would be added to the Ridgefield Wildlife Reserve as a stopping point for migrating birds on the West Coast of North America. This action would free up Clark County resources to develop a series of regional parks between the urban area and the state and national forests to the east and north.

### More comments from participants:

*"Strive for environmental equity. Don't let human use interfere with use by wildlife."*

*"Save the land that supports endangered species."*

*"Preserve the meadows, wildlife, flowers, plants and hawks."*

*"Kids want room for wildlife."*

*"We need a place for wildlife in urban areas, too, along trails and in nodes."*

*"Protect all remaining wetlands."*

*"Restore wetlands to provide habitat and flood control."*

*"Dedicate areas solely to fish and wildlife habitat."*

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- **Preserve riparian corridors and manage access.**

The preservation and extension of riparian corridors were endorsed by many of the groups, although there were varying opinions on access. One group proposed that undeveloped corridors and upland riparian habitat for wildlife be connected for “people use,” while another suggested that riparian areas with their native vegetation need to be preserved, allowing for only limited human intervention, if at all.

The need for healthy rivers and fishable streams was part of the discussion, too. One man said his ultimate dream is being able to catch a fish in the middle of town ... and eat it.

Discussion was also directed at the need for environmental education and interpretation programs, signs and a coordinated effort by all participating agencies. It was suggested that a series of environmental centers, interpretive signing stations and educational materials be developed, taking into consideration the diversity of communities throughout the region.

### More comments from participants:

*“The protection of riparian areas goes hand-in-hand with aquifer protection since our drinking water is aquifer based.”*

*“Think big: make riparian corridors 200 feet at a minimum.”*

*“Protect stream sides, waterways, and ground water with conservation easements and protection buffers.”*

*“Reverse pollution problems in our waterways so we have healthy rivers and fishable streams.”*

*“Keep trees along the streams for fish protection.”*

*“There are places that should be preserved for the sake of preservation but not open to the public.”*

*“Preserve natural areas, not necessarily for public access.”*

*“Prioritize or designate no-touch areas.”*

- **Expand the urban parks system.**

The need for a park or open space within walking distance of every resident was one of the most-mentioned topics of the night. As expressed by one group spokesperson,

*“We need to create a number and quality of urban park areas where the urban*

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*population can easily go to find re-creation, while maintaining a large number of wilderness areas where the urban population can go to find inspiration.*”

Wish lists included a park in every neighborhood; sports fields to accommodate every kid who wants to play; community centers all over the County; more disabled-accessible features; and more variety in developed parks, including arboretums, skateboard parks, community gardens, mazes, and test gardens. One group saw the need not just for classic recreational facilities with pools and playgrounds, but also for facilities that promote cultural heritage, history and art.

One Youth Ambassador suggested that GIS be used to determine the perfect places to locate the urban parks of the future, and that land be acquired even if money isn't available right now to build a park on it. *“Make the space a money-maker and let the park come later.”*

### More comments from participants:

*“It’s critical to have open space set aside now for recreational areas.”*

*“Think BIG: aggressively acquire space – now!”*

*“Acquire the suggested acreage per capita in our park system now.”*

*“Nobody should have to walk more than three blocks to get to the nearest park.”*

*“We need to equitably distribute corridors and pockets of open-space functions throughout neighborhoods and the community at large.”*

*“We need a place for every child to play safely within walking distance of home.”*

*“Build more urban parks within dense areas and within aquifer recharge areas.”*

*“Convert transportation and drainage systems into usable/accessible parks and open spaces.”*

*“Let kids adopt and work in parks, like the Adopt-A-Highway program.”*

*“Create ‘nodes’ or small ‘hearts’ for the larger Clark County.”*

*“We need small developed parks and play spaces.”*

*“Bring more water into urban parks, build participating fountains.”*

*“No more overdeveloped parks.”*

*“What about simple ‘micro-parks’ with just a couple of benches and a basketball hoop?”*

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*“Small open spaces are better than nothing.”*

*“More skate parks for our kids – even if, God knows, they have little jets on ‘em by 2050!”*

### • **Promote high-density development in urban areas.**

This was one of the most vigorously debated topics of the night, with a wide range of opinions expressed. The most aggressive supporters of high-density development urged that urban growth boundaries not be enlarged. Others asked if we should redefine the whole concept of open space, rework existing space, or recreate open space within urban confines.

