

**Item 8B**

Meeting Date: March 2011  
Title: Level of Service Recommendations  
Prepared By: Jim Eychaner, Senior Policy Specialist

Approved by the Director:



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**Proposed Action: Briefing**

## Summary

The Recreation and Conservation Office (RCO) hired a contractor to complete a statewide test of the level of service (LOS) recreation planning tool. Our contractor is recommending, and staff agrees, that the LOS be amended and used as an optional tool for local and state agency recreation planning. Staff will brief the Recreation and Conservation Funding Board (board) about the tool at the March board meeting.

## Strategic Plan Link

Consideration of the level of service recreation planning tool supports the board's strategy to evaluate and develop strategic investment policies and plans so that projects selected for funding meet the state's recreation and conservation needs.

## Background

In 2005, Representative Hans Dunshee expressed interest in an easy way to explain recreation "demand." To that end, he helped create a Legislative Study Committee on Outdoor Recreation. The committee found that typical approaches to recreation planning such as "population ratios" once recommended by National Recreation and Park Association are neither desirable nor effective.

Representative Dunshee then sponsored budget language that directed RCO to "... develop recommendations for a statewide approach to a recreation level of service for local and regional active recreation facilities, including indicators with which to measure progress in achieving level of service objectives."<sup>1</sup>

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<sup>1</sup> Supplemental Capital Budget, ESSB6384, April 4, 2006

## Developing a Level of Service

RCO assembled an advisory group of local planners and other experts to help staff develop a scope of work. After an open contractor competition, RCO retained the consulting firm of EDAW (now AECOM). EDAW started work in July 2006.

RCO and EDAW held a series of public meetings on the assignment. Two meetings were scheduled for each community: one in the afternoon intended for professionals, and one in the evening intended for volunteers and the general public. The public meetings were held in Spokane, Wenatchee, Everett, Tacoma, and Aberdeen. The meetings were well attended, especially in Everett and Tacoma.

Reception was mixed. Planners and citizens were highly interested in and supportive of a tool with which to make more objective judgments about the status of and need for recreation sites and facilities. Park directors and managers were often neutral, or voiced concerns about unfunded state mandates, unproven tools, the potential need to re-do plans that had been developed at great political and financial cost, and the potential of being held to a new standard.

Working to meet the Legislative mandate, RCO and EDAW collaborated to develop the most reasonable and practical outcome. The result was a preliminary Level of Service (LOS) based on a three-tiered approach: quantity, quality, and access. In its report to RCO, EDAW stressed that the LOS was preliminary and that the concept needed further testing.

In a letter transmitting the LOS report to the Legislature in March 2007, the RCO Director stated

*"The result is a recommendation that is both ground-breaking and preliminary.*

*It is ground-breaking in the sense that it introduces a truly new and unique concept of how to measure both performance of and the potential need for active park and recreation facilities. To our knowledge, no other state has developed anything like the initial level of service method presented in the report. The multi-level method has the potential to become a powerful planning tool, useful locally and at a statewide level to identify gaps in active park and recreation facilities.*

*It is preliminary in that the authors of the report recognize the need for further testing and refinement with input from communities across the state."*

## Testing the Preliminary Level of Service Proposal

In order to further the opportunity to test the LOS proposal, RCO staff added the preliminary LOS outcome to the state comprehensive outdoor recreation planning (SCORP) document,

which was then under development<sup>2</sup>. The SCORP document was focused on defining and measuring success based on staff’s experience with the state budget “Priorities of Government” process, as well as its experience in the LOS workshops held across the state.

The board agreed with this approach to further the public dialogue on the LOS and approved the 2008 SCORP with the preliminary LOS as a major component. A key provision of the SCORP’s discussion of the LOS was to acknowledge that the concept needed further testing. The National Park Service subsequently agreed to help fund a statewide test.

RCO again conducted a competition to find a contractor to conduct the statewide test. The successful bidder was AECOM (formerly EDAAW).

### Testing the Local Agency LOS

AECOM, with input from RCO staff and the project’s advisory group, developed a sample of communities and counties on which to test the local agency LOS tool. The sample was stratified by population size, median income, and percent minority (non-white) to allow for potential comparisons. The selection of sample communities and counties based on these characteristics helped ensure that the preliminary LOS tool was tested on and applicable to a variety of communities/counties throughout the state.

