

ONE TACOMA

A Comprehensive Plan
for a Vibrant, Connected,
and Sustainable City

Parks and Recreation Baseline Report | **DRAFT**
November 2024

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1 INTRODUCTION

Parks promote health and wellness, encourage early childhood development, build community connection, and contribute to resilience and ecological health.¹ In Tacoma, most of the City's robust park system operations are run by Parks Tacoma, an independent parks district that maintains and improves most of the City's parkland. Parks Tacoma organizes its work across three key mission areas:

1. **Active Living and Community Wellness.** The facilities, amenities, and programming associated with this category fulfill what a "typical" parks and recreation agency might offer.
2. **Arts, Culture, & Heritage.** This mission area further enhances the community benefits of Tacoma's park system. A network of heritage and historic sites, visual and performing arts programming, and public gathering events build additional public connections to the park system through local history and artistic expression.
3. **Nature & Environment.** Open spaces and natural areas are important environmental assets in a community. Public access to preservation areas differs across sites, but these areas are key for building awareness of and meeting many habitat and ecological system needs.

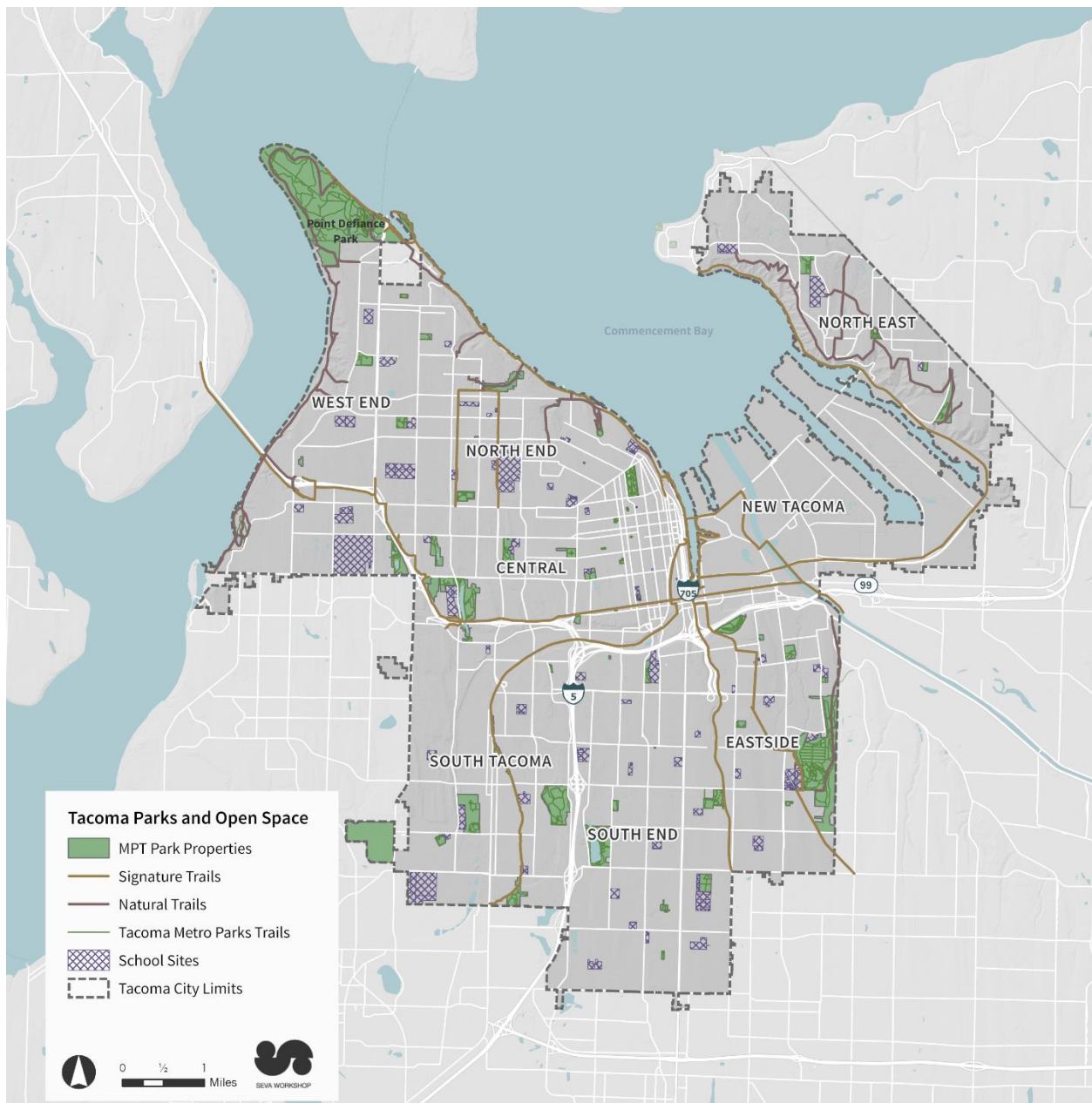
Parks Tacoma's work and plans are guided by a six-year strategic plan. The 2018 Strategic Plan is currently in the process of an update to a System and Strategic Plan to guide the agency through 2024-2030. This document sets the vision, goals, and policies for the parks district. Supplementary to this, the City owns and maintains a network of open space sites and the trail network outside of park boundaries. It also maintains access to parks via public rights-of-way.

