

# REGIONAL OPEN SPACE LEADERSHIP FORUM

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A Report from the  
March 29, 2017 Convening

## IN THIS REPORT

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<b>BACKGROUND .....</b>	<b>2</b>
<b>CONVENING HIGHLIGHTS.....</b>	<b>2</b>
Celebrating and understanding the ROSS .....	2
Looking Ahead: The Trends Shaping Our Region’s Future .....	3
Learning from Other Regions .....	4
Mapping the Sector .....	5
Opportunities and Challenges: How Could a Regional Open Space Alliance Bring Value? .....	5
<b>RECOMMENDATIONS .....</b>	<b>6</b>
<b>APPENDICES .....</b>	<b>7</b>
1. Forum Participant List .....	7
2. Presentation: Regional Open Space Strategy .....	7
3. Trends Shaping Our Region’s Future .....	7
4. Lessons Learned: Portland, Bay Area, Denver .....	7
5. Mapping the Open Space Sector .....	7
6. Post-Forum Survey Highlights .....	7

## BACKGROUND

On March 29th, 2017, about one hundred participants spanning academia, nonprofits, government, health, funders, business, and community-based organizations gathered for a day-long convening to explore how a more robust and strategic regional collaboration among public and private partners could help Washington state, specifically the four-county region of central Puget Sound, better protect and manage its open spaces. The meeting marked the completion of six years of work on the Regional Open Space Strategy (ROSS), which makes the business case for better and more integrated planning across the open space system in central Puget Sound, and maps a path forward for this new approach.



The convening also served as the launch of the central Puget Sound Open Space Assessment Tool (OSAT), which lays the foundation for more robust cross-jurisdictional, cross-organizational, and cross-departmental planning, priority setting, and management of the open space system in the Central Puget Sound region.

The convening was organized and supported by Steve Whitney, Bullitt Foundation; Scott Miller, Resource Media; and Tracy Stanton, who served as chair of the convening, with support from a cross-sectoral planning committee. See Appendix 1 for a full list of convening participants.

The **GOALS** for the Forum were to:

- Celebrate the completion of the Regional Open Space Strategy (ROSS), and recognize the accomplishments of organizations and individuals who have made significant

contributions to the ROSS, and to preserving the region's open spaces.

- Describe the need for, and value of, a comprehensive and integrated regional open space network.
- Make the case for a regional open space alliance to attendees, illustrating the value to the region, and to each of them/their organizations/their constituents.
- Move into the implementation phase, identifying and prioritizing key opportunities and challenges (as highlighted in the [ROSS final report](#)) and mapping out next steps for better integrated planning and continued collaboration.

## CONVENING HIGHLIGHTS

### Celebrating and understanding the ROSS

The morning session focused on sharing the findings of the ROSS, including what was learned and the opportunities it identified for the region going forward. John Owen, co-director of the ROSS, presented the findings of the report. See Appendix 2 to view this presentation.

This was followed immediately by a panel moderated by Tracy Stanton, Forum Chair, that dove deeper into the five policy areas identified in the ROSS: climate change, biodiversity, human health, social justice, and economic vitality.

Panelists included:

- Rachel Gregg, EcoAdapt: Biodiversity & Climate Change
- Phil Wu, Kaiser Permanente: Human Health
- Sean Watts, Seattle Parks Foundation: Social Equity
- Tracy Stanton, Forum Chair, (moderator)

What we heard:

- **Engaging the communities impacted is crucial to creating sustainable, equitable solutions.** Sean emphasized the importance of supporting communities to participate in solutions “in their own vision,” which can upend traditional planning and development processes. Engaging youth is also critical as they are the leaders of the future and are often the fluent English-speakers in their communities. Great examples of youth engagement and leadership programs include Little Brook neighborhood teen programs and the Duwamish Valley Youth Corps.
- **The business community needs to be fully engaged and represented moving forward.** This was evidenced by the absence of a representative on the panel, and a relatively small number of attendees from the business sector to the convening. Living in this region is a “second paycheck” and a great recruitment tool for businesses. Efforts should be made to maximize new business opportunities (possibly starting with convening a business round table to engage with business leaders on the multiple benefits of investing in the region’s open spaces).
- **Funding is a challenge in each policy area,** particularly given the priorities of the new administration. New ways to streamline funding processes are needed. Ideas proposed included integrating conservation and natural infrastructure

*"Helping ensure social equity is integrated with the more environmental goals/themes is our raison d'être!"  
—Sean Watts, Seattle Parks Foundation*

projects into city budgets, and encouraging cross-sector collaboration and action.