Sample Communities				Sample Counties
Algona	Beaux Arts Village	Bellevue	Bellingham	• Adams
Bremerton	Brewster	Buckley	Carbonado	• Benton
Clarkston	Colton	Duvall	Ellensburg	• Ferry
Elmer City	Federal Way	Forks	Grand Coulee	• Grant
Issaquah	Kettle Falls	Kirkland	Lacey	• Kitsap
Mercer Island	Mossyrock	North Bend	Oakville	• Kittitas
Prosser	Pullman	Puyallup	Redmond	• Lewis
Renton	Richland	Ridgefield	Roy	• Lincoln
Royal City	Sedro-Woolley	Sequim	Skykomish	• Okanogan
Soap Lake	South Cle Elum	Spokane	Steilacoom	• Skagit
Sunnyside	Tacoma	Twisp	Walla Walla	• Spokane
Wenatchee	West Richland	Yakima		• Wahkiakum

The test was done by gathering existing park and recreation data from the communities. No new information or data were collected at the community/county level. The available data was then analyzed according to the preliminary LOS guidelines.

Presented with the results of the test, communities were surveyed on two major items: attitude toward the LOS and the accuracy of the LOS.

<sup>2</sup> SCORP is required to maintain Washington State’s eligibility for federal Land and Water Conservation Fund grants from the National Park Service.

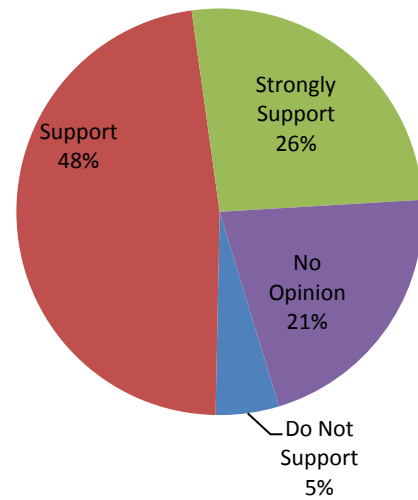
Regarding attitudes, as shown in the graph, there was strong support among the communities responding.

Regarding accuracy, communities responded as shown in the table. In short, they believed that the tool was quite accurate, but the response for individual indicators was mixed.

***Accuracy of Local Agency LOS Grades***

	<b>LOS Overall</b>	<b>Individual Indicators</b>
Very Accurately	24%	10%
Accurately	48%	55%
Neither Accurately nor Inaccurately	14%	10%
Inaccurately	14%	25%
Very Inaccurately	0%	0%

**Attitudes Toward the Preliminary LOS (Local)**



**Testing the State Agency LOS**

Three state agencies (DNR, WDFW, and State Parks) were invited to participate in a test of the preliminary state agency LOS. Several challenges appeared immediately.

- Among the three state agencies, there is inconsistency in whether or not data exist, the type of data that exist, and the usability of the information.
- All three agencies aim to protect the resources listed in their mission or mandate, whether that is forested lands, recreation sites, and/or fish and wildlife habitat. Recreation resources hold varying degrees of priority in those missions.
- The three agencies are aiming for different goals, have differing visions and mandates, and reach different objectives through the provision of recreation resources.

The state agency test was not as robust or conclusive as the local agency LOS test. However, AECOM recommended retaining a version of the state LOS, recommending further work in the next iteration of SCORP.

**Analysis**

**Potential Use of the LOS in Grant Making**

As a component of the recreation LOS testing process, the RCO also requested a “mock” grant evaluation. The intent of the mock grant evaluation was to assess the potential use of the LOS tools in RCO grant processes. Because of the common denominator of SCORP, the LWCF grant program was chosen by the RCO and AECOM as the case study for the mock grant process using the LOS.

AECOM recreation planners compiled and reviewed available data and information (using the RCO's PRISM software, which is available to the public) for each of these grant applications. Based on this review and prior knowledge from the local agency LOS tool testing process, AECOM determined that (1) the applicants had likely included any available pertinent data and information in their grant applications and (2) additional sources of data/information were not likely to be gained via direct engagement with the grant applicants.

