

INVESTING IN THE COMMUNITY  
OBTAINING A HIGH RETURN IN THE FORM OF SOCIAL CAPITAL  
AN OPINION ABOUT THE PROPOSED PARK DISTRICT

BY GARY G. LINKOUS

I hesitate to engage in online exchanges, as it is a forum that seems to disregard the need for accuracy, the “truths” put forth are often based on limited knowledge that is charged with emotion and if repeated enough times these “truths” become the new reality despite all the evidence to the contrary.

I view this type of communication process as often being not so much an equal intellectual exchange of perceptions and ideas so individuals can make well advised and sound decisions, but more as a one sided opportunity to make comments as if one is an experts on the issue with no actual responsibility or requirement to thoroughly research the topic and support one’s statements and positions with rational and demonstrable evidence and facts. To me, the problem seems to be the fact that emotional feelings, if not controlled, prevent us from very carefully listening and contemplating the position of the opposing side before firing off a response.

Therefore, before I present my point of view, I want to make it clear that my goal is provide my reasoning and observations so that those interested have an opportunity to make the most informed decision possible regarding supporting or not supporting the proposed park district.

I ALSO WANT TO LET YOU KNOW THAT THIS IS A RATHER LONG READ, BUT I WAS TRYING TO GET ALL OF THOUGHTS DOWN AT ONE TIME AND IN ONE PLACE.

I do not assert myself as someone special or as someone with any superior knowledge. Clearly there are far more talented people living in this community than me. I am simply someone that has been very blessed and fortunate to have successfully establish a career and a life style in this community for the past 42 years. I think I am about average in terms of how I live my life. I do realize are community is made up of people across a broad range of the socioeconomic scale. Each person is unique in their lifestyle, individual experiences and how they perceive various situation and make decisions. Therefore, I do not see my opinion as any more than my opinion with some additional information as someone who was actively engaged in developing the concept for the park district.

I have raised three daughters in this community and now have 9 grandchildren. I will confess that I am naturally biased in favor of the proposed park simply because on the days I am charged with watching grandkids, I would like as *many options* as possible for them to be safe, active, and have fun as opposed to sitting around on I-Pads, cell phones, watching TV and constantly being hungry.

Wildwood Park, mountain biking, skiing or hiking on a trail, all of which I truly enjoy and from time to time share with my grandchildren, does not cut it with a group of 4-12 year olds., This is especially true if my time with them is spontaneous and/or I have just a few hours during the day to spend time with them. For this, the proposed Park District fits the bill. Over time it can create numerous activities and opportunities that simply are vastly different and are not within the programming and operational systems of BLM and the Forest Service.

### **OBSERVATION ONE:**

My first observation is that in this community a very small percentage of the population dedicates itself to true community involvement. I define community involvement as any activity that adds to the quality of life for **all of those living in the community**. I see the proposed park district as being one of these activities.

A park district is nothing new. They are prevalent throughout the United States in all sorts of different communities, including communities like ours. This is because such organizations provide a return on investment not measured in dollars and cents, but in societal benefits for community members of all ages.

By researching on line, I found numerous articles and research reports on this issue. I have attached at the end of my opinion an exhibit of nine of the benefits I found most meaningful to me. My purpose in doing so is to share with you things that helped to strengthen my opinion for the park district. It is up to you to decide if they are relevant to your position.

I do believe that a lot of the opposition to the park district is based on a lack of experience as to what a park district provides. It is not just about a trip to Wildwood Park. Park Districts traditionally provide not only unique physical activities, but educational programs, social gatherings such as concerts, summer day camps and after school activities. They are multidimensional and by legislative mandates must serve all age levels and socioeconomic groups in the community. *See OBSERVATION THREE, PARA. 3(c) below for legislative intent.*

### **OBSERVATION TWO:**

The initial proposed park development area has always been designated as a park since I have lived here. At one time the Dorman Center served this community with a variety of beneficial activities, however Clackamas County opted to let the building and park go. The local Woman's Club members, as part of the small percentage truly dedicated to community involvement, are trying to save, restore and improve the park.