¹ [NRPA "Parks and Recreation is Essential"](#)

2 INVENTORY

Tacoma is home to 2,901 acres of park and open space and 161 miles of trail. The map in Exhibit 1 identifies Parks Tacoma’s inventory of parks and open spaces. This system is jointly managed by the City of Tacoma and Parks Tacoma. An additional 880 acres of school sites, shown in purple, add to this network of spaces to walk, play, and connect with nature.

Exhibit 1: Parks Tacoma System Map.



2.1 Parks and Facilities

Between Parks Tacoma and the City, the Tacoma Parks system includes 97 properties offering a wide range of recreation opportunities and facility access.² Highlights of the system include Point Defiance Park, which includes an accredited zoo and aquarium, a marina, an old-growth forest and Fort Nisqually Living History Museum; Meadow Park Golf Course; W. W. Seymour Botanical Conservatory inside an arboretum; Tacoma Nature Center; sports complexes; and 5 swimming pools.³ These parks are distributed across the city. In addition to official park space, school grounds provide opportunity for outdoor recreation. These areas have more limited hours for public access but represent an important partnership opportunity for enhancing public access to park space, facilities, and amenities.

Park Types

City of Tacoma Classification System

In the 2015 Comprehensive Plan, the City of Tacoma classifies parks as urban parks, neighborhood parks, community parks, regional parks, natural areas, community gardens, special recreation facilities, trails, open space corridors, and waterfront.

Urban parks offer breathing space in an otherwise concrete built environment. These are a special type of open space that serves the unique lifestyles and recreation needs of those who live or work in or close to Downtown and designated centers.

- Examples: Thea's Park, 21st Street Park

Neighborhood parks provide daily convenience for recreation access by nearby residences via foot or bike. They are generally small in size and are developed primarily for spontaneous and non-structured recreation activities.

- Examples: Sawyer Tot Lot, Optimist Park

Community parks are typically 5 acres or more in size, providing visitors with access to high and low impact recreation opportunities. They are designed to enhance community identity and preserve open space.

- Examples: McKinley Park, Wapato Park

Regional parks are usually over 100 acres in size. They provide visitors with access to unique regional features and attractions. Often they accommodate large group activities and have the infrastructure to support special events and festivals.

- Examples: Point Defiance Park

² Metro Parks (now Parks Tacoma) 2023 Year-end Report

³ <https://www.metroparkstacoma.org/about/agency-plans-partnerships/strategic-plan/>

Community gardens are gardened by local groups for food, plant, or fiber production. They provide access to fresh produce, encourage connections to the environment, and support general health and wellbeing.

- Examples: 40th Street, Neighbors Park

Special recreation facilities offer opportunities for programmed activities that promote active living, an appreciation for nature and the environment, and foster respect for culture and heritage. These facilities might be freestanding within a community or regional park and are usually managed by Parks Tacoma.

- Examples: Spray park at South End Recreation & Adventure Campus, Meadow Park Golf Course

Trails serve both a recreation and active transportation function. Trails in Tacoma provide opportunity for walking, bicycling, jogging, in-line skating, dog walking, and wildlife watching.

- Examples: Dome to Defiance promenade, Titlow Park trail

Parks Tacoma Classification System

Parks Tacoma categorizes parks in its system as Regional (13), Community (24), Neighborhood (30), Natural Areas (11), and “Other” (3). A list of parks by types can be found in Exhibit 2.

Exhibit 2: Parks Inventory, by Type

Neighborhood Parks	
1	Alderwood Park
2	Baltimore Park
3	Browns Point Playfield
4	Cloverdale Park
5	Fern Hill Park
6	Ferry Park
7	Frank Alling Park
8	Gas Station Park
9	Irving Park
10	Jane Clark Park
11	Jerry Meeker Memorial
12	Lincoln Heights Park
13	Lots for Tots
14	Manitou Park
15	McCarver Park
16	Neighbors Park
17	North Slope Historic Park
18	Northeast Tacoma Playground

19	Oakland Madrona Park
20	Old Town Park
21	Optimist Park
22	People's Park
23	Proctor Gardens
24	Puget Park
25	Rogers Playfield
26	Roosevelt Park
27	Ryan's Park/Celebration Park
28	Sawyer Tot Lot
29	Sheridan Park
30	Thea's Park
Community Parks	
1	Browns Point Lighthouse Park
2	Center at Norpoint
3	Dash Point Park and Pier
4	Eastside Community Center
5	Franklin Park
6	Heidelberg/Davis Park
7	Jefferson Park
8	Kandle Park
9	Lincoln Park
10	McKinley Park
11	Norpoint Park
12	Peck Field
13	People's Community Center
14	Portland Avenue Park
15	South End Recreation & Adventure (SERA) Campus
16	South Park
17	Stanley Playfield
18	Stewart Heights Park
19	Titlow Park
20	Vassault Park
21	Verlo Playfield
22	W. W. Seymour Conservatory

