

Board of Park Commissioners Minutes, 1890-2007

Overview of the Collection

Creator	Seattle (Wash.). Board of Park Commissioners.
Title	Board of Park Commissioners Minutes
Dates	1890-2007 (inclusive) 1890 2007
Quantity	6.8 cubic feet, (7 boxes, 20 volumes)
Collection Number	5800-01
Summary	Minutes of the Board of Park Commissioners, 1890 to 1991. Includes information on parks improvements, use of Parks lands, and budget information.
Repository	Seattle Municipal Archives Seattle Municipal Archives Office of the City Clerk City of Seattle PO Box 94728 98124-4728 Seattle, WA Telephone: 206-233-7807 Fax: 206-386-9025 archives@seattle.gov
Access Restrictions	Records are open to the public.
Languages	English
Sponsor	Funding for encoding this finding aid was provided through a grant awarded by the National Endowment for the Humanities.

Historical Note

The Department of Parks and Recreation administers Seattle's parks system and community recreation programs. It maintains over 6000 acres of city parks, 20 miles of shoreline, and 22 miles of boulevards. The department operates the city's 25 community recreation centers, the Woodland Park Zoo, the Seattle Aquarium, nine swimming pools, a tennis center, and more than 400 smaller facilities. In addition, it is custodian for four public golf courses, three moorages, and several other athletic and cultural facilities.

In 1884 David Denny donated a five-acre tract that was the site of a cemetery to the City of Seattle, stipulating that it be designated a public park. The site, initially named Seattle Park and later renamed Denny Park, was the first ordinance-designated public park in Seattle. The ordinance that accepted the property (Ordinance 571) also made allowances for its conversion from a cemetery to a park and included a provision that three Park Commissioners be appointed to oversee the conversion. At that time, the City of Seattle was operating under its 1869 charter which provided for a relatively small government of 13 elected officials and three other officers, in whom all municipal authority was vested.

Legislation in 1887 (Ordinance 874) created the Board of Park Commissioners, consisting of three members to be appointed by Council, and who served three-year terms. This unpaid body was charged with all management responsibilities for Seattle's parks and was expected to report to Council as often as each quarter, making recommendations for improvements and for the acquisition of new properties.

In 1890 the City of Seattle adopted its first home-rule charter. The city's population had expanded from 3533 in 1880 to nearly 43,000. The new charter mandated a dramatically larger city government composed of 34 elected officials, 13 departments, and six regulatory commissions, including a Board of Park Commissioners. A park fund was also established, consisting of: proceeds from the sale of bonds issued for that purpose; gifts; appropriations made by Council; and 10% of the gross receipts from all fines, penalties, and licenses. The new Board of Park Commissioners, appointed by the Mayor, consisted of five paid (\$300 per year) members who served five-year terms. Although the Board had all management responsibilities for Seattle's parks, including the authority to appoint a superintendent and to negotiate for property, Council retained the authority to purchase property.

In 1892 the Board appointed E. O. Schwagerl, a noted landscape architect and engineer, to be the second Superintendent of Parks. During the four years that he held the office, Schwagerl developed the first comprehensive plan for Seattle's parks. This plan may have guided Assistant City Engineer George F. Cotterill. Cotterill organized volunteers to construct 25 miles of bicycle paths, the routes of which were utilized by the Olmsted Brothers in their 1903 city-wide plan for a system of parks and boulevards.

In 1896 Seattle adopted a new home-rule charter. This charter redefined the Board of Park Commissioners as the Park Committee: five unpaid appointees who reported annually to Council. In addition, all management responsibilities of the parks, including the authority to obtain new properties, were vested with the City Council. The Superintendent of Parks position was eliminated and its responsibilities were assumed by the new Superintendent of Streets, Sewers, and Parks, one of the three members of the Board of Public Works.

In 1903, City Council adopted the Olmsted Brothers plan to expand and develop a system of parks and boulevards. At the same time, the Charter was amended, re-establishing the Board of Park Commissioners and giving it the kind of independence that park commissions in the metropolitan cities of the East enjoyed. While Council retained the authority to approve the purchase of property, the Board assumed all management responsibilities of the parks, as well as the exclusive authority to spend park fund monies. In addition, all park-related authority was removed from the Board of Public Works, and the Board of Park Commissioners elected to appoint a superintendent. Public support, both for the implementation of the Olmsted plan as well as for the new, empowered Board, was substantial. In 1905 a \$500,000 park bond was passed; followed by \$1,000,000 in 1908; \$2,000,000 in 1910; and \$500,000 in 1912.

In 1907 the Superintendent was joined by a new staff position, the Assistant Superintendent, and in the following year the first directorship, Playgrounds Director, was created. In 1912 the first full-time engineer appeared under the title Chief Engineer, later to be changed to Park Engineer. By 1922 a Head Gardener had been appointed, and two more directorships created: the Zoo Director and the Bathing Beaches Director.

In 1925 the charter was amended such that no more money could be spent in the acquisition of park properties than was available through the park fund. In that same year, the Park Engineer was replaced by a new position, the Landscape Architect. In 1926 the Board abolished the position of Superintendent, distributing that position's responsibilities between the Head Gardener and the Landscape Architect. In 1927 the position title of Park Engineer was re-established, but with the duties

and responsibilities of the old superintendent, while the new Junior Park Engineer directly managed engineering and construction activity.

