

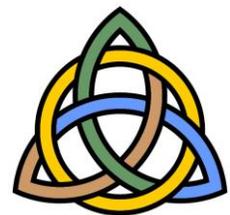


Hover Park

Interim Master Plan



December 2008



**Benton County
Parks**

Hover Park

Interim Master Plan

December 2008

*Cover photo of Hover Park
courtesy of Victoria Clark*

Acknowledgements:

**Benton County
Park Board:**

Earl "Skip" Gest
Marilyn Hyde
Kathye Kilgore
Richard Kilgore
Bert Lake (Chair)
Donna Raines
Henry Sauer
Glynn Wheeler (Member Emeritus)

**Benton County
Staff:**

Adam J. Fyall, Community Development and Parks Coordinator
Mark Finkbeiner, Park Ranger - Horn Rapids Park
Dennis Rockwell, Park Ranger - Two Rivers Park

Special Thanks:

Members of the "Hover Park Planning Sub-Committee for their research and recommendations: Marilyn Hyde, Bert Lake (Chair), Richard Kilgore, Victoria Clark, Ron Davidson, Robert Fortman, and Dennis Rockwell.

Contents

INTRODUCTION

SETTING, PURPOSE, AND NEED

PROCESS

CONDITIONS, ISSUES, OPTIONS, AND LIMITING FACTORS

FINDINGS

INTERIM MASTER PLAN



Introduction

Hover Park is one of eight units with the Benton County Parks System. The property is 175 acres in area and lies southeast of the community of Finley in the extreme eastern portion of Benton County. Along with Two Rivers Park six miles upstream, Hover Park is a leased property that is managed by Benton County but owned by the United States Army Corps of Engineers (the “Corps”).

In 2007 and 2008, Benton County undertook a comprehensive parks planning process that examined the Parks System both in its entirety and piece-by-piece. One of the chief recommendations of the Comprehensive Parks Plan (CPP) was to complete master plans for each of the eight parks in the System. Given some of the issues at play for Hover Park specifically, it was decided by the Benton County Park Board to address Hover Park right-away, and that process resulted in this Interim Master Plan. The Interim Master Plan is a simple document that answers some key questions for the purposes of short-term management, while setting the table for a more expansive and more visionary full master plan at some later time.

Setting, Use, and Need

Hover Park is a riverside park, characterized primarily by the roughly one-and-a-half miles of Columbia River frontage that comprises its eastern boundary. Topographically, the property is a combination of river terrace and steeper upland slopes; characterized both by areas of deep, wind-blown soils, and substantial rocky outcrops and talus. Most of the shoreline directly fronts the main river channel with the exception of a harbored cove that is the park's most notable natural feature.

Ecologically, three main environments are present: At the river interface, a thin riparian zone can be found in most areas that is supported by the diurnally-fluctuating river levels. In other low-lying areas away from the river, scrubland can be found throughout the park where depth to groundwater is minimal that is comprised mostly of invasive non-native plants such as Russian olive (*Eleagnus augustifolia*), which is visually the most noticeable plant in the park. In the drier, more upland areas, Columbia Basin shrub-steppe environments are found. In most cases the ecology of the park has been heavily impacted by past and ongoing human activities, and by frequent incursions of wildfire and off-road vehicular use.

Historically, the area is notable as the site of the first wagon train crossing of the Columbia River in 1853; and later was the site of the namesake town of Hover that was later abandoned but remnants of which remain on the site today. Corps ownership of the property came later in the 20th Century when the McNary Project required the expropriation of lands along the Columbia to accommodate the rising waters of Lake Wallula which filled behind McNary Dam. Today, the park is bisected by a section of the Burlington Northern Railroad which runs the length of the property which does pose some safety and access issues.

Currently, Hover Park is managed for passive, unstructured uses. Allowable activities include fishing, hiking, horseback riding, and bicycling; although there are no formal or official trails for any of these uses. A primitive parking area is available at the end of Hover Road to access the park, and no other amenities exist at the site. Non-permitted activities that are known to occur in the park include shooting, camping, and off-road vehicle use. The park has also been prone to illegal trash dumping through the years.