23	Wapato Park
24	Wright Park
Regional Park	
1	Dickman Mill Park
2	Dune Peninsula at Point Defiance Park
3	Fort Nisqually Living History Museum
4	Hamilton Park
5	Jack Hyde Park at Commencement Bay
6	Marine Park
7	Old Town Dock
8	Point Defiance Boathouse Grounds
9	Point Defiance Park
10	Point Defiance Zoo & Aquarium
11	Ruston Way
12	Swan Creek Park
13	Weyerhaeuser Jr. Park
Natural Area	
1	Catherine Ursich Park
2	Charlotte's Blueberry Park
3	China Lake Park
4	DeLong Park
5	Garfield Gulch
6	Garfield Park
7	Julia's Gulch
8	Oak Tree Park
9	Puget Gardens
10	Tacoma Nature Center Park/Snake Lake Natural Area
11	Wapato Hills Park
Other	
1	Al Davies Boys and Girls Club
2	Boy Scouts of America Pacific Harbors Council
3	Parks Tacoma Headquarters

Park Facilities

Park facilities are physical assets and amenities that expand the range of activities that can be enjoyed across the parks system. Typically, these facilities also require additional maintenance efforts and investment. Examples include spray parks, basketball courts, picnic shelters, and dog parks. The list in Exhibit 3 details the range of facilities and amenities across Tacoma’s park network.

Exhibit 3: Facilities and Amenities in Tacoma’s Park System

Facilities and Amenities	Total Count
Pools	5
Picnic Shelters	40
Water Access	12
Beach Access	9
Skate Features	8
Spraygrounds	10
Playground	47
Athletic Field	18
Off leash Dog Park	4
Diamond Fields	26
Biking Infrastructure	17
Community Centers	4
Historic Site	24
Community Gardens	8
Display Gardens	2
Tennis/Pickleball	11
Basketball	31
Benches, Open Lawn and/or Picnic Tables	64
Rain Garden	1

Source: Parks Tacoma, 2024; Seva Workshop, 2024.

2.2 Level of Service (LOS) Standards

LOS standards are metrics created to track the performance of a park system. When first popularized in the 1970s, 80s, and 90s, LOS was measured with a population-based standard for the number of amenities, facilities, trail miles, or park land acres available to residents. Today, these metrics are broadened to encompass a variety of characteristics within a system. Access is one major consideration that is not well addressed with a population-based metric.

Parks Tacoma takes a system-wide approach to understanding and evaluating LOS, understanding that community needs are complex and contextual. This allows the organization to consider that certain parts of the City have different focus areas for improvement, leading to a cohesive network of spaces and programs.

The 2018 Strategic Plan sets 2 key performance measures for the park system, in addition to 4 other measure more relevant to their operations as an organizatoin:

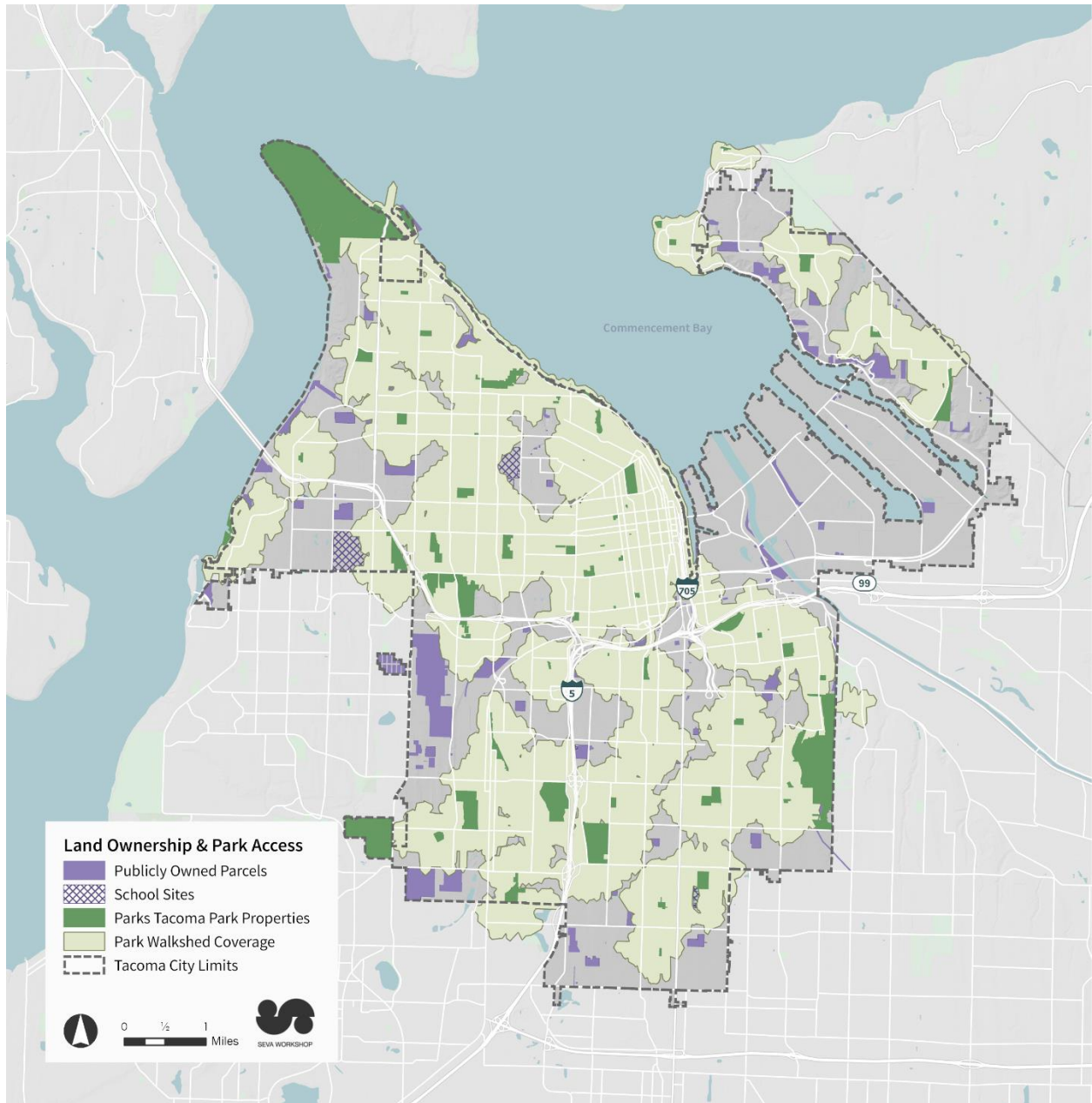
1. Walkable Access – Ensure that all District residents, regardless of location, have access to a park or open space within a 10-minute walk from their residence.
2. Programming – Maintain at least 40% of classes at 75% registration capacity or higher.