This has required them to obtain a formal memorandum of understanding which will allow them to obtain the designated park area plus some additional property at no cost. They have openly provided public gatherings to inform the community of their goals for the past two years prior to the upcoming election. They have navigated their way through a myriad of regulations, they have

researched the actual cost of park development and have put together an initial proposed budget based on hours and hours of research, which resulted in approval from Clackamas County after their review. They have met all the Statutory requirements to get this initiative in front of the County Commissioners, and subsequently met all the County Commissioners' concerns to receive approval to get the park district initiative on the ballot.

**The result of all this work was to provide this community (you) with the opportunity to decide whether they want to have a Park District or not.**

The Park District is a statutory creature subject to public hearings laws and a variety of strict budget and audit compliance regulations. The application process required complex documentation, hearings and subsequent modifications and document reviews by various government entities, the Oregon Department of Revenue and Clackamas County. As an attorney, my pro bono contribution to the process was being sure all the "T"s were crossed and the "I"s were dotted on the various submissions and the petition.

A similar process is required going forward after approval. These requirements make the entire operation of the park district highly regulated and transparent at all times. I mention this because I was involved in reviewing extensive research to support the budget, the mil rate and formation of the Park District. This included consulting with Clackamas County's Park and Recreation Staff, Private Engineering Firms and relying on the numerous resources available through the **Oregon Recreation and Parks Association (ORAP)**. This was critical both for getting the measure on the ballot as well as insuring that if the Park District is established it will be eligible for substantial sums of grant money from various organizations nationwide.

**To me the most critical need was budgeting in a fulltime membership with the ORAP if the park district is approved. This organization is a well-established and very successful non-profit dedicated to providing the resources, guidance and education to insure the success of park districts throughout Oregon. Because park districts require locally elected board members, it is this organization that will insure the board members have the resources and knowledge they need to be successful in developing the park district while at the same time meeting all the regulatory and auditing requirements that must be met.**

In addition to all the above work, candidates have stepped forward to offer their help, so the Park District can be successful. **Once again who will serve on the board is not their decision, but yours.**

All these individuals have done something most members of this community will never do. That is to donate countless hours of hard work and research and endure public criticism from a variety of members in this small community, which is sometimes very vehement, disrespectful and untruthful, all for the sole purpose of giving the community an opportunity to decide on whether or not we will recover, restore and improve the designated park area and begin to share resources so we can serve and include **all segments** of the population in community activities.

I do not mind if you disagree with the Park District. However, I respectfully take strong exception to anyone accusing any of these individuals as being involved in some pet project for a few select individuals or as having an ill-conceived idea of what is necessary for a park district to serve this community or as to having an ulterior motive, or as to being incompetent in their budget planning or unrealistic in their goals.

It is my observation that not only are such comments unjustified and in poor form, they raise the suspicion that you know of the weakness in the issues you are attempting to use to persuade people's opinions, therefore you attempt to bolster your position using unrelated personal degradation of those disagreeing with you. I would urge you to think about how such actions are better replaced with more intent listening and less talking. Something I still have trouble mastering.

### **OBSERVATION THREE:**

**"No more taxes"** can be a spontaneous general knee jerk reaction or it can be based on a well-reasoned opinion that the Park District, after careful consideration is simply not worth the investment to the community. I would suspect that with COVID, inflation and the current state of the world, there can be a lot of spontaneous knee jerk responses. I must say that I have that same response to increased taxes. However, this is a onetime deal, so I felt I needed to think things through before reaching a decision. Here are my thoughts on increased taxes.

1. First off, how much are we talking about? If you look at the budget in the petition you will see zero dollars from tax revenue for 2022-2023. That is because using the election in May instead of November results in final approval at the Oregon Department of Revenue being past the cutoff date to calculate tax collection approval for 2022-2023. This is okay, as there is a substantial amount of organizational, issues to resolve the first year after approval of the park district.

For the preceding two tax years I figure property tax increases of about \$300 to \$350 per year. For my wife and I that translates into one day and night at the beach or one day skiing or one time into town for a night out with friends or one trip over to Bend to see my daughter. This does not include bringing my grandkids along, but for me it is just not that much money for the potential access to year-round personal and family activities.