AECOM recreation planners gathered and summarized available data and information from the 2010 LWCF grant applications (as provided by the grant applicants in PRISM). Originally, AECOM recreation planners hoped to engage the LWCF Advisory Committee in the review and scoring of the new LOS-related grant criteria. This plan proved unfeasible, so we used an internal review group of three AECOM recreation planners and two RCO staff members.

Overall, using the new LOS-related criteria with the existing LWCF grant criteria resulted in no change in rank for five of the fourteen grant applicants, an increase in rank for five of the grant applicants, and a decrease in rank for four of the grant applicants. Of the four applicants that decreased in rank, two (Tacoma and Mason County [Sunset Bluff]) decreased by 3 places –the largest relative move in the rankings. The change in rank seems to indicate that adding a LOS-related set of criteria to the LWCF grant application process would result in slightly different final ranks for grant applications.

While this change in rank is an interesting observation, it is difficult to draw definitive conclusions from the mock grant process because of several limitations associated with the process. First, the LWCF Advisory Committee scored the existing criteria, while an internal review group (many of whom were not experienced in scoring grants) scored the LOS-related criteria. Second, the grant applicants were not asked to directly address the LOS-related criteria. Third, the process lacked a robust stakeholder input process.

## Local Agency LOS

High support for the local agency LOS indicated that it has high value as a planning tool. Mixed response to the criteria, however, indicated that changes were needed. Changes included eliminating several criteria. AECOM added a criterion based on "population ratios" commonly used in recreation planning. While many planning professionals reject the "population ratio" approach as simplistic and inadequate, it is retained as a sort of "short hand" that is easy to understand and explain.

## AECOM Recommendations

- Retain the overall concept and execution of the LOS planning tool.
- Modify some of the specific indicators used in the tool (indicators are deleted, revised, or new).

- Reorganize the indicators within the three following categories: Quantity, Quality, and Distribution and Access.
- Recommend that local agencies use the LOS tool, but do not require its use.
- The revised LOS tool increases the ease of use and utility of the local agency LOS tool, can be enhanced in the future to accommodate other indicators, and retains inherent flexibility to best meet the needs of an individual community or jurisdiction.

## State Agency LOS

The state agency LOS needs further development. However, AECOM has simplified it from the preliminary approach by removing criteria. A new criterion based on budget goals has been added.

### AECOM Recommendations

- The original recommendation was to eliminate the use of the state agency LOS planning tool, as preliminarily proposed.
- Based on additional feedback (on the draft Recommendation Report), the final recommendation is to revise the state agency LOS planning tool to focus less on integration with state agency planning processes, and instead provide a consistent measurement approach for park and recreation facilities managed by the state.
- Like the recommendation for the local agency planning tool, the indicators should be designed and organized around three main concepts: Quantity, Quality, and Access. The indicators should exclude Distribution.

## AECOM Recommendations: Moving Forward

As the state moves forward in potentially advocating the use of the LOS tools (per the recommendations in this report), the following are key considerations:

- **Provide Implementation Assistance:** The RCO could consider providing direct assistance (e.g., funding, staff time) to those communities who may not have the staff and/or resources to utilize the local agency LOS tool in their planning efforts.
- **Provide Written Guidance for Implementation.** The RCO could provide more direction on how to use the local agency LOS tool. For example, a guidebook could be created that communities/counties could use to apply the LOS indicators and criteria in a meaningful manner.
- **Provide On-Line Guidance.** The RCO should also consider creating an online local agency LOS knowledge-sharing or community of practice website.

- **Add Predictive Element to the LOS Tool.** The RCO should consider including an element on using the LOS tool to quantify future recreation needs, often a key component of recreation planning at the local level.
- **Continue to Work with State Agencies.** The RCO should continue to work with DNR, State Parks, and WDFW to refine and improve the state agency LOS planning tool.

## Next Steps

Staff notes the high level of support shown for the LOS by test communities and agrees with the local agency LOS modifications proposed by AECOM. Staff also agrees that use of the LOS should be recommended, not required, as a way to help local communities assess the effectiveness of their park and recreation programs.

We agree with providing guidance. However, we recognize that the agency's budget means that this should be done at the lowest possible cost. We are pursuing two initial methods:

- We have rewritten policy Manual 2, *Planning Policies*, to include the LOS as a recommended tool for agency self assessment.
- We propose to develop a web page based on the material developed for Manual 2.

