

Free Days and Free Ways to Reach Washington State Parks

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Background

- Washington State Parks and Recreation Commission (Parks) owns and operates 143 publicly accessible state parks for recreation
- To park a car at a state park, a Discover Pass is required
- The Discover Pass presents a financial barrier to many communities in the state
- Parks is increasing efforts to promote diversity, equity, and inclusion at Parks
- There are several other free ways to get into a state park, including on designated free days, by foot, or by bicycle
- There are significant physical and mental health benefits to accessing greenspace



Partnerships

- This project began as a partnership between Parks and Washington State SNAP-ed (SNAP-ed) in 2024
- The two agencies identified that they had a shared goal: greater access to parks for public transit users
- The two agencies then decided to collaborate on a project to identify what the current state of transit access is, and to create a resource for the public

Objectives

- Create a resource for SNAP-ed community members to improve knowledge of state parks accessibility
- Identify which state parks can be reached by public transit
- Identify challenges and areas for growth in public transit access for the Washington state Parks and Recreation Commission

Methods and Deliverables

- Develop handout materials for SNAP-ed providers to use to promote State Parks visitation
- Interview employees across Parks, SNAP-ed, and Washington Department of Transportation
- Audit of parks that are within 0.5 miles of a public transit stop
- Site visit to transit-reachable state park

HEALTH EQUITY QUICK FACTS

- In Washington state, approximately 7% of households do not have access to a private vehicle¹
 - For Black households that number rises to 14%¹
- Access to parks and greenspace is linked with improved mental and physical health²
- Physical activity is linked to decreased cardiovascular disease, Type 2 Diabetes Mellitus, and all cause mortality³
- Greenspace in communities promotes social cohesion and prosocial behavior⁴

Findings

- Challenges were identified across the agency including for funding, infrastructure, monitoring, and community opinions
- Stakeholders across agencies are generally highly supportive of increasing public transit access
- 36 state parks and park properties are within a half mile of a bus stop
- 149 state parks and properties were not reachable by transit
 - Of these, 33 parks and properties were identified as areas of future opportunities

PARK AUDIT



1. National Equity Atlas. Car Access. National Equity Atlas. 2022. Accessed March 11, 2025. https://nationalequityatlas.org/indicators/Car_access?geo=020000000000053000

2. Hazlehurst MF, Muqueeth S, Wolf KL, Simmons C, Kroshus E, Tandon PS. Park access and mental health among parents and children during the COVID-19 pandemic. BMC Public Health. 2022;22:800. doi:10.1186/s12889-022-13148-2

3. Moore SC, Patel AV, Matthews CE, et al. Leisure time physical activity of moderate to vigorous intensity and mortality: a large pooled cohort analysis. PLoS Med. 2012;9(11):e1001335. doi:10.1371/journal.pmed.1001335

4. Arbutnott KD. Nature exposure and social health: Prosocial behavior, social cohesion, and effect pathways. J Environ Psychol. 2023;90:102109. doi:10.1016/j.jenvp.2023.102109

5. Picture: Lake Sammamish State park Via Washington State Parks and Recreation Commission

Recommendations

Relationships: Form stronger relationships with DOT and other local transit authorities. By doing so, Parks can advocate for diverting bus routes closer to parks. This requires bringing in local transportation authorities in planning processes.

Monitoring and Evaluation: Parks needs a survey of user experiences, as well as a tracking mechanism to understand how many people are using the park by transit. Current data is based on Discover Pass sales and camping permits, which does not include anyone entering parks by bike, foot, or transit.

Funding: Analyze how funding streams interact with state parks' priorities. The State Parks relies on 65% revenue (primarily Discover Pass and camping) and 35% General Fund. Reliance on Discover Pass sales can encourage a focus on private vehicle users - which is not always in support of DEI and sustainability goals. Changing focuses allows an expansion of public transit options.

Future Planning: Prioritize public transit access in future planning of parks. When infrastructure is being created or modified, the ability for buses/mass transit options to access the infrastructure allows for future growth in this area. For new development, this means making bus access a contingency for building codifies access for all.