Walkable Access

The walkshed map in Exhibit 4 shows the 10-minute walkshed around each of Tacoma’s parks. Areas of the City outside of these walksheds are considered “gap areas”. In 2018, Parks Tacoma adopted an LOS goal to ensure that all residents, regardless of location, have access to a park or open space within a 10-minute walk of their residence. At the time, coverage was at 74% (inclusive of K-12 school properties), with the goal of reaching 90% by 2023. Reporting from the Trust for Public Land (TPL) in 2024 estimate slower progress, at 76% coverage.⁴ The City measures this walkshed coverage without the public school properties considered, as access to these facilities varies across the City. With that lens, the current 10-minute walkshed coverage rate is 64%.

⁴ <https://parkserve.tpl.org/mapping/index.html?CityID=5370000#/?CityID=5370000>

Exhibit 4: Tacoma Parks and Walksheds Map.

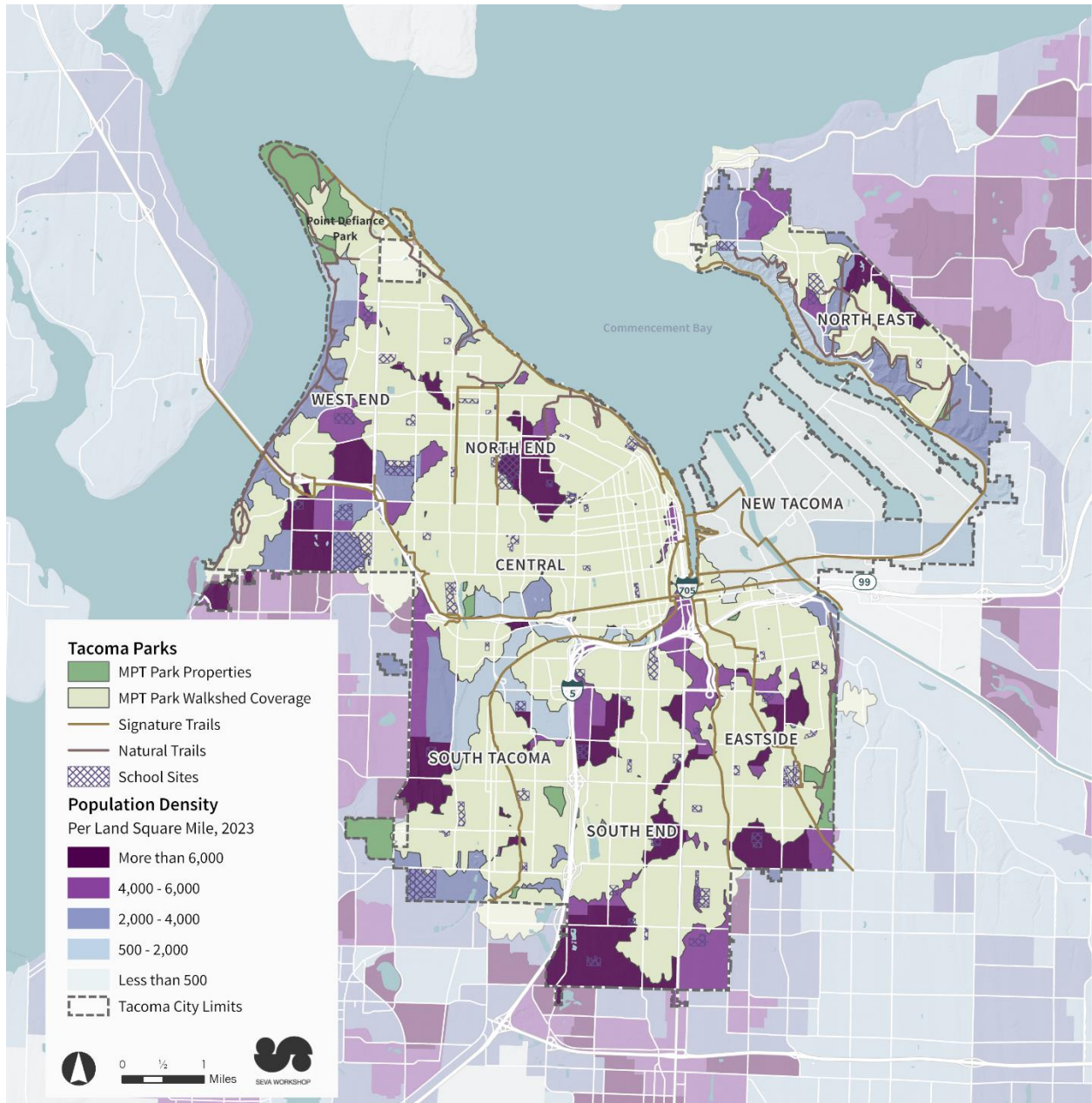


Sources: Parks Tacoma, 2023; Seva Workshop, 2024.

The map in Exhibit 5 overlays population density data for areas that fall outside of the park walkshed map. This highlights priority areas for improvement to park access, based on the goal of increasing proximity of parks for more residents. There is some nuance to these gaps, as shown by the location of school sites and trails. Gap areas with higher population density are listed below, along with equity priority communities identified in higher proportions based on Community Profile analysis:

- **The southern and northwestern parts of South End**
 - The southern proportion has a high proportion of People of Color, and there is a lower median household income for both areas
- **The southern area of Eastside**
 - There is a high proportion of households with children, People of Color, and a lower median household income
- **The western areas of South Tacoma**
 - There is a high proportion of households with children and a lower median household income
- Southern and central portions of West End
 - There are lower median household incomes
- The central area of North End
 - There is a high proportion of household with children
- Eastern edge of North East

Exhibit 5: Park Walkshed Gaps and Population Density in Tacoma.



Sources: Parks Tacoma, 2024; OFM Population density, 2023; Seva Workshop, 2024.

Recreation and Programming

Recreation facilities, classes, athletic clubs and leagues, and cultural events all contribute to the connection and activation of Tacoma’s park system. The range of offerings should reflect the population’s diverse interests, abilities, and cultures. Participation in recreation classes and leagues builds community and connects families in a unique way. In 2023, Parks Tacoma reports offering 4,118 classes and events across the year, with 539,519 total participants. Continued surveying and community conversations help public agencies respond to changing desires for recreation and events in Tacoma.