We also agree that further work with state agencies is needed. The next iteration of SCORP needs to follow up on the current edition by presenting the LOS test and test results. As the development of SCORP is done with the cooperation of affected parties and public review, it is an ideal next step for development of the LOS.

## Attachments

- A. Preliminary local agency LOS, as published in SCORP and tested
- B. Recommended local agency LOS, based on 2010 test
- C. Preliminary state agency LOS, as published in SCORP and tested
- D. Recommended state agency LOS, based on 2010 test
- E. Text from Manual 2, *Planning Policies*, explaining the recommended LOS

**Attachment A: Preliminary Local Agency LOS as published in SCORP and tested**

Indicators and Criteria	Level of Service Ratings				
	A	B	C	D	E
<b>Baseline Criteria: Per Capita Participation</b>					
<b>Individual Active Participation</b>					
Percent of population that participates in one or more active outdoor activities	66-100%	51-65%	41-50%	31-40%	0-30%
<b>Facility Capacity: Activity-Specific Participation</b>					
Existing facilities meet this percentage of activity-specific demand	76-100%	61-75%	46-60%	31-45%	0-30%
<b>Enhanced Criteria: Service Area/Population-Based (Equity)</b>					
<b>Urban Park, Trail</b>					
Percentage of population within 0.5 mile of a neighborhood park or trail	76-100%	61-75%	46-60%	31-45%	0-30%
<b>County Park, Trail*</b>					
Percentage of population within 1.5 miles of a county park/trail	76-100%	61-75%	46-60%	31-45%	0-30%
<b>Regional Park, Trail*</b>					
Percentage of the population within 25 miles of a regional park or trail	76-100%	61-75%	46-60%	31-45%	0-30%
<b>In-depth Criteria: Function-Based Guidelines</b>					
<b>Agency-based Assessment</b>					
Percentage of facilities that are fully functional per their specific design and safety guidelines (based on manager assessment)	81-100%	61-80%	41-60%	21-40%	0-20%
<b>Public Satisfaction</b>					
Percentage of population satisfied with the condition (including facility condition, cleanliness, etc.) of existing outdoor park and recreation facilities	66-100%	51-65%	36-50%	26-35%	0-25%
<b>Operations and Maintenance</b>					
On average, routine operations and maintenance funded at this percentage of annual need (does not include major capital development)	80-100%	61-80%	41-60%	21-40%	0-20%
<b>Access</b>					
Percentage of facilities that may be accessed safely via foot, bicycle, or public transportation	80-100%	61-80%	41-60%	21-40%	0-20%

**Attachment B: Recommended Local Agency LOS, based on 2010 test**

<b>Indicators and Criteria</b>	<b>A</b>	<b>B</b>	<b>C</b>	<b>D</b>	<b>E</b>
<b>QUANTITY CRITERIA</b>					
<b>Number of Parks and Recreation Facilities</b>					
Percent difference between existing quantity or per capita average of parks and recreation facilities and the desired quantity or per capita average	<10%	11-20%	21-30%	31-40%	>41%
<b>Facilities that Support Active Recreation Opportunities</b>					
Percent of facilities that support or encourage active (muscle-powered) recreation opportunities	>60%	51-60%	41-50%	31-40%	<30%
<b>Facility Capacity</b>					
Percent of demand met by existing facilities	>75%	61-75%	46-60%	30-45%	<30%
<b>QUALITY CRITERIA</b>					
<b>Agency-Based Assessment</b>					
Percentage of facilities that are fully functional per their specific design and safety guidelines	>80%	61-80%	41-60%	20-40%	<20%
<b>Public Satisfaction</b>					
Percentage of population satisfied with the condition, quantity, or distribution of existing active park and recreation facilities	>65%	51-65%	36-50%	25-35%	<25%
<b>DISTRIBUTION and ACCESS CRITERIA</b>					
<b>Population within Service Areas</b>					
Percentage of population within the following services areas (considering barriers to access):	>75%	61-75%	46-60%	30-45%	<30%
0.5 mile of a neighborhood park/trail					
5 miles of a community park/trail					
25 miles of a regional park/trail					
<b>Access</b>					
Percentage of parks and recreation facilities that may be accessed safely via foot, bicycle, or public transportation	>80%	61-80%	41-60%	20-40%	<20%

