

Initial Values and Vision And Preliminary Management Concepts For Proposed Grouse Mountain Ranch Acquisition

PROPOSED ACQUISITION

Oregon State Parks and Recreation Department has the opportunity to complete the purchase of the 6,100 acre ranch in Grant County. The acquisition of this property will provide a large park that is comprised of ponderosa pine forest, bunchgrass prairie, and riparian bottomlands. It includes Beech Creek, a tributary of the John Day River, and other streams on the property that provide salmonid habitat. Based on assessments conducted to date, the property has high potential for providing significant natural resources, recreational, cultural and scenic value to the state park system. Existing infrastructure provides a basis for the future development of a state park at a regional and state-wide scale.

It is a very early stage in picturing a new state park in Grant County. However, it is important to start capturing initial ideas around what a new park would be all about. Local officials and citizens are weighing in on what they see as important about the potential for a park on the Grouse Mountain property. The initial vision and underlying values for establishing a new park are about the process and about its future use.

Process

- what are the shared values around the process of acquiring and planning a new state park?
- from a community perspective, what would an ideal result look like, if the process of acquiring and planning a new park was a success?

Future Use

- what is important for the future use of a new park?
- what would be an ideal story about the park sometime in the future?

PRELIMINARY MANAGEMENT CONCEPTS

Upon acquisition of the subject property, staff will engage the Commission in developing and refining preliminary management concepts for the property. Goals will be more fully developed as resource inventories and analyses are completed and the communities are engaged during the planning process. Preliminary management concepts and uses for the property are provided below.

Park Resources

desired result: a balanced approach to resource management is the foundation for planning long-term use of the park.

desired outcome (a): park resources on the property are well understood.

1. A biological and cultural resource survey of the property is completed first thing.
2. Rare, endangered, and other desirable species are identified for the property.
3. Higher quality habitats such as creeks, ponds, seeps, rare serpentine rock outcrops, and other significant components of the Blue Mountain ecoregion are identified and mapped.
4. Knowledgeable residents and neighbors are interviewed about the land use history, natural resources, cultural resources, and their concerns for the property.
5. Appropriate tribal representatives are consulted regarding the formulation of long-term cultural resource protection goals.
6. Sensitive and significant cultural sites, such as the 1875 Anderson cabin site, are identified.
7. All existing use, assets, and infrastructure are identified and mapped.
8. Significant and potential scenic viewpoints are identified and mapped.

desired outcome (b): the planned approach for park resources addresses community concerns.

1. Prescriptions are developed to limit the potential for wildland fire on the property including active management of forests.
2. A fire response capability and protocol are worked out and agreed to with local communities, the Oregon Department of Forestry, and the U. S. Forest Service.
3. Prescriptions are developed to improve forest health including the removal of encroaching juniper and the commercial thinning of the ponderosa pine.
4. Prescriptions are developed to continue converting weed-infested areas to stable native plant communities.
5. A weed response action plan is developed to detect and suppress weeds before they become established in cooperation with the Grant County Soil and Water Conservation District and other partners.
6. Prescriptions are developed for boundary protection including the maintenance of fencing to avoid trespass.

desired outcome (c): the planned approach for park resources supports visitor experiences of statewide significance.

1. Plans to protect, improve, and highlight the significant natural features of the park are developed.
2. Plans to protect and encourage populations of rare, endangered, and other desirable species are developed with a full range of management tools and options.
3. Prescriptions are developed to restore and maintain quality riparian, shrub steppe, upland prairie, and high elevation ponderosa pine habitats representative of the region.
4. Prescriptions are developed to help interpret significant natural resources for visitors.
5. Prescriptions are developed to protect and enhance the existing water resources on the property.
6. Prescriptions are developed that afford quality views of the park interior, the Strawberry and Aldrich ranges, and the John Day valley.
7. The appropriate intensity of use for the natural settings is determined prior to the design of visitor experiences.
8. Plans anticipate potential for future growth in the John Day region with foresight to protect accessible, high quality natural resources that may become scarcer.
9. Plans to protect, improve, and highlight the significant cultural features of the park are developed.
10. The appropriate intensity of use for cultural resource protection areas is determined prior to the design of visitor experiences.
11. Plans to address the use or disposition of all existing assets and infrastructure are developed for the property.
12. Plans for any recreational development are limited and dispersed to generally maintain a natural setting as the predominant cultural and scenic experience.

Visitor Experiences

desired result: design and development of visitor experiences with statewide significance and draw.

desired outcome (a): the park is widely known for its educational experiences.

1. Plans for visitor learning opportunities are based on resource inventories, an evaluation of prospects for teaching outdoor skills, and incorporation of an appreciation for the history and lifestyle of Grant County.
2. The main lodge house is re-purposed to provide an exceptional day use experience for visitors as a research and education center.

3. Innovative educational programs are developed in conjunction with Eastern Oregon University with an emphasis on local teachers' needs as well as best management practices in timber, hydrology, recreation, and restoration.
4. Plans for a summer institute at the park are developed with Eastern Oregon University as an anchor educational use for facilities.
5. Demonstration forest management is evaluated as an outreach function for the park to show innovative approaches to resource stewardship.

desired outcome (b): plans developed for building the best destination public campground in eastern Oregon.

1. Surveys of potential visitors identify overnight characteristics that would draw people from a long distance to visit the park for multiple nights, and would extend the stays of visitors already drawn to other Grant County attractions.
2. Market research is completed to identify a unique mix of overnight amenities and characteristics for the park to make it stand out within the region.
3. Plans for overnight park facilities factor in resource considerations as well as market demand.
4. Appropriate camp and cabin sites with water, showers, and electricity are identified to serve as an overnight base of operations in accessing the park, surrounding federal lands, scenic bikeways, and other destination sites in the region.
5. One or more sites for innovative hike-in camping opportunities are identified.
6. Sites for easy-to-use equestrian camping with water, showers, electricity, corrals, and manure bins are identified.
7. Park design factors in energy use and conservation for sustainability and to minimize and offset both environmental and long-term cost impacts while in balance with providing the intended visitor experience.

desired outcome (c): plans developed for remarkable day use experiences worthy of a long trip to eastern Oregon.

