

What's This About Parking Pay Stations in Washington Park?

When you enter Washington Park from southwest Portland, you know you've arrived. The prominent entry sign, brick planters, curved streets and green surroundings provide a strong sense of arrival into one of Portland's oldest and grandest parks.

But no entry sign, elegant avenue or pretty vista announces your arrival to the park from Highway 26. Instead, a muddle of directional signs and a sea of parking greet the visitor. Confusion reigns and traffic backs up as drivers slow to consider their options or as parents look for the right spots to drop off excited campers on summer mornings. And these are just the beginning of the challenges. The parking lots fill rapidly, leaving later visitors to navigate the off-site shuttle service. While many visitors arrive by light rail, there are no connections between the MAX station on the south side of the park and the attractions on the north side, including the Japanese Garden and International Rose Test Garden.

As the population and popularity of the Portland metro area has grown over the past few decades, the numbers of visitors to Washington Park and its paid attractions have steadily increased, too. Today, an estimated three million people visit the park each year. Yet its transportation system hasn't kept pace and the city's dwindling park funds can't begin to cover the investment needed to make improvements or even to cover maintenances costs. The park needs an infusion of attention and funding if it is to graciously accommodating this many people and avoid impacts on adjacent neighborhoods.

Except for the Oregon Zoo site, Washington Park is owned and managed by Portland Parks & Recreation (PP&R). While the parking lots that serve the attractions on the south side of the park are owned by PP&R, the zoo has managed and maintained them for 35 years. Each of the attractions has collected parking fees from visitors since January, 2005, via a pay-at-the-gate honor system. The revenues are then pooled to pay for parking lot management. However, these fees are not sufficient to cover the costs of maintenance, nor do they provide enough funding to develop a more efficient, welcoming parking and transportation system for the park.

For the past two years, the Washington Park Alliance--comprised of Portland Children's Museum, World Forestry Center, Portland Japanese Garden, Oregon Zoo and Hoyt Arboretum Friends, Portland Parks & Recreation, Metro, and TriMet--have been working with the Arlington Heights and Sylvan-Highlands neighborhood associations to consider ways to improve parking, traffic flow, shuttle service, transit access, and safety. These partners have developed an innovative strategy to make many of the necessary improvements.

The boards of directors of all of the attractions and both the Metro and Portland City Councils have unanimously approved an agreement that sets these changes in motion.

In addition, Parks and Metro have worked with the two neighborhood association boards to draft a Washington Park Good Neighbor Agreement. The parties continue to discuss solutions to neighborhood concerns which include spillover parking and traffic management.

To bring about improvements, park and venue management and partners need to initiate a more systematic method for collecting parking fees. Pay stations will be live January 10, 2014.

Rates are proposed to be comparable to those in other areas of the city, currently \$1.60 an hour, with a daily cap of \$4.00 in winter and \$6.40 in summer (peak visitor season). Visitors to the zoo and other paid attractions currently pay \$4.00 for parking at the entrances, on an honor system.. The partners and neighbors look forward to initiating a series of important changes that include repairs to roads; improved signs; an intra-park shuttle service that links the two sides of the park with the light rail station; and better off-site parking shuttle service. Later phases of improvements include a redesigned south entry and eventually a parking structure.

Portland City Council, on Wednesday, December 5, 2012, unanimously approved a proposal to:

- Establish of a new non-profit Washington Park Transportation Management Association (TMA) that will manage parking and transportation in the park and provide one-stop-shopping for transit information and incentive programs to encourage light rail use.
- Complete a Washington Park transportation plan
- Complete a new park master plan. The last Washington Park master plan was completed in 1981. By creating a standard parking pay system across the park, the Washington Park partner organizations expect to establish the stable funding necessary to make significant improvements to the park, more effectively manage parking and better address the transportation needs of visitors.