In 1926 Mayor Bertha K. Landes appointed a Municipal Recreation Committee, comprised of Park Board members, School Board members, and a representative of the community at large, to analyze ways in which they could cooperatively contribute to the municipal recreation program. The Committee submitted its report to the Mayor in January 1928. The report detailed which facilities were provided by the Park Board and which by the School Board; how the facilities could be more efficiently utilized; and what additional facilities were required.

A ten-year plan for the Department of Parks was announced in 1931. This plan, based upon a projected population for the Seattle metropolitan area in 1940, was a program of development aimed at making better use of existing properties, adding to those properties that needed more space, and acquiring new properties in those parts of town that were experiencing growth. Much of this plan would be realized by the Works Projects Administration later in the decade.

In 1939 administration of playground programs and bathing beaches was consolidated under the newly created position. In 1940, with the opening of the West Seattle Golf Course (the city's third municipal golf course) the position of Golf Director was established. A 1948 Charter amendment required the Board of Park Commissioners to appoint a park superintendent, and the position was to be excluded from the classified civil service.

A Charter amendment in 1967 reconstituted the Board of Park Commissioners as an advisory body to the Mayor, Council, the renamed Department of Parks and Recreation, and other City agencies. The amendment placed the fiscal and operational administration of the department under the control of the Superintendent of Parks, who was now appointed by the Mayor to serve a four-year term. The specific duties of both the Superintendent and the Board, as well as the number of members and term length for the latter, were to be prescribed by ordinance. Council passed an ordinance in 1968 (Ordinance 96453) which defined the Board as a seven-member body with three-year terms of service.

The \$65 million Forward Thrust bond was approved by voters in 1968. By 1974, with matching funds, interest, etc., it had grown to 92 million dollars in working capital; by 1976, over 40 new properties had been obtained by the Department of Parks and Recreation utilizing these funds. Forward Thrust and the Seattle Model City Program together supported the largest expansion of the Park system in Seattle history. These programs funded more than 70 new parks and park facilities.

Content Description

Legislation in 1887 (Ordinance 874) created the Board of Parks Commissioners, consisting of three members to be appointed by City Council; these members served three-year terms. This unpaid body was charged with all management responsibilities for Seattle's parks and was expected to report to the City Council as often as each quarter, making recommendations for improvements and for the acquisition of new properties.

Seattle's first home-rule City Charter, adopted in 1890, expanded the size of the Board of Parks Commissioners to five members and greatly expanded the Board's authority to include control over public parks and squares, as well as play areas, boulevards, parkways, and park facilities. The Board was the only agency authorized to spend Parks funds, and was authorized to designate land for use by the Parks Department, to plan parks, make improvements to existing parks, and to censor any artworks or monuments presented to the City. Although the Board had the authority to appoint a superintendent and to negotiate for property, Council retained the authority to purchase property.

The failure of the highly regulatory 1890 Charter led to adoption of a new home-rule charter in 1896. This charter abolished the Board of Parks Commissioners and established the Park Committee, a five-member unpaid body with significantly curtailed authority. All management responsibilities for the parks, including the authority to obtain new properties, were vested with the City Council. The Superintendent of Parks position was eliminated and its responsibilities were assumed by the new Superintendent of Streets, Sewers, and Parks, one of the three members of the Board of Public Works.

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A 1948 City Charter amendment required the Board of Park Commissioners to appoint a park superintendent to administer the department; this official managed parks and department employees. A Charter amendment in 1967 reconstituted the Board of Parks Commissioners as an advisory body to the Mayor, City Council, the renamed Department of Parks and Recreation, and other City agencies. The amendment placed the fiscal and operational administration of the department under the control of the Superintendent of Parks, who was now appointed by the Mayor. City Council approved an ordinance in 1968 (Ordinance 96453) which established the current structure of the Board as a seven-member body with each commissioner serving a three-year term.

Minutes of the Board of Park Commissioners, 1890-1991, include lists of board members and staff present at each meeting, old and new business, and agendas for future meetings. Minutes report motions and resolutions of board members, as well as actions on citizen requests and petitions, which might be granted, denied, or referred to another authority. Protests, remonstrances, and memorials are also included.

Issues covered include land acquisitions, condemnation and improvement projects of Parks lands, and restrictions on citizen use of Parks land. Plans, inspections, funding, concessions, equipment, and estimates of work costs are discussed for a wide variety of Seattle parks, playgrounds, playfields, and golf courses, such as Volunteer Park and the Woodland Park Zoo. Special events, including Seafair and the Potlatch, are also discussed, as are activities including swimming, tennis, music, and theater. Information regarding events and programs for youth organizations such as the Boy and Girl Scouts are also found in the minutes. Reports from park police and various committees are included; also present are apportionments of bond money and budgets adopted.

Use of the Collection

Preferred Citation

[Item and date], Department of Parks and Recreation Board of Park Commissioners Minutes, Volume [number], Page [number], Record Series 5800-01. Seattle Municipal Archives.

Administrative Information

Names and Subjects

Subject Terms :

Parks--Washington (State)--Seattle

Playgrounds--Washington (State)--Seattle

Recreation--Washington (State)--Seattle

Youth--Recreation--Washington (State)--Seattle

Corporate Names :

Seattle (Wash.). Dept. of Parks and Recreation.

Geographical Names :

Seattle

Seattle (Wash.)--Politics and government

Form or Genre Terms :

Minutes

Finding aid prepared by Finding aid prepared by Scott Cline and Shannon B. Lynch
2004