- **An accessible, compelling and succinct narrative drawn from the ROSS findings is needed to coalesce and build the alliance, and to bring new partners to the table.** The open space movement needs a concise, coherent, multi-benefit story that makes the connection between open space and the issues related to these five policy areas. This narrative should include talking points for those working in the field to make the case for open space, and for builders of an alliance to attract more businesses, foundations, healthcare organizations, and other private entities, who are just beginning to step up to fill the gap left by cuts in federal funding.

#### Looking Ahead: The Trends Shaping Our Region’s Future

In this session we sought to identify key transformative trends in open space protection over the next three years, exploring their consequences, and beginning to look at how a regional alliance or other collaborative models could help to address them. In a rapid-paced exercise, our goal was to map major trends on the horizon, prioritize those that are most important for us to work together to address, and identify what is needed to address them. For a list of the trends identified during this session, see Appendix 3.

What we heard:

- **TREND: The (un)affordability of housing and land is an urgent problem,** especially as the income gap grows and people are forced to live farther from where they work. This has created more development pressure at the urban and suburban fringe.

**OPPORTUNITY:** We have a **strong economy** and many **people want to live in urban centers**. Urbanites support density, and greatly value access to open space.

- **TREND: More people are migrating to the region**, and within the region, from urban to rural and rural to urban. This puts pressure on transportation systems as displacement pushes people out, and on the need for greater “nearby nature” as the urban cores becomes more densely populated.

**OPPORTUNITIES: With new people come new resources.** If we can instill a strong sense of place in people migrating here, they can become part of the solution.

- **TREND: Decreased public funding**  
**OPPORTUNITIES: Increased potential collaboration and public/private partnerships.** Constraints historically spur innovation. This can lead to new approaches to open space funding strategies and greater collaboration.

- **TREND: Increasing accessibility to open space tools and data.** While these create innovative approaches to harnessing data, we need to ensure they work in concert with one another.  
**OPPORTUNITIES:** The ability to **ground the narrative and case statement for open space in data**, and data driven decision-making that will produce benefits across a range of biophysical and socio-economic public policy objectives.

- **TREND: Our country is becoming more diverse while the income gap grows.** We should acknowledge that it is challenging to balance the need for consensus with the need for progress, but realize that stakeholders who have not traditionally been included in open space protection must now be included for everyone to benefit.

**OPPORTUNITY: We can lead on creating a new era of open space projects** that are multicultural in approach and address equity concerns by forming nontraditional alliances.

### Learning from Other Regions

Robert Liberty of Portland State University gave the luncheon keynote talk on the benefits of a regional approach, and made the case for a “Peoples’ Regional Vision.” Among the benefits he talked about were: a united voice for advocacy; the ability to create specialization in roles; opportunities for cost effectiveness and larger taxing districts; greater capacity to take on larger projects; access to a more diverse talent pool; the ability to create a grand and unified vision and story, and finally, the fact that organizations that work in partnership and in a collaborative way are more attractive to funders.

He also pointed to some of the challenges we need to acknowledge, including competition for funding, the need to

establish new and non-traditional relationships, and the complexity of partnerships. This set the stage for the next panel, “Lessons Learned from Other Regional Models.”

*“An alliance that brings together an even “bigger tent” for support would be a politically powerful group.”  
—Andrea Imler, Washington Trails Association*

Following his keynote, Robert moderated a panel discussion with leaders of open space organizations and initiatives located in Denver, Portland and the Bay Area. Panelists included:

- Susan Daggett, Denver Natural Area Alliance (Metro DNA)
- Deb Callahan, Bay Area Open Space Council
- Mike Wetter, Intertwine Alliance (Portland)
- Robert Liberty, Portland State University, moderator

Each participant started by giving an overview of their region's open space alliance, which are at various stages of development. See Appendix 4 to view each panelist presentation.