The Parks Tacoma Needs Assessment summarizes recreation trends by neighborhood in Tacoma. They include categories of: Exercise/Personal Health Activities, Sport Activities, Outdoor Activities, and Programming-Related Enrichment Activities. Scores over 100 reflect higher than national average demand for the described activity, and scores under 100 represent lower than national average. Average demand is indexed on national trends. Summary tables for all studied activities are shown in Exhibit 6 through Exhibit 9, grouped by category of activity.

Note: Study area boundaries in the Parks Tacoma report are slightly different than the study areas for this comprehensive plan update. We have summarized at the closest approximate overlap.

Exercise and Personal Health Activities

This study finds that Parks Tacoma residents exhibit averages that generally align with national averages for exercise and personal health activities. Northern planning areas score highly for almost all of the studied exercise/ personal health activities such as walking, swimming, and aerobics. This directly relates to the trail system development, fitness opportunities, and aquatic space available in these neighborhoods. Southern planning areas overall score lower for demand for these activities., although Zumba is popular in these areas. Pilates, weight lifting, and yoga also score higher for demand in these areas.

Exhibit 6: Exercise and Personal Health Activities, MPI by Study Area

Activity	Central	New Tacoma + North East	West End + North End	Eastside + South End	South Tacoma	Overall
Zumba	99	106	95	122	129	110
Pilates	107	124	115	86	101	104
Weight Lifting	93	120	107	101	102	104
Yoga	102	120	121	86	96	104
Jogging/Running	91	120	117	92	99	103
Walking for Exercise	96	113	111	88	88	99
Swimming	89	114	106	90	92	98
Aerobics	86	118	110	84	88	96

Note: Study area boundaries in the Parks Tacoma report are slightly different than the study areas for this comprehensive plan update. We have summarized at the closest approximate overlap.

Sources: Metro Parks (now Parks Tacoma) “Needs Assessment: Recreation Trends”, 2022; Seva Workshop, 2024

Sport Activities

All sport activities score above 100 in the New Tacoma + North East neighborhood area. Citywide, the highest ranking sports are ping pong, soccer, bowling, basketball, and softball. South Tacoma shows higher demand for volleyball, while the West End + North End neighborhoods exhibit higher demand for tennis, frisbee, and golf. The Central area shows the lowest overall demand for sport activities.