Unfortunately, Hover Park has garnered a reputation as the "black sheep" of the Benton County Parks System. With no identified vision and no advocating constituency, Hover has generally been at the bottom of the list when it comes to resources and attention. This has resulted in a number of responses in recent years, ranging from calls to "do something" about Hover, to the suggestion that perhaps Benton County should revise its lease arrangement with the Corps of Engineers and abdicate responsibility for Hover altogether. The recently-completed CPP public process reinforced the need to deal with the "Hover question" in the near term. It was clear from that process that there is a lot of awareness of and interest in Hover Park among the public, but also frustration at the condition of the park and the lack of any direction about its long-term management.

Comprehensive Parks Plan

In August of 2008, Benton County formally adopted the Comprehensive Parks Plan, and this is the guidance for Parks System management and development both in regards to overall vision and philosophy and in regards to specific major projects. Regarding Hover Park in particular, the CPP states that the Park Board needs to deal with the Hover issue, and identifies three specific steps to take:

Step One

- Control vehicular access into the park (including signage and physical barriers).

Step Two

- Establish a sub-committee to determine the future disposition of the park.

Step Three

Dependent on the decisions made in Step Two, the following should be considered:

- Develop a park master plan that considers water access, primitive camping options, water trail amenities, bathroom facilities, small boat access, parking, formal trail heads, and interpretive signage.
- Railroad crossing options either on the existing crossing north of property or with a new above-grade pedestrian bridge.

Process

In Spring 2008, the Park Board determined that a sub-committee should be established to review history, issues, and ideas concerning Hover Park. That sub-committee would return a report of findings and/or recommendations to the full Park Board for further consideration. The Hover Park Sub-Committee consisted of three Park Board members, three members of the general public, and one Benton County Parks staff person. After its review of the situation, the Sub-Committee decided to return a recommendation for this "Interim Master Plan" for the purposes of near-term management of the park, and suggested that a facilitated full master plan effort be tabled indefinitely until conditions changed or community pressures warranted new consideration.

Conditions, Issues, Options, and Limitations

The Sub-Committee examined many aspects of the park for its report and recommendations to the Park Board. The situation at Hover Park is complex. Here are the major components that were evaluated.

As noted elsewhere, Hover Park has not had the status or standing over the years as some of the other parks in the system. Maintenance and development resources are spread thin throughout the system, and lower profile parks get a lesser share of attention. As such, management does the minimum that it needs to, to satisfy the requirements of its lease with the Corps of Engineers. This situation is sometimes criticized in the public as a sort of “benign neglect” – or maybe not so benign.

One result of “less-attentive management” is that the door has been opened for abuses of the property, which compounds the difficulties of doing anything constructive with the park down the road. Hover Park has a reputation for being an easy place to dump trash, use off-road vehicles, and use firearms. None of these activities are allowed uses at the park, and all negatively impact aesthetic and habitat values, and contribute to a general feeling of a lack of safety by some patrons or potential patrons.

Hover Park is not a great distance from the metro Tri-Cities area, yet it is or feels like it is remote. This contributes positively to feelings of solitude or towards the types of activities for which dispersal is an asset; but remoteness again inhibits maintenance and the ability to patrol the park regularly. Because Hover is out-of-the-way and generally reachable only from one direction – the northwest – it is difficult to grow a constituency or patronage without a more localized population base or specific amenities that will draw users.

Given some of the conditions discussed above, one option that was brought forward was for the County to end its lease agreement with the Corps and get out of Hover Park altogether. This would revert direct management of the property back to the Corps and would not change Hover’s status as “public land”. It would remove Benton County from any management and maintenance responsibilities over the property. Such an action would however require redoing the lease for Two Rivers Park, because both properties are currently jointly covered under the same bilateral lease agreement.

There are several disparate issues that would need to be addressed if any changes or developments were proposed for the park. Primary examples include dealing with the rail line that runs through the property, water use, and cultural resources. If a significant rise in visitors was expected, crossing the railroad tracks and dealing with the water and cultural issues would have to be addressed. Any irrigation or potable water proposals would require an examination of the water rights situation at the park and the ability to deliver such water. Finally, being at the river interface, Hover has a likelihood of having elevated archaeological or historical resource values; and full cultural resources surveys and consultations would have to be undertaken to characterize and protect such resources.