## Attachment C: Preliminary State Agency LOS Tool as Published in SCORP and Tested

Indicators and Criteria	Level of Service Ratings				
	A	B	C	D	E
<b>Baseline Criteria: Sustainable Access</b>					
<b>Sustainable Access</b>					
The agency provides sustainable access while meeting this percentage of its resource protection goals	More than 70%	61-70%	51-60%	50-59%	0-50%
<b>Enhanced Criteria: Service Area, Population-Based (Equity)</b>					
<b>Distance to Parks, Trails, Access Sites</b>					
Percentage of population within 1 hour of a state site	66-100%	51-65%	36-50%	21-35%	0-20%
<b>In-Depth Criteria: Function-Based Guidelines</b>					
<b>Agency-based Assessment</b>					
Percentage of facilities that are fully functional per their specific design and safety guidelines	81-100%	61-80%	41-60%	21-40%	0-20%
<b>Public Satisfaction</b>					
Percentage of users satisfied with the condition (facility condition, cleanliness, etc.) of outdoor access and recreation facilities	66-100%	51-65%	36-50%	35-49%	0-35%
<b>Operations and Maintenance</b>					
On average, routine operations and maintenance funded at this percentage of annual need	81-100%	61-80%	41-60%	21-40%	0-20%
<b>Access</b>					
Percentage of facilities that may be accessed safely via foot, bicycle, or public transportation	66-100%	51-65%	36-50%	21-35%	0-20%

**Attachment D: Recommended State Agency LOS, based on 2010 Test**

<b>Indicators and Criteria</b>	<b>A</b>	<b>B</b>	<b>C</b>	<b>D</b>	<b>E</b>
<b>QUANTITY CRITERIA</b>					
<b>Capital Facility Development</b>					
Biennial average percentage of unmet capital facility development (redevelopment, renovation, and/or restoration) goals	<30%	30-40%	41-50%	51-60%	>60%
<b>QUALITY CRITERIA</b>					
<b>Agency-Based Assessment</b>					
Percentage of facilities that are fully functional per their specific design and safety guidelines	>80%	61-80%	41-60%	20-40%	<20%
<b>Public Satisfaction</b>					
Percentage of visitor population satisfied with existing park and outdoor recreation facilities/experiences/opportunities	>65%	51-65%	36-50%	25-35%	<25%
<b>ACCESS CRITERIA</b>					
<b>Sustainable Access</b>					
Percentage of parks/recreation areas/facilities that provide sustainable recreation opportunities (e.g., help protect natural and cultural resources, use green infrastructure to strengthen natural processes, minimize encroachment and/or user-developed facilities, prohibit poaching, etc.)	>65%	56-65%	46-55%	36-45%	<35%

## Attachment E: Text from Manual 2, *Planning Policies*, explaining the recommended LOS

### Recommendations for Your Planning Process

RCO recommends but does not require determination of a level of service for park and recreation planning, including trails.

This recommendation is based on a level of service first proposed in the state comprehensive outdoor recreation plan (SCORP).<sup>3</sup> The proposed level of service was subsequently tested and refined. The test found strong support for a level of service tool, with 73% of the communities testing the level of service tool supporting or strongly supporting an LOS tool.<sup>4</sup>

The LOS works best for local communities considering grants from ALEA, BFP, LWCF, WWRP, and YAF. The state agency LOS tool may be useful for federal as well as state agency applicants in BFP, RTP, and NOVA, especially the criteria concerning resource protection.

An analysis with the level of service tool will indicate strengths and weaknesses of your parks and trails system, suggesting where you may need additional resources.

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Once the categories and elements have been assessed and scored, it is your choice whether to average the scores or to keep each separate. Consider how you will use the LOS scores when deciding.

For example:

- If you are applying for a grant to build a new ball field, you may wish to present results of the quantity criteria that support your request.
- If you are building a budget request for additional maintenance resources, you may wish to use results from the quality criteria. Providing new trails can be justified with the access criteria.
- If you are developing a report to citizens, you may wish to publish results of each of the criteria, and suggest an overall average.

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<sup>3</sup> *Defining and Measuring Success: The Role of State Government in Outdoor Recreation*, RCO, 2008

<sup>4</sup> The complete test is posted on RCO's web site at <http://www.rco.wa.gov/recreation/scorp.shtml>