2.1 PROCESS

The Washington State Recreation and Conservation Funding Board, supported by the Recreation and Conservation Office (RCO), prescribes an overall framework that local planning efforts must meet in order to be eligible for the following funding opportunities:

- Boating Facilities Program (BFP)
- Land and Water Conservation Fund (LWCF)
- Non-highway and Off-road Vehicle Activities (NOVA)
- Washington Wildlife and Recreation Program (WWRP)

Therefore, it is imperative to align planning efforts with the requirements put forth by the RCO. The RCO does not mandate a certain “look and feel” to its plans; rather, they provide an overall requirement list that plans must meet, but it is up to the agency to determine what methods and process works best for them. In the end, plans must include (at a minimum):

1. Goals and objectives
2. Inventory
3. Public involvement
4. Demand and needs analysis
5. Capital improvement program (CIP)
6. Plan adoption

Additionally, having an adopted Strategic Master Plan fulfills requirements to maintain the District’s accreditation status with the National Recreation and Park Association’s (NRPA) Commission for Accreditation of Park and Recreation Agencies (CAPRA). CAPRA recognizes park and recreation agencies for excellence in operation and services. MPT has been accredited since October 13, 2014.

The plan’s overall goal is to provide a firm understanding of the major strategies MPT should implement over the next six years while highlighting the research process and methodology employed to demonstrate the foundation on which the strategies are built.
2.2 INTERNAL AND EXTERNAL ENGAGEMENT – DETERMINING NEED

PROS Consulting, Inc. was retained in May 2017 to assist MPT with the development of an updated six-year Strategic Master Plan. The research process culminated in October 2017 with final plan approval and adoption in January 2018. A major tenet of the Strategic Master Plan update is its multi-faceted approach to technical research that allowed a full understanding of the needs and critical actions MPT must address.

2.2.1 SWOT ANALYSIS

The consultant team first conducted a Strengths, Weaknesses, Opportunities, and Threats (SWOT) Analysis with a wide subset of MPT staff. Staff were divided into five groups, representing MPT’s five different departments. A series of guiding questions were asked to help facilitate an in-depth conversation. As a result of the meetings, emerging themes were identified to help begin framing the planning context. The following themes emerged from the SWOT Analysis.

INTERNAL VS. EXTERNAL INVESTMENT

Throughout each focus group, staff discussed the balance between investing in staff and investing in external priorities. That is, staff appreciate the opportunity to be creative, but they do not indicate always having the actual means/support to implement ideas. This relationship also stems from the idea of investing in internal work systems and technologies to help support overall operations and workflow.

Additionally, much conversation related to operating and maintaining the existing park system. With changing demographics and new features entering the system, this puts a strain on maintaining existing amenities and facilities by increasing resource demand. If resources are not added to the system commensurate with amenity/facility development, the existing system can be hampered while the new features may not have the appropriate resources allocated for operations and maintenance. The balance between maintaining the current system and adding new features is a challenge to perfect but staff desire to continue seeing improvements in this area.

PARTNERSHIP MANAGEMENT

Staff spoke about Metro Park Tacoma’s overall approach to partnership development and management. Three areas of concern emerged:

- Equitable
- Measurable
- Accountable

Staff desire for all partnerships to be equitable. That is, each partner (including MPT) is putting in equal amounts of resources and effort into the agreement. But along with that notion, there is a strong desire to be able to measure the effectiveness and equality of partnerships. This can be accomplished in a variety of ways if partnership agreements are written with measurable outcomes included. Finally, staff desire partners be held accountable for their agreements and that they accomplish what they said they would do (including MPT).
PERFORMANCE MEASURES

It is evident that the MPT staff is comprised of passionate, loyal, and smart individuals. As such, there is a strong desire to articulate the MPT story (i.e., why are we doing what we’re doing and how are we doing what we’re doing?) through consistent tracking and reporting performance measures. The aim of the overall Strategic Master Plan is to identify and develop performance measures (both internal and external-focused) that MPT can use to address this notion.

STAFF PLANNING

Similar to the notion of onboarding procedures and internal investment, staff acknowledged a desire to formalize succession planning. As staff retire or leave for any other reason, institutional knowledge leaves as well. Along with succession planning, staff reported the strain constant turnover causes. This notion was brought forward in relation to more part-time and seasonal positions than full-time.

2.2.2 STAKEHOLDER INTERVIEWS

A list of 34 key stakeholders were identified early on in the public engagement process. Including key stakeholders by conducting one-on-one interviews allowed the planning team to receive a diverse understanding of how different community interests manifest in MPT’s strategic planning. Key stakeholders represented different community sectors and included, but not limited to:

- City Council
- Park Board of Commissioners
- Other City agencies/departments such as:
  - Police
  - Fire
  - Health
  - Human services
- University professors
- Private businesses
- Non-profits
- Special interest groups

Six major findings revealed what key stakeholders believe the District should address over the next six years:

1. The District’s role within the community;
2. The District’s role in active transportation;
3. Identifying what the District’s focus is regarding parkland (i.e., size, new vs current, and utilization);
4. Identifying what the District’s focus is regarding programming (i.e., recreation, competitive, and tourism);
5. Establishing the District’s commitment to equity for programs and facilities/amenities; and
6. Preparing to face existing and new challenges related to funding, demographic changes, perceived visitor safety, communication methods with the public, and the balance between what is feasible and what is truly ambitious.
2.2.3 CITIZEN ADVISORY COUNCILS

MPT has four advisory councils that help guide different aspects of its service delivery and then make recommendations to staff members and the Board of Park Commissioners. Three of the groups are directly related to MPT’s three mission-led program areas and the fourth council is related to the District’s general business and financial operations.