For some people, Hover itself is not a destination but rather the jump-off point for other venues. Some people use Hover to access lands in the Wallula Gap area, including Benton County’s Wallula Gap Preserve which lies a couple of miles downstream. People can park at Hover, then walk or ride bikes/horses south onto adjacent public lands.

The CPP process illuminated the fact that there is a lot of public knowledge of and interest in Hover Park -- but there is no advocacy. No particular user group has come forward with offers of resources or vision; nor has there been any noteworthy public outcry for anything other than “cleaning it up”.

Findings

The Hover Park Sub-Committee and the Park Board made the following general findings, and used these conclusions to develop the Interim Master Plan:

Regarding Reorganization of the County-Corps Lease

The public sentiment that has shown itself has been strongly against the County divesting itself of its lease arrangement with the Corps of Engineers. Furthermore, re-organizing the lease would take time and energy that could best be spent improving the park, and the Corps itself is not favorable to changing the lease agreement at this time.

Regarding Major Development of Hover Park

No funding streams have been identified that would enable any form of “major” development of Hover Park.

The Facilities and Parks Department does not currently have extra maintenance and operations resources available for the increased maintenance demand that an improved Hover Park would require.

Benton County’s two existing developed parks – Horn Rapids Park and Two Rivers Park – are considered underused at this time. Expending resources to develop a third park just six miles away from Two Rivers does not make sense.

No unified vision has coalesced among the public regarding what an improved Hover Park would be or look like. During the comprehensive parks planning process, the public expressed a desire to have an accessible park with few amenities that continued to promote passive uses such as fishing and horse riding, but no formal or extensive development beyond that.

There are still hurdles to be overcome in regards to any major development at Hover Park, including but not limited to: safe ingress vis-à-vis the railroad, water rights and availability, cultural and historical resource concerns, and wetlands and shoreline issues.

Regarding Master Planning

This interim plan will suffice for the park indefinitely until conditions change. For now, Hover Park should remain essentially in “upgraded stand-by mode”. At the appropriate time in the future when there is pressure from the community, a professionally-facilitated master planning process will map-out a more formal blueprint for the park. Such “pressure” is defined as obvious parkland demand that is tied to population growth, or focused energy from the public or user groups.

Interim Master Plan

Operations and Management

Benton County will establish a more regular schedule for park inspection and maintenance. Because there is no regular staff dedicated to Hover Park, any added attention to Hover will be done on a staff-available basis.

To assist with inspections and maintenance planning, Benton County will work with the Park Board and the community to establish an ad-hoc “operations group” similar to what exists at Horn Rapids Park. Such an operations group, coordinating with County staff, can organize volunteer events and plan for small-scale improvements at Hover Park.

The three main areas of emphasis for Benton County staff and for any operations group that may be established will be: 1) to identify any safety concerns present in the park, which is always the County’s top management priority to begin with; 2) to identify and then clean-up illegal dump sites of trash and rubbish; and 3) begin a vegetation management program that will prune existing trees for aesthetics, mobility, and tree health; will clear areas either of lesser habitat value or for ease of access; and will identify areas for remediation.

Capital Improvements

For the interim period, only the access point at the end of Hover Road shall receive any capital improvements. Three upgrades will occur:

Some form of a cordon will be constructed by Benton County around the parking area in order to enclose the area to restrict unauthorized vehicular travel into the park. The form and material of the barrier will be of the County’s choosing, taking effectiveness, maintenance, aesthetics, and cost into consideration.

The surface of the parking enclosure will be upgraded to create a suitable parking area. This may include some grading and/or re-graveling of the area at the County’s discretion.

Signage will be upgraded at the access site to better inform patrons of boundaries, allowable uses, and park rules.

In addition to these improvements, Benton County will continue to look at the river interface for an opportunity to provide amenities for the Northwest Discovery Water Trail, which begins on the Clearwater River in Idaho, continues onto the Snake River, then finally onto the Columbia River as it passes Hover Park. Signage and a kayak/canoe launch are examples of basic amenities that could be provided at an appropriate location.

#