Exhibit 7: Sport Activities, MPI by Study Area

Activity	Central	New Tacoma + North East	West End + North End	Eastside + South End	South Tacoma	Overall
Ping Pong	106	116	107	105	120	109
Soccer	82	119	99	118	109	106
Bowling	95	110	101	106	110	104
Basketball	91	104	88	108	120	101
Softball	85	110	89	108	123	101
Tennis	91	117	111	82	91	97
Volleyball	83	103	91	96	107	95
Baseball	75	118	89	96	78	91
Frisbee	82	124	107	75	80	91
Football	77	108	82	94	99	90
Golf	70	127	113	73	71	90

Note: Study area boundaries in the Parks Tacoma report are slightly different than the study areas for this comprehensive plan update. We have summarized at the closest approximate overlap.
Sources: Metro Parks (now Parks Tacoma) "Needs Assessment: Recreation Trends", 2022; Seva Workshop, 2024

Outdoor Activities

The top two outdoor activities both relate to biking – mountain and road – indicating a priority for continued enhancement of the trail network. Downhill skiing also ranks high cityside. Northern neighborhoods show higher demand for a variety of outdoor activities, such as backpacking, kayaking, hiking, fishing, horseback riding, boating, and archery. More investigation should be given to understand the outdoor activity needs for residents in Central and Southern neighborhoods.

Exhibit 8: Outdoor Activities, MPI by Study Area

Activity	Central	New Tacoma + North East	West End + North End	Eastside + South End	South Tacoma	Overall
Bicycling (Mountain)	97	134	106	105	106	107
Bicycling (Road)	95	120	122	87	87	102
Skiing (Downhill)	84	129	133	85	63	101
Backpacking	99	113	117	87	84	100
Canoeing/Kayaking	93	120	115	86	83	99
Hiking	92	124	113	82	85	98
Fishing (Salt Water)	78	117	101	93	84	94
Archery	87	95	103	82	97	92
Horseback Riding	77	110	94	76	97	88
Fishing (Fresh Water)	83	90	89	80	92	86
Boating (Power)	79	112	100	64	72	83

Note: Study area boundaries in the Parks Tacoma report are slightly different than the study areas for this comprehensive plan update. We have summarized at the closest approximate overlap.

Sources: Metro Parks (now Parks Tacoma) "Needs Assessment: Recreation Trends", 2022; Seva Workshop, 2024

Program-Related Enrichment Activities

There are many program-related activities exhibiting high demand in Tacoma. Visiting the zoo is highly rated across planning areas. The arts have positive trends across Tacoma including painting/drawing, dancing, and visiting art galleries. Video gaming (console, portable, and computer) have relatively high scores indicating there may be an opportunity to explore e-gaming as a programmatic offering. Several differences exist across the planning areas that should be considered when program planning. For example, billiards/pool is more highly ranked in South Tacoma, while woodworking scores higher in New Tacoma + North East.

Exhibit 9: Programming-Related Enrichment Activities, MPI by Study Area

Activity	Central	New Tacoma + North East	West End + North End	Eastside + South End	South Tacoma	Overall
Art Gallery	101	120	135	95	99	111
Video Game (Console)	120	99	99	113	122	110
Computer Game (Offline)	106	106	107	106	110	106
Museum	102	123	122	92	92	106
Painting/Drawing	106	103	109	104	109	106
Dancing	103	100	101	108	116	105
Video Game (Portable)	104	96	98	114	110	105
Dance Performance	106	120	112	90	105	104
Board Game	98	113	111	98	97	103
Chess	102	103	108	96	98	102
Computer Game (Online)	111	102	106	94	102	102
Cooking	99	110	109	93	102	102
Zoo	93	112	106	100	102	102
Indoor Gardening or Plant Care	97	106	110	93	93	100
Baking	96	107	109	92	93	100
Birdwatching	101	103	111	90	95	100
Theater	94	124	120	80	86	100
Adult Education Course	93	112	107	89	97	99
Cards	102	109	109	88	88	99
Book Club	89	126	120	81	80	98
Photography	99	111	109	86	93	98
Barbecued	92	108	101	94	92	97
Fantasy Sports	92	125	109	90	75	97
Billiards/Pool	89	91	94	96	110	96
Drone	93	97	96	99	94	96
Musical Instrument	94	113	110	77	85	95
Sudoku	90	113	104	85	90	95
Bingo	93	90	96	96	91	94
Photo Albums/Scrapbooking	90	98	102	85	97	94
Water Park	66	113	90	72	80	82
Woodworking	81	103	93	68	74	82

Note: Study area boundaries in the Parks Tacoma report are slightly different than the study areas for this comprehensive plan update. We have summarized at the closest approximate overlap.
 Sources: Metro Parks (now Parks Tacoma) "Needs Assessment: Recreation Trends", 2022; Seva Workshop, 2024

3 DEMAND AND NEEDS

3.1 Future Demand and System Needs

As Tacoma's population grows and changes, the demands and system needs for its park network evolve as well. Looking to the future, considerations for the size, accessibility, quality, and variety of offerings in Tacoma's park system are all taken into account to promote health and wellbeing across the city.