The Citizen Advisory Councils meet monthly and so the project team visited each Council and solicited their input regarding MPT’s strategic directions. A short online questionnaire was administered that allowed individuals to provide open-ended comments about where they feel MPT should concentrate their efforts over the next six years.

Three major findings revealed what key stakeholders believe the District should address over the next six years:

1. Maintaining and ensuring equitable public access to programs, services, and parks;
2. Keeping up with the operational and maintenance implications with the park system; and
3. Focusing on large regional attractions/destinations at Point Defiance and Ruston Way.

2.2.4 COMMUNITY SURVEY

The last public engagement opportunity yielded the most response (761 responses) throughout the research process. An online questionnaire was administered that tested several ideas to see where community priorities reside. Full survey results can be found in the Appendix.

HOW TO BEST SUPPORT THE DISTRICT’S MISSION

The public indicated that the best way for MPT to fulfill its mission is to be an accountable and responsive agency that listens to and communicates with residents, contribute to a sustainable and livable city, and increase appreciation for stewardship of wildlife and natural resources.

EVALUATING THE DISTRICT’S VALUE TO THE COMMUNITY

Over 90% of respondents at least somewhat agree that MPT’s parks, facilities, and programs make Tacoma a more desirable place to live and MPT helps create healthy opportunities for residents to play, learn, and grow.

WILLINGNESS TO WALK

Approximately 69% of respondents reported a willingness to walk at least 15 minutes to visit a park or program location. When adding in those that reported a willingness to walk at least 10 minutes, the percentage increased to 87%.
2.3 ALIGNING AND PRODUCING MPT’S STRATEGIC DIRECTIONS

The data gathering phase revealed many potential directions for the District. Ranging from taking care of themselves (staffing) to the existing system (assets) to having a large role in creating a walkable, vibrant community (active transportation and equity). In addition, each potential strategic direction will require time, energy, and resources and will produce unique implications for elevating them to a District focal point.

Given the many directions MPT could move in, it was imperative to be realistic when entering the Strategic Direction Development Phase of the planning process. What the community identifies as a needed strategic direction, the District has to be willing and able to support that direction with goals, objectives, and actionable performance measures. Therefore, an opportunity to vet, discuss, and analyze all the potential strategic directions was imperative.

2.3.1 STAFF RETREAT

A two-day staff leadership retreat was held in September 2017 to analyze and ground-truth the most appropriate steps necessary to address the key issues identified through the research phase described above. Over the course of the retreat, leadership (along with the consulting team) was able to dissect and discuss the role MPT should play to address community needs. As a result, high level strategies, and in some instances specific actions, were identified and prioritized.

The process began with a thorough review of all data points gathered via the data gathering phase. All information was presented to staff for discussion. To facilitate thoughtful discussion, the data points were presented in the following groupings:

**External**
- Land/water and facilities
- Programs and operations

**Internal**
- Land/water and facilities
- Programs and operations

It was important to acknowledge both external and internal directions because all major decisions have implications to the District and to the community at large. Additionally, it is important to recognize that there are both external and internal actions that need to be taken to achieve identified goals/strategies.
2.3.2 CHARTING THE COURSE AND SUPPORTING BEST PRACTICES

After reviewing all information gathered through the data gathering phase and culling through the input provided by District staff, larger “themes” were identified in which specific strategies and tactics could be assigned. Moreover, it was critical to continue aligning the District with industry best practices. This planning process includes an integration between national standards and local practice.

NATIONAL RECREATION AND PARKS ASSOCIATION – THE THREE PILLARS

According to the 2017 National Recreation and Park Association (NRPA) American’s Engagement with Parks Survey, four in five Americans agree that NRPA’s Three Pillars — Conservation, Health and Wellness, and Social Equity — represent what they see as the priorities for their local park and recreation agency. Specifically, Americans believe park agencies should:

- Lead the nation to improved health and wellness through parks and recreation;
- Protect open space, connecting children to nature, and engaging communities in conservation practices; and
- Ensure all people have access to the benefits of local parks and recreation.

METRO PARKS TACOMA – THE TRIPLE BOTTOM LINE

Based on its three mission-led areas, MPT is committed to understand community priorities — to preserve, protect, and maintain the current parks and recreation system. One way to address this challenge is by considering MPT’s Triple Bottom Line framework. In order to link NRPA’s pillar concept to its own, MPT has adopted its Three Pillars of Sustainability. With a finite amount of resources necessary to provide for future generations, the District has one eye on today while looking for a balanced approach to longer-term social, environmental and economic solutions. It is key that one pillar not take away from the other—but to work in concert, to achieve true sustainability. It is in this confluence of NRPA’s three pillars and the District’s that this strategic master plan’s directions are found.