So, say I have no such park and I use the local environment around me what does that cost? We do a lot of hiking up in Old Maid Flat that is easy, and we have walked it all, and I mean all, over the years we have lived here. However, it is not something to do with grand kids. It just does not have the necessary stimulation to keep them engaged very long. The same thing is true with Wild Woodland Park unless they are playing in the river. So, what if we go skiing or

fishing or for a bike ride or up to a lake?

What gear do we have? Good hiking shoes and boots, skis (downhill and cross country), paddle boards, back packs, and bicycles. Do I take my grandkids? If so maybe I need rental gear for them or maybe their parents will buy them the gear they need. I will need the truck with my rack system attached.

Better make sure the grand kids have everything packed that they need, especially helmets, pads, goggles, gloves, life jackets etc. Depending on where we go, it can be a long drive back to pick-up a forgotten item. Worse yet is to leave something behind. Do they have friends that want to go? Do those kids have the necessary gear?

What is my point? Based on my experience, which I believe is like many active families in our community, other than very simple activities such a hiking all the wholesome fun stimulating things to do in our local environment have evolved such that they require very specific good equipment, none of which is cheap, but all of which is necessary.

Is it worth it for me to invest \$300-\$350 a year so I can run the grand kids down to a local park with their friends for a few hours of play where there is an array of different and fun activities within a confined safe space?

2. Given today's realities and the fact that Memorandum of Understanding relating to the transfer of the property has been renewed several times and will not be renewed again, I could think of no worse timing to bring this issue to the community for a vote, especially with a proposed tax levy. The reality is that it is now or never.

Due to my own adversity to increased tax payments, I also thought it was important to consider some of the arguments opponents have poised as a reason for a "no" vote. Below are some the issues I have thought through:

A. Too poor to pay more.

For those citizen on limited incomes the reason may seem simple, they cannot afford it. However, it is their choice to make. In many instances their decision is dictated by the results of their previous choices. Sometimes they vote yes because they view the value to them as greater than the cost.

I do see some people using this argument to garner support for an overall "no" vote on the park district. However, I believe this is a misplaced argument.

**I do not discount the hardship of a low fixed income**, and it is clearly each person's choice as to how they view this issue. I believe people using this argument need to acknowledge that this community has approved various tax increases in the past that have had the very same negative impact on these same individuals they are so concerned about now. Many such tax hikes provided little to no benefit to these people.

Granted, times have changed for the worse over the past couple of years. However, every community everywhere in this country has had and will have residents that are faced with this difficulty. To counter this problem, Clackamas County, like most of the U.S., has a property tax relief program. Though it is not perfect, in that it is a deferral program versus a forgiveness program, it is the solution our elected officials have put in place.

One of the purposes of the property tax relief program is to insure communities can vote for tax increases and certain segments of the population can avoid the hardship of this vote. Where this type of relief does not exist, the community begins to make decisions not on what is a new or a better alternative for the future of the community, but on the financial realities created by history.

Many times, this history represents a long gone economic era in which older citizens lived during their working years. This problem is also compounded by inflation, bad luck, tragic life altering events and poor personal choices or no personal choices about retirement years. In all events it is real, and we should be compassionate towards these individuals.

With that said, I still have the opinion that this segment of our community should not dominate or dictate the future potential of any community, especially if the community is giving up something that provides a positive return to a broader segment of the community over a longer period.

B. Taxation of absentee owners, forest service cabins and landlords.

I do not find the fact that absentee property owners will be taxed without having a vote as a compelling reason for voting "no" on the Park District.

This taxation without a vote argument is a nationwide reality wherein substantial property tax income is collected from absentee land owners living outside the voting district. It is most prevalent in high end destination resort communities where most of the homes are "second homes". You simply cannot live in two places at one time.

It should be no surprise to the absentee landowner at the time of purchase that property outside their voting district will be taxed with little to no right to object

to the taxes imposed. Every year by the tax assessor reminds them of this.