Most agreed that it is important to look at ways to raise awareness and promote interest in greater densification. Among the suggestions:

- Diversify currently developed land so people can live, work and play in the same area without having to commute by car.
- Demolish ugly buildings that are just taking up space to make more room for play and recreation.
- Restore damaged areas; go back in time and correct past errors.
- Build to smaller sizes to free up as much open space as possible.
- Offer transportation options (e.g., interconnected bike paths) to access jobs and commercial areas, and to reduce car commuting.

One group proposed taking a more European approach to growth, offering these suggestions:

- Build up, not out (no more one- or two-story buildings downtown!).
- Keep open-space percentages high.
- Encourage multifamily complexes with large open-space connections.
- Allow for large areas with open access and a “backyard”-like community feel.

#### More comments from participants:

*“Industrial and commercial interests need to be integrated with community values.”*

*“Some at our table want higher densities, some want lower densities.”*

*“We all decided we need to work where we live.”*

*“If there’s a space to be developed, build on it, but not beyond.”*

*“Focus on small pedestrian scale model development.”*

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*“Make developers pay impact fees and/or dedicate land.”*

*“Allow building of new housing units only in consideration of green space.”*

*“Need zoning to preserve open spaces.”*

*“Recapture the ‘rural’ feel that made people love Clark County in the first place, without creating sprawl.”*

*“Make it difficult to live in the country (i.e., build fewer roads).”*

*“Build on the ‘New Urbanism’ – plan your sprawl and make it good.”*

*“We have to wake up and see just how much open space we have lost.”*

### • **Preserve views and vistas.**

Several groups talked about the importance of maintaining the visual appeal of our surroundings, both rural and urban – *“not just vistas, but views of the community and how they function aesthetically.”* Participants were emphatic in declaring that the larger community should place a priority on securing – *for public access* – important vistas and views within both our urban and rural community.

It was suggested that greater pressure be put on developers to design settings that are not only accommodating to residential/commercial needs, but are more compatible with nature. Maybe even develop design guidelines to craft a more aesthetically pleasing community.

Specific suggestions ran the gamut, from cleaning up the rooftops of downtown buildings to constructing underground roads below the Cascade Mountain foothills.

#### More comments from participants:

*“As you drive your car through the County and look at the Cascades, you should be able to see wooded foothills. Whatever we can do to preserve this is important.”*

*“One of the most important items on our list is view preservation ... not just vistas, but views of the community and how they function aesthetically.”*

*“We live in one of the most beautiful places on earth. I want my children to look out and see the mountains, trees and wildlife as they are today.”*

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*“Protect unique sites – landmarks and viewpoints.”*

*“Retain visual access to the wetlands.”*

*“In downtown Vancouver we look down on the roofs of some pretty ugly scenes. It ain’t a pretty sight. We can do better.”*

### • **Intensify the use of vegetation.**

Nobody disagreed on the need to increase and improve vegetation along trails, greenways, and transportation routes, as well as in urban areas. Thoughtful, pleasing “urbanscaping” was suggested, as was a return to the use of native vegetation in landscaping and parks.

One group framed its report within a discussion of the Burns-Collier Freeway Act of 1947, which made it possible for cities in Southern California to enjoy free landscaping services along its freeways, in exchange for prohibiting billboards. Services were guided by the L.A. Arboretum and included free trees and ground cover. Pasadena, Glendale and Riverside chose free trees and landscaping, while Los Angeles went with billboards and eventually faced far greater smog problems. The advice: *“Get as much carbon dioxide-absorbing capacity as possible along I-205 by planting vegetation.”*

It was suggested by another group that the road system shouldn’t determine open space, but neither should we ignore green space that occurs around or in the middle of a road. They cited the intersection of Highway 14 and I-5/South as a prime example of open space that could be utilized for a park or underground freeway.

The need to “soften” areas where development exists was also considered. One woman mentioned the recent use of tree plantings along Macadam Avenue in Portland as having a dramatic effect in creating the appearance of open space in a heavily urbanized setting. A transportation corridor habitat management program was proposed (disallowing ivy and Scotch broom!).