LOS by System Size and Population Estimates

Today's population is served by 13.0 acres of park space and 0.72 miles of trail per 1,000 population.⁵

- If no expansions to the park system are made, the 2050 population will have an LOS of 8.3 acres and 0.46 miles of trails per 1,000 population.
- To maintain a consistent LOS with 2050 target population growth, 1,659 acres of park space and 92 miles of trails need to be added.
- While regional parks may not scale with population growth, the acreage of community and neighborhood parks can be tracked so that new development is adequately served by park space.

LOS by Walkshed

Parks Tacoma emphasizes a key focus on park accessibility, with the target that every residence in the city be within a 10-minute walk of a park. This LOS metric takes into account that it isn't always feasible to acquire park land at the pace of population growth, but strategic acquisitions can ensure broad accessibility of open space and recreation amenities. As measured in 2018, Parks Tacoma reports 74% of Tacoma is within a 10-minute walk of a park. This figure, however, adds K-12 school properties as part of the service network. Not all schools offer many windows of access to the general public, however, so the City has also calculated the 10-minute walkshed without these sites at 64%.

- Focus areas for addressing walkshed gaps are the southern and northwestern gap areas in South End, the southern portion of Eastside, and western areas of South Tacoma.
- Second tier priority gaps are in the southern and central portions of West End, the central area of North End, and the eastern edge of North East.

⁵ Parks Tacoma reports an LOS of 13.1 acres per 1,000 population but this includes a service area that extends beyond the City's boundaries. The figure shown adjusts acreage and population to City of Tacoma only.

- As demonstrated in the difference between walkshed coverage estimates, partnerships with local schools within service gap areas can make a meaningful difference in improving public access to parks and open space.

Maintenance and Capital Improvements

In addition to the size and availability of the park system, the quality of park spaces is another important consideration. Adequate funds must be earmarked to care for landscaping, repair damaged or aging equipment, upkeep restrooms and indoor facilities, and replace assets at the end of their useful life. In 2022, the City of Tacoma allocated \$7.2 million to Parks Tacoma for its staffing, supplies, and capital investments in the 2023-24 biennium.⁶ Other major sources of revenue for Parks Tacoma include property tax, earned revenue, sales tax, donations, intergovernmental funding, and grants. Their staff includes 458 full time positions budgeted by the end of 2024.

- If system expansions are implemented proportional increases in staff allocations will be needed to maintain these new spaces.
- In 2014, voters approved a \$198 million capital improvements bond which has included a wide range of projects, including major investment in the zoo.
- The Tacoma Department of Public Works budgeted \$4.3 million to capital investments in paths and trails for the 2023-24 biennium.
- Current priorities for capital spending include \$28.4 million of investment:⁷
 - Chinese Reconciliation Park (new phase)
 - Downtown Fountains (reconditioning)
 - Fireman’s Park (improvements)
 - Catherine Ushka’s Gas Station Park – recently completed
 - Melanie Jan LaPlant Dressel Park – recently completed
 - Prairie Line Trail – Art Park
 - Waterway Park

Recreation and Programming

One LOS metric for Parks Tacoma is that at least 40% of its classes attain 75% registration capacity or higher. In 2022 the overall average fill rate for Parks Tacoma programs was over 68%. In 2023 the average was over 56%. If population targets are achieved, continued and increased demand for recreation programs is anticipated.

⁶ Parks Tacoma 2023-2024 Budget Presentation, 2022.

⁷ Tacoma 2023-2028 Capital Facilities Program

3.2 Tree canopy

Tacoma, with 20% of the land area covered by tree canopy, has the least amount of tree canopy as a percentage of land cover for all communities assessed in the Puget Sound Region⁸. The City of Tacoma Urban Forestry team has committed to a goal of 30% tree canopy cover by 2030. At the neighborhood scale, tree coverage ranges from a low of 12% in New Tacoma to a high of 32% in North East Tacoma. Tacoma’s existing tree canopy is summarized by neighborhood in Exhibit 10 and is mapped in Exhibit 11. Areas of Tacoma with lowest rates of tree canopy coverage are New Tacoma, South End, and Central neighborhoods.

When an area has fewer green spaces and more impervious surfaces like roads, parking lots, and buildings, etc. it absorbs and retains more heat from the sun and can create a heat island. Because of built infrastructure, many urban areas experience higher temperatures compared to their rural surroundings. This difference in temperature is what defines an urban heat island effect. A 2020 analysis conducted by Earth Economics found that urban heat islands in Tacoma increase maximum temperatures by as much as 6.2°F above the local baseline. Combined with regional climatic effects, neighborhoods in Central and South Tacoma may be as much as 14°F hotter than neighborhoods in North Tacoma.