I am also curious as to how many of these absentee owners in our district live in a community where they have the advantage of a park district while they do not want us to have one? How many absentee landowners are paying property taxes for their park?

As to people that own forest service cabins. If they are Oregonians, they potentially had a hand in electing those representatives and senators that passed the statutes allowing for property tax assessments and the establishment of the park district boundary. It was ultimately the County Commissioners that set the boundary for the Park District. Contrary to the notion that the proponents of the park excluded Government Camp for fear of a no vote, it was the Commissioner's decision to exclude Government Camp as they found it did not fit all the necessary criteria to be included and its removal had no adverse impact on the proposed budget plan for the district.

If forest service cabin owners did not like the boundary designation, then they had the right to appeal this decision. If they did not, which was the case, then they made the boundary final by that choice. To me, raising this as a basis for voting "no" on the park district ignores this reality. It has no justifiable rationale for me much for the same reasons stated above regarding absentee owners.

As to landlords, I am not certain that the proposed property tax increase will solely have the net effect of raising rental cost for residential properties in the community. I agree that a landlord will take this into consideration in setting the rent, and in a commercial triple net lease rents will go up. However, in the residential setting I believe landlords will set rents based more on what the market will allow and will push that rent level up as high as reasonable to insure a profitable business regardless of the property tax burden. I am also wondering if the range for the increase in rent is about \$20.00 to \$40.00 a month and is easily added in due to the demand for rental property.

All property owners within the district boundary will contribute to the park district if it is approved. I just do not see the rationale for an obligation to vote "no" to minimize property taxes for absentee owners and landlords. I still believe a more rational basis for a decision is one based on what value and benefits voters believe the community will receive from the Park District.

C. Local control of tax dollars.

I do not view the proposed tax increase as being characteristics of most of the taxes I pay. I say this based on the following:

1. The Statewide Land Use Planning Goal 8 requires local governments to plan for the recreation needs of their residents and visitors. The goal places priority on non-motorized forms of recreation, and recreation areas that serve high-density populations with limited transportation options and limited financial resources. **It also places priority on recreation areas that are free or available at a low cost to the public.**
2. In the Clackamas County Comprehensive Plan (“CCCP”) Chapter 9 Open Space, Parks and Historic Sites the Summary of Findings and Conclusions states that “[c]onsideration must be given to various methods of financing the provision of adequate park and recreation facilities and programs in urban areas. **A park and recreation district would probably be the best solution.” CCCP pg. 9-3.**
3. **In CCCP Chapter 9B Parks and Recreation Policies an expressed policy is to initiate the formation of parks and recreation districts to provide a full range of recreation facilities and programs for urban residents. CCCP 9.B.7. This policy provision goes on to state that the park district is to initiate a recreation program, coordinate the use of publicly operated recreation facilities, provide access to recreation services for all County residents, attempt to meet the recreational needs of all age groups, serve as many different interest groups as possible and keep participant fees as low as possible while attempting to recoup many of the cost of each program. CCCP 9.B.7.2. There are a variety of suggested activities in this policy statement including both team sports, exercise classes and arts and crafts.**
4. In the Mt Hood Community Plan (hereafter (MHCP) there are three designated urban areas. Government Camp, Rhododendron and Welches/Wemme. MHCP 10. There is a policy to Encourage development of recreational facilities in these areas. MHCP 10.A.3.2 .

The above provides the statutory and regulatory basis for the County to turn the designated park property over to the proposed Park District along with all fiscal responsibility, use and development.

Thus, development and operation of the Park District is a done by local control on property owned by the local district. Every penny of my tax dollars for the district is spent in this community, based on decisions by people elected in this community, for the sole benefit of people living in this community. My tax dollars combined with other community members provide us with the combined monetary ability to access substantial sums of money to create numerous opportunities and activities for everyone living in this community regardless of age and ability. More important is that acting together in support of the Park District we also provide a variety of free and affordable activities and

opportunities to those community members less fortunate than many of us.