Panel highlights:

- Each panelist touched on social equity, specifically addressing the question: How do you address social equity in your work, and in particular, how do you include underserved and underrepresented voices?
  - **Bay Area Open Space Council's** focus is on rural spaces, and because the overall region is relatively wealthy it has concentrated on smaller pockets of need. Primary work in this area is with ad hoc groups on single issues.
  - **Intertwine** is actively working to bring more people of color into the environmental sector, which is currently 84% white, by building relationships with leaders and political organizers. With 160 members, it doesn't aim for consensus but rather works in small, issue-based groups.
  - **Metro DNA** engages social and environmental justice by meeting underrepresented populations where they are. Membership fees are waived if this is a barrier to participation, and representatives are not required to participate in all meetings given limited staff capacity.
- **The group also had questions about governance. Deb Callahan was asked why the Bay Area Open Space Council became an independent 501(c)3 after many years as a fiscally sponsored organization.** Deb raised the point that fiscally sponsored organizations do not have their own governing boards, and are therefore subject to many of the

rules of their sponsors. Additionally, she believes being independent sends a strong message to members and funders about the seriousness of an organization's commitment to its work and mission.

- **The group wrestled with the challenge of preserving open space with the pressure of increasing density, livability, homelessness in parks, and displacement.** Mike commented that "nature hits more marks for livability in a city than any one other issue," and offers tremendous opportunities to partner with folks outside of the environmental sector. Susan emphasized investing in permanent, affordable housing; promoting the value of shared spaces; and the importance of hiring people of color to fill the jobs being created in the green business sector.

### Mapping the Sector

The goal of this exercise was to begin to sketch the size, shape, and breadth of the open space community in the region, and the connections within these communities. Participants were asked to brainstorm organizations they believe should be at the table, especially those not represented at the Forum. See Appendix 5 for a full listing of organizations and sectors identified.

### Opportunities and Challenges: How Could a Regional Open Space Alliance Bring Value?

In this final exercise of the day, attendees explored the value a new entity or alliance could bring to their organizations and to the field overall, and honed in on the challenges they see ahead. They looked back on the trends identified earlier and were asked to think about where cross-sector communication, unified action, and coordination across organizations would be needed and beneficial to addressing the issues resulting from these trends.

Challenges identified include:

- **Funding.** All organizations are struggling with funding. How might an alliance attract new dollars and help its members make the most of the funding they have?
- **Prioritization.** What's the best way for an alliance to support organizations with competing priorities to make decisions that will benefit both the region and their particular missions? An alliance should be able to counter some of the fragmentation that exists currently in the open space sector.
- **Process and issue fatigue.** There are many organizations doing a lot of great work, and plenty of processes and issues to fight for. How might an alliance simplify and streamline the work, and spark new ideas for solving old problems?
- **Leadership/governance.** In order to be successful, an alliance needs to have strong governance, and also a leader with a strong voice and ability to galvanize its members to action.

Opportunities identified include:

- **Simplify open space financing.** Currently the sources of funding and processes are not streamlined or well coordinated. A collaborative effort to address this would be beneficial to all entities involved, as this is the main issue nearly all organizations identified as a key barrier to achieving their missions.
- **Give voice to under-represented populations.** There was broad agreement that decisions about open space need to be more inclusive. Too often, the people and communities most directly affected are not at the table. Working more closely with community-based organizations through an alliance could help address this problem.

- **Creation of an entity for establishing regional priorities, advancing future regional initiatives, and sharing resources and tools.** Functioning as a neutral convener and catalyst for creative partnerships, the alliance can provide a backbone for regional decision-making and contribute to reducing redundancies and competition for scarce resources.
- **Change the mindset within the sector.** Right now, organizations and individuals often view issues from the vantage point of their focused work, and within the limits of their organization's resources. An alliance could help shift this mindset.
- **Tell the story beyond the sector in a unified voice.** This will create broader awareness of the value of open space across sectors, and be of great use when making the case to policy makers and elected officials.

*"This issue is very important to me personally and I see a great need for this kind of thinking in this region at this time of rapid urbanization."  
--Kitty Craig, The Wilderness Society*

## RECOMMENDATIONS

- **It is time to roll up our sleeves and to get to work!** Momentum exists to form a collaborative entity. 78% of Forum attendees agree or strongly agree that an open space

alliance would benefit their work and the region at large (see Appendix 6 for the Post-Forum Survey highlights).

- **The collaborative must be truly cross-sector.** It should include tribal nations and communities who have historically not had a voice at the table in addition to business, community-based organizations, academia, nonprofits, healthcare, funders, government, and agricultural interests.
- **Funding to establish and sustain an alliance must be new,** and not compete with current funding sources.
- **A concise, compelling and provocative elevator pitch** supported by talking points culled from the comprehensive, data-driven findings in the ROSS is needed. The Working Group, and others they recruit, will need this to bring prospective alliance members to the table.

## APPENDICES

1. [Forum Participant List](#)
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