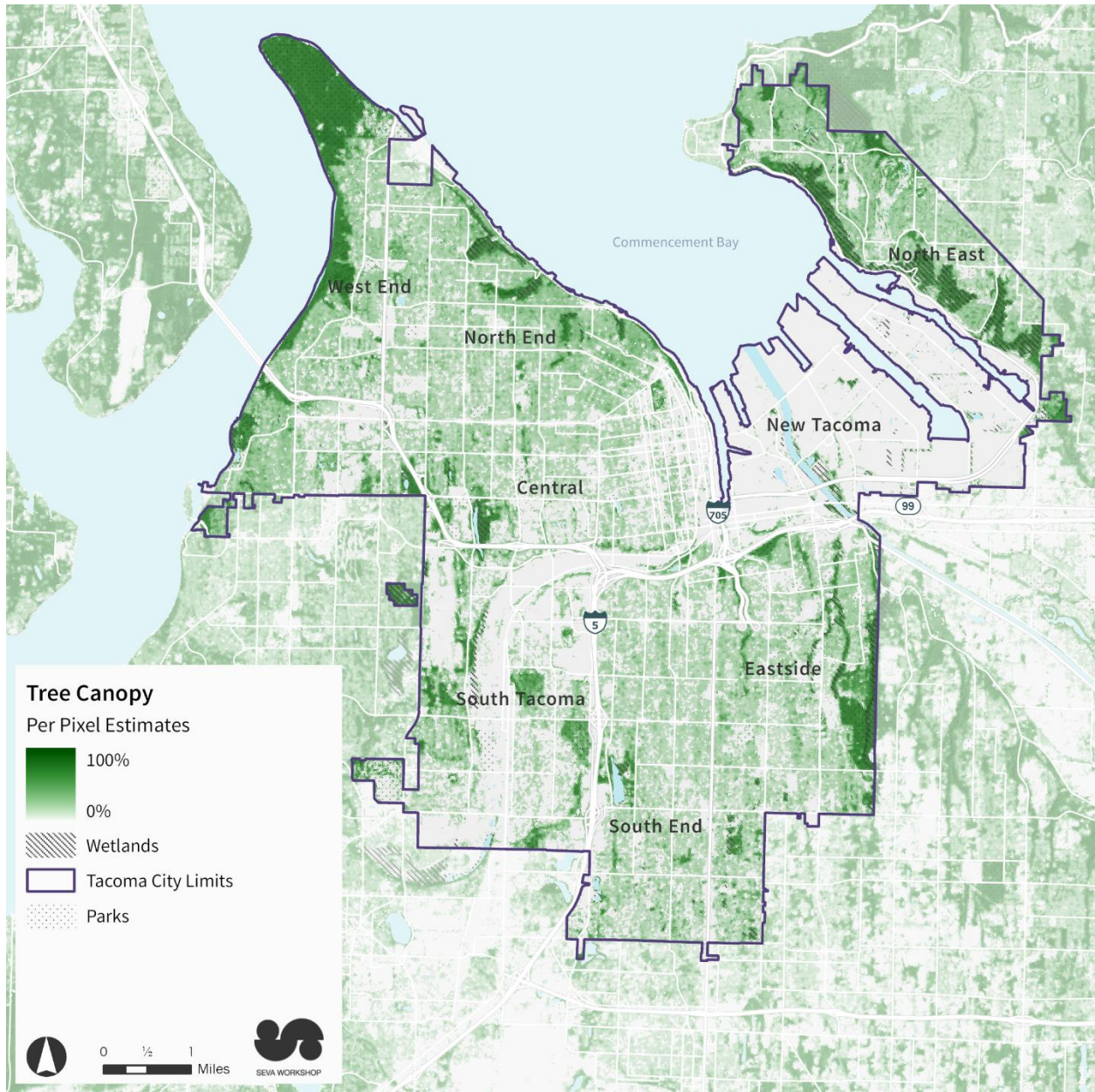
Exhibit 10: Urban Heat Index and Average Tree Coverage in Tacoma, by Neighborhood.

Neighborhood	Urban Heat Index*	Average tree coverage (%)
Central	86.91	17%
Eastside	87.20	23%
New Tacoma	86.04	12%
North East	85.80	32%
North End	85.86	23%
South End	86.77	16%
South Tacoma	86.57	19%
West End	85.52	21%
All Tacoma	86.39	20%

*Urban Heat Index measures the average afternoon and evening temperature during a single day. Sources: iTree Landscape, 2017; Earth Economics Analysis, 2020; Seva Workshop, 2024.

⁸ [“Urban Tree Canopy Assessment”](#) City of Tacoma, 2018

Exhibit 11: Tree Canopy in Tacoma, 2017.



Source: City of Tacoma, 2017; Seva Workshop, 2023.

4 INTERGOVERNMENTAL COORDINATION

Success for Tacoma’s park system relies on multiple organizations and departments to work in coordination. Some of the key players in this ecosystem include:

- Parks Tacoma: Maintains and operates the active park spaces in Tacoma and provides and manages recreation programming
- City of Tacoma: Owns most of the space dedicated to passive parks and natural areas in the city; Public Works department maintains trail network outside of physical park boundaries, as well as public rights-of-way which connect users to park system amenities
- Tacoma Public Schools: Partner with communities to offer public access to amenities during hours when facilities are not otherwise in use
- State Agencies: Offer grant funding for improvement and operations of the park system