## CONCLUSION

I appreciate that some of you can simply not afford it and encourage you to investigate the Clackamas County Property Tax Deferral program. I believe this would help you in making an informed decision regardless of how you ultimately vote, but you should vote.

I view some of the stated opposition to the Park District as a knee jerk reaction for “no more taxes”. This is natural, but it results in very little analysis of what a “no” really means to this community. If you are interested in the community give it some thought. If you do not really care about deciding whether the park district is beneficial to the community that is your prerogative. Either way you should get your vote in.

In some opposition I see the simple desire to maintain the past. It is sort of like calmly rowing a boat. You are always looking back where you have been and rely on your past to direct where you go in the future. I believe it is natural to view any change as a loss, and therefore not desirable.

The reality of the above types of thinking is that change will occur with or without your participation, simply because nothing will ever stay the same. The result is that you can pass by an opportunity without really seeing it or thinking about it. You are then sometimes left with the clear 20:20 hind site of an opportunity that was lost.

As to the absentee property owners and landlords. I will simply not decide based on these criteria. There is a reality to second home ownership, and I really question how many absentee property owners take advantage of a park district where they live? And if they do, how many absentee owners are paying property tax for their park district?

As to our other local parks and trails, I believe I have said it. I love them, but they are a very different in terms of resources for entertainment, activities and exercise. Further, many of the activities they provide require preparation, gear and time. Further, I believe the proponents of asking BLM or the Forest Service to provide additional alternative should review the mandates, regulations, policies and mission statements for the entities before relying on these notions as a basis for voting no for the Park District.

For me, I believe the past made this community what we are, but the past should not take precedent over this community's future. I believe strongly that the Park District going forward can and will provide several social benefits to this community similar to or the same as I found in my on-line research and listed below. It is my opinion that this is good for our community and it is needed as a first step toward a future of restoring and improving our quality of life. For these reason, I am willing to invest what seems to me a small sum of money as my part in community

involvement for a community project offering a great return on my investment in the form of social capital.

**I will vote for the Park District.**

I simply asked that you give my opinion a read and think about it. The decision is entirely yours and you do not need to justify your reasoning to me. However, in being truthful, I do hope it encourages you to join me in supporting the Park District.

Respectfully,

Gary G. Linkous

## **RECOGNIZED BENEFITS OF A COMMUNITY PARK DISTRICT**

### **1. Promoting Community Wellness**

Many Americans live sedentary lifestyles, especially today. Recreation Park Programs help provide places for community members to be active and encouraging a healthier lifestyle by offering a variety of opportunities that are entertaining, educational and interactive. Many activities are presenting in doors and often well after dark. Try a Salsa class at 7:00pm on a rainy November night.

### **2. Providing Connection Space**

With the internet's prevalence, it has become more common to go from work to home without changing up the routine. Parks give individuals a space for meeting their neighbors in person. Community parks can be spaces for kids and adults to gather and meet new people who enjoy similar activities. Picnic areas provide space for large gatherings like parties or reunions.

Thrilling playground equipment can further entice visitors and encourage parents to bring their kids multiple times. As parents visit a park more, it is more likely they will meet more of their community members.

Those interactions then form the basis of community. Separate families and individuals can bond together with the intention to help their surrounding community and fellow community members. In a 2016 study, communities that dedicated more space to communal park areas had residents who reported higher community well-being levels.

### **3. Encouraging Activity in Kids**

When kids get to play outside instead of indoors, it increases the positive impact of physical activity. Kids who spend time outside have:

Better test scores

Better cognitive function

Fewer behavioral problems

Fewer signs of ADHD

Improved self-discipline

Getting kids to play has risen to such elevated levels of importance that doctors prescribe time outdoors for some patients as part of a push by the National Recreation and Park Association. Pediatricians have recognized the advantages of a park for their patients.

Childhood is a different holistic experience for every kid. Kids need hands-on learning opportunities outside of the classroom, and community playgrounds can be an enriching space for kids to learn and have fun.

How can you bring kids to a park? Build them playgrounds that excite them. Think thrilling

slides, skate board parks, pump tracks and climbing walls. With the latest equipment, kids can play out their adventurous fantasies through a variety of challenging structures.

