



June 20, 2018

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Mayor Ted Wheeler
City Hall
1221 SW 4th Avenue
Portland, OR 97204

Dear Mayor Wheeler:

The National Association for Olmsted Parks (NAOP) is writing to express its deep concern about present threats to Portland’s remarkable and irreplaceable Forest Park. Established in 1980, NAOP is a coalition of design and preservation professionals, historic property and park managers, scholars, municipal officials, citizen activists, and representatives of numerous Olmsted organizations around the United States. Its concern is the legacy of landscape work left by Frederick Law Olmsted and the firm continued by his sons, John Charles Olmsted and Frederick Law Olmsted, Jr. NAOP is the only national organization solely dedicated to preserving the Olmsted legacy by providing the advocacy, research, and education needed to protect, restore, and maintain these exemplary parks and landscapes.

It was John Charles Olmsted who visited Portland and produced the 1903 *Report to the Park Board of Portland, Oregon*, in which Forest Park was recommended as a key feature.

...future generations will ,,, bless the men who were wise enough to get such woods preserved. Future generations, however, will be likely to appreciate the wild beauty and the grandeur of the tall fir trees in this forest park, or reservation,...its deep shady ravines and bold view-commanding spurs, far more than do the majority of the citizens of today, many of whom are familiar with similar original woods....If these woods are preserved, they will surely come to be regarded as marvelously beautiful...No use to which this tract of land could be put would begin to be as sensible or as profitable to the city as that of making it a public park or reservation.

From this seed grew the largest urban wild land park in the country, in closest proximity to its city’s residents. Only Mount Royal Park in Montreal compares in proximity to the urban center, but its landscape is not purely native. Natural areas were intentionally incorporated in Olmsted park systems, beginning with Central Park’s Ramble in New York City. Besides offering city dwellers immersion in unspoiled nature, they captured the geographic “Genius of Place” - forest, water courses, topography, vistas, or in the case of Portland all of the above.

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Frederick Law Olmsted expressed an unshakable conviction, that “City dwellers need contact with the natural world in order to preserve not only their physical health but also their mental tranquility” and more specifically, “We want a ground to which people may easily go when the day’s work is done, and where they may stroll for an hour, seeing, hearing, and feeling nothing of the bustle and jar of the streets, where they shall in effect, find the city put far away from them.” (1870) This philosophy and its tangible expression remain manifest in the Olmsted firm’s urban parks, and in recent generations have inspired scores more.

John Charles Olmsted bridged centuries from the vanishing frontier to the rapidly urbanizing twentieth-century over the course of his remarkable career. Nowhere was this better exemplified than in the emerging cities of the Pacific Northwest. Olmsted left a prolific legacy of public and private designs in both this region and across the United States and Canada. He served as the pivotal link between Frederick Law Olmsted and his much younger half-brother Frederick Law Olmsted, Jr. The Olmsted landscape architectural practice spanned from before the Civil War to the mid-20th Century. Its continuing importance to the quality of life for millions of Americans cannot be overstated. Any city possessing a piece of this legacy is lucky, indeed.

John Charles Olmsted brought to Portland extensive experience developing parks and park systems. Working with his father Frederick Law Olmsted for twenty years, he helped generate some of the firm’s best-known park systems, among them Louisville, Kentucky and the famous “Emerald Necklace” in Boston. For the rest of his career he continued to plan park systems across the country, from Portland, Maine to Dayton, Ohio, Charleston, South Carolina, Essex County, New Jersey, Seattle, Spokane and Portland, Oregon. Through all of these ran a common thread of design approach, practical intent, and overarching philosophy. His 1903 Portland parks report embodies key Olmstedian design principles first set out by Frederick Law Olmsted and described by eminent Olmsted scholar Charles Beveridge as:

- Genius of Place
- Unified Composition
- Orchestration of Movement
- Orchestration of Use
- Sustainable Design and Environmental Conservation, and
- A Comprehensive Approach

In Portland’s park system the younger Olmsted took pains to:

- Highlight Portland’s unique landscape character
- Create diverse, interconnected green spaces accessible to all
- Provide for both active recreation and passive immersion in nature
- Accommodate but segregate incompatible uses, and above all
- Secure high quality public green space for future generations

Although the plan’s execution has been yet imperfect and incomplete, key portions have been implemented and contribute greatly to Portland’s storied quality of life. For 115 years, Olmsted’s 1903 document has inspired visionary planning, and hopefully will continue to do so. However, the City’s current proposal to change the very purpose and laws governing Forest Park suggests a narrow and supremely short-sighted rejection of this enduring vision. One might wonder as well if

proponents have evaluated the added capital expense, maintenance burden and liability a large mountain bike trail system would bring, at a time when park departments nationwide are increasingly strapped. What existing parks and recreation facilities would suffer as a result?

Altering the designated use of Forest Park to accommodate special purpose, active recreation would fly in the face of both Olmsted's intent and current law that embodies it. Contemplated construction of miles of mountain bike trails would serve a small segment of the local population at great price to the rest, and to the landscape itself. Introduction of single track trails would be destructive in a great many ways, and irreparable damage done. The overarching loss would be the park's treasured natural character and tranquility. Erosion, slope destabilization, canopy loss, fragmentation of fragile vegetation and wildlife habitat and dangerously incompatible uses are but some of the foreseeable consequences.

NAOP urges City leaders to recognize the value of this spectacular resource that they have been entrusted to protect in perpetuity, acknowledging the considerable public investment and private generosity that delivered Forest Park into their care. There is nothing passé about protecting nature in the city; in fact its importance is increasingly being documented and championed. As John Charles Olmsted so presciently wrote, Forest Park "is intended to afford to visitors that sort of mental refreshment and enjoyment which can only be derived from the quiet contemplation of natural scenery....The fundamental purpose...requires the shutting off from the interior as completely as possible, all city sights and sounds, and the resolute exclusion of many exceedingly popular means of amusement...even at serious sacrifice of opportunities for those using them to enjoy some sort of scenery."

Portland's Forest Park may be the only city park in the country that has as a goal, set by law, to retain what the Olmsted Brothers originally envisioned for it to be: a natural sanctuary – a place for mental and spiritual renewal and refreshment. Forest Park is a public asset of great historical and environmental significance, an unsurpassed embodiment of the Olmsted philosophy. As such, Forest Park is nationally recognized and valued. NAOP urges local leaders to accord it commensurate value, and manage it consistent with all it contributes to the outstanding city you oversee.

Respectfully,



Lucy Lawliss
Co-Chair, NAOP



Addy Smith-Reiman
Co-Chair, NAOP