#### Other comments by participants:

*“Let’s see trees instead of smog.”*

*“Convert sewers back into urban streams. Uncover culverts and replant stream areas and trees.”*

*“Plant trees where there are no trees now; create spaces where there are no sidewalks.”*

*“Plant more trees on developed sites.”*

*“Incorporate greenbelts within urban areas. I want to see more green than gray.”*

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*“Return to native vegetation.”*

*“Maintain as much as possible in a natural state.”*

- **Other issues and points of view.**

### WATER QUALITY

*“Preserve and restore sensitive water-related areas.”*

*“We feel strongly about water quality and well-head protection.”*

*“Manage surface water in conjunction with development.”*

*“Protect and reverse pollution problems in our waterways.”*

### AGRICULTURE

*“Our agricultural areas should be protected for small farms.”*

*“Retain agricultural lands for open space.”*

*“Save productive farmland. And when you talk about farmers, don’t talk with your mouth full.”*

### ROADS

*“Reconfigure road networks to allow for open-space corridors.”*

*“Turn highways into avenues and boulevards.”*

*“Design roads from the center out, streets from the center in.”*

### ALTERNATE TRANSPORTATION

*“Create a better transportation system that is less dependent on cars.”*

*“Convert highways and principal arterials into avenues and boulevards with trees, bike lanes, mass transit, walking spaces and social spaces.”*

*“Shift our focus to accommodate the human more than the machine.”*

*“Connect the community with light rail.”*

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### DNR LANDS

*“Land swap DNR lands for regional parks/open space.”*

*“We need to make the surrounding area untouchable with special emphasis on preserving DNR forests.”*

### IN-FILL PRACTICES

*“Re-think in-fill – it overcrowds open spaces, schools, roads, etc.”*

*“Re-examine in-fill practices in the City and the County.”*

### EDUCATION

*“Promote continued education – ‘life learning’ – and integrate Citizen Science Centers into expanded campuses in open space.”*

### CULTURAL

*“East County needs more cultural hubs – cafes, parks, shops, and art.”*

*“A Cultural Arts Center needs seven acres to grow and exist. It would include a concert hall with seating for 1,300, a performing arts theater, poetry and reading rooms, and visual arts. It would give Vancouver an identity of its own.”*

*“Bring value to the community. Make Vancouver stand out in the state and region where we live.”*

### • **How GIS can help**

Prior to the visioning process, participants were given an overview of Clark County’s Geographic Information System. Based on the latest information technology available, GIS can show development patterns and identify important open-space opportunities. At the symposium it was used to show the extent to which development has spread throughout Clark County in the last 100 years.

Groups were asked to suggest ways in which GIS might help them implement their ideas for the future uses of open space. Among the suggestions for ways in which GIS can help:

- Identify what’s currently developed and what’s undeveloped.
- Document existing environmental conditions.
- Inventory all critical areas.
- Provide for “what-if” scenarios.

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- Show areas of overdevelopment.
- Assess “values” or “priorities” in making open-space decisions.
- Provide the “connective vision” for use of open space by large numbers of people.
- Identify linkages to be developed and/or maintained for wildlife.
- Set standards for the minimal amount of open space required for livability.
- Encourage appropriate cluster zoning, enabling people to live/work/play in one spot.
- Identify locations of critical water supplies and how to protect them.
- Plan for parks in high-density locations.
- Plan transportation corridors for easy and efficient access to public services, recreation, schools and commercial development.
- Locate high viewpoints to protect.
- Look at opportunities to connect wetlands as a regional system.
- Use as a “demonstration evidence” tool to resolve land-use disputes.
- Create community discussion to engender and ensure open-space preservation.
- Involve more people in decision making.
- Illustrate to others “where we are” and what we might preserve.
- Have *The Columbian* utilize GIS mapping to show the progression of loss.

### • **Final thoughts/next steps**

Beyond specific issues involved in open-space planning, a number of participants took time during the visioning process to look at where we go from here, and how to get there.

Among the recommendations:

- Emphasize intergenerational/intercultural involvement in the process. The spokesperson for one group challenged others in the room to make sure the whole community is involved and integral to what she called “*the rainbow vision*” and then to let elements within the community, including neighborhoods and institutions, determine the ways in which that vision is applied.
- Promote the whole experience of being outdoors. Be passionate about open space – *walk it, don’t just talk it, literally.*
- Stimulate the Public Benefit Rating System so that the community at large can decide what attributes of open space it values most, then determine if these are compatible with the comprehensive land-use planning system.
- Develop philanthropic program funding for purposes of maintenance and programming.
- Seek federal funds for open space protection, acquisition and restoration.
- Coordinate open space planning with Oregon/Metro and work on cooperative partnerships.
- Meet the County’s current established standards because right now “*we’re far below.*”
- Decide what we’re going to save and save it. In support of this thought, the words that resonated most at the end of the night were these:

*“We need to take a final inventory – now.”*