#### **4. Creating Safe Gathering Places**

Residents need to feel safe. If they don't have anywhere to go without feeling in danger, they will remain in their homes. For communities where no one leaves their homes, residents do not get the benefits of outdoor activity or engaging with each other. Here, parks can help solve this problem by providing residents and their kids with a safe place to go.

Parents may feel afraid of letting their kids play outside alone especially around the sandy river or out on our many hiking trails. However, in a survey of patrons and nearby residents of 48 parks across the country, the majority felt the parks were safe. Park use correlated directly with supervised programs at the facility more than security personnel on-site.

Parks give community members a safe location to gather and play. By having a safe place for their kids, parents may be more likely to let their children outside. As already noted, when kids engage in physical activity outside, they enjoy more significant benefits.

#### **5. Including Everyone in Play**

For those with disabilities, finding ways to get active can be difficult. A park with an inclusive set of programs and playgrounds that allow people of all abilities to enjoy lets everyone in on the fun. People who engage with others of differing abilities from themselves increase their positive feelings for others.

#### **6. Giving Families Free and Low-Cost Activity**

Free is always the perfect price, especially for families looking for fun without breaking the bank. Providing a variety of recreational opportunities in neighborhoods offers residents a place to take their kids without spending too much.

It can be difficult to keep kids entertained. Luckily, community parks can be a fun, cost-effective way to keep kids occupied. Parks, especially those with innovative playgrounds, give parents a break from the usual routine, and kids get the chance to release their energy. Regardless of the number of kids in a family, a trip to the park is easy on a family budget.

Free fun fits into any income. While amusement parks and other attractions are exciting ways to get out of the house, they often come at a high price. These options may be off the table for large families looking for a day trip on a budget. Having recreational areas in neighborhoods and local parks for kids ensures all families have the opportunity for a great time outside.

#### **7. Encouraging Social Skills in Kids**

Playgrounds at parks do more than provide a structure for kids to jump, climb and slide on. The equipment also helps build social interactions between kids. With multiple options for play, just about every kid can find something to do. Additionally, many activities, like see-saws, require a partner. Without realizing it, kids will pair up for play.

Community playgrounds offer a better chance for kids to socially engage with other kids than an informal game of pickup football or basketball. Since playgrounds do not have a competitive nature, everyone wins.

With recess at schools averaging 10 to 35 minutes a day, kids may not have enough time for social interaction at the school playground. Having a park in their neighborhood allows them to meet other kids outside their peer group and learn how to interact with each other.

While kids see the same peers at school every day, visitors at a local playground or park may change regularly. With new friends to make and people to meet, kids visiting their community playgrounds can continue to build their social skills outside of school.

## **8. Offering Family Bonding Sites**

Because parks have opportunities for people of all ages to have fun, families can engage in activities together. Families that participate in recreational activities together report greater feelings of cohesiveness and happiness. Parks bring families together for fun activities and significant events. Families may gather at a park for a birthday party or graduation celebration because these locations offer activities for everyone without the high cost of indoor venues.

Many families gather with extended relatives for large family reunions. Parks that offer picnic areas or pavilions that can be rented out are popular choices for events like family reunions. Several generations of family members can enjoy all the benefits of parks for the community.

With so many ways that families can use parks together to build memories, such recreational areas can strengthen the bonds between family members.

## **9. Creating Social Equality**

Parks help with social equality by providing residents of low-income families with safe spaces to visit. People already feel safe in parks. In the study of people's perceptions of park safety. Encouraging all groups to use parks means encouraging people from every income level to take advantage of the amenities. Offering free programs may entice people to visit the park if they otherwise wouldn't. Supervised programs also correlated to park users' increased feelings of safety.

Parks are free to use and are open to all, regardless of income. Anyone can participate and kids playing on the playground can interact with others. Parks areas give everyone in those areas a safe place to play and meet. Having a centerpiece such as a playground with action-packed

structures will encourage parents to bring their kids to the park, raising visitation rates, which further enhances the feeling of safety.