1. Winter, summer, and shoulder season opportunities for park visitor day use activities are identified that would attract, engage, and extend visitor associations with the park, the region, and the park system.
2. Plans for park access from highway 395 include improved and expanded opportunities for day use facilities with parking and guidance for use of the property.
3. Plans for developing the property include opportunities for day use hiking, horseback riding, non-motorized biking, wildlife-viewing, fishing, and other similar experiences.

4. Half- and full-day trail experiences including connections to the Malheur National Forest are designed with unique and innovative trail features.
5. Visitor experiences are designed to make the beauty and diversity of the region accessible to novice outdoor recreation visitors who lack the confidence to explore the National Forest on their own.
6. Park design plans include ADA accessibility to the extent possible at all facilities including creek and pond access opportunities.
7. Concession opportunities are identified for activities like horseback riding, outdoor skills teaching, hunting guides, and food.

Community Interaction

desired result: the local community comes to believe the park to be a positive addition to the region.

desired outcome (a): Grant County commissioners find that state parks met commitments.

1. Lost tax revenue due to shift of land into public ownership is offset by contributions from state parks.
2. Ample and regular opportunities are provided during park planning to learn about the concerns, wishes, and reactions of local residents.
3. Local concerns and issues brought to the attention of state parks are addressed in a timely and complete manner.
4. Active management of visitor behavior through planning, design, operations, and strong boundary control helps protect neighboring private lands from trespass.
5. Land use decisions related to the park are agreed to by Grant County.
6. State parks are seen to be investing in the future of the John Day region by adding value in the form of building a new park and community profit center.

desired outcome (b): interim and long term use opportunities of particular interest to local communities.

1. Early interim trailhead access to the property is provided during the planning process.
2. Plans for the property identify sites that were designed to become special places where the local community can hold low impact events and their families can gather.
3. Plans provide access and support facilities to allow local people to pursue traditional activities including fishing, walking, riding, and a place to picnic.

4. Programming for the park provides an outdoor classroom experience for local school children.
5. Programming for the park includes visits by park rangers to local schools passing on their knowledge of the park.
6. Plans to locate park facilities and do landscaping improve scenic beauty from highway 395 and the John Day valley.

desired outcome (c): clear connections made between the park and the local economy.

1. Local businesses start using the park in their promotional materials to help showcase what makes the region such a special place.
2. Value-added products and services in the food, retail, service, and overnight accommodation sectors are developed as a direct result of visitation generated by the new park.
3. Good relationships between OPRD and the local chambers of commerce are established to promote the park.
4. Local jobs as rangers, guides, outfitters, resource workers, contractors, and caterers are generated by the new park.
5. An education partnership with Eastern Oregon University that leverages park resources is expanded to include the new park and make good use of the main lodge house as a research and education center.

Park Administration

desired result: adequate management resources identified to build and operate the new park.

desired outcome (a): interim park operations conducted well while comprehensive planning completed for the park.

1. The new park is opened on an interim basis in 2016 to the extent allowed under local land-use.
2. A comprehensive management plan, including master planning, is completed before December 2019.
3. Full operations are phased in during the early 2020s.

desired outcome (b): adequate interim and long-term operational resources dedicated to the new park to support effective operations.

1. Adequate staff resources are shifted to the park to oversee, inspect, and steward the land on a regular basis during the planning process.
2. Base annual stewardship funding in the \$50,000 to \$100,000 range is secured to steward and manage the property as responsibility transitions to OPRD.
3. Enhancement of natural resources on the property in conjunction with other resource agencies such as the Grant County Soil and Water Conservation District, Oregon Department of Fish and Wildlife, and others are continued and strengthened.
4. Adequate construction funding for the new park from enhancement funds, grants, and donations is secured over time to gradually phase in development of the park.
5. Adequate dedicated staffing for the new park is secured over time through park system-wide realignments and new staffing requests.
6. Plans are developed to capture in the form of revenues or sponsorships enough of the value created by the new park to support day-to-day operations.

Possible Park Operations for a Phased Acquisition

The preliminary proposal is to continue operating the ranch in similar management practices as it is currently functioning. Operation of the 40 acres of bottomland along Beech Creek would continue in hay production utilizing current water rights and work with the local ranching community to assist with managing production and harvest. This will help offset some of the cost of operating and maintaining the park and buildings and provide some revenue (estimated \$4,000/yr.) until a comprehensive management plan is completed. For the remaining acreage, OPRD would continue the current landowner's efforts to restore native plant communities, and limit grazing on the property until more thorough site assessments are completed. OPRD would continue the current landowner's aggressive weed control efforts.

Phase 1: Land without the Main House and adjoining property

1. Establish a park office and maintenance shop at the existing office building/maintenance yard for base of operation. This would include park signage for entrance, boundaries, regulation, and trails. It will require shifting/transferring 1 permanent position in the MU/District/Region or other Regions to the park. An additional .5 FTE will be required to provide 7 day coverage during spring/summer/fall.
2. Establish the existing small house as park residence for on-site presence.
3. Develop a trail system, to create some basic visitor access to the property. Use established road/trails as base trail inventory.
4. Develop the 1st of two day use areas/trailheads to access trails (North & South). Most likely at the flat area near the small house/potential manager residence. This location could also provide equestrian parking as well. This would be north access.
5. Develop one of two identified existing flat open field areas in the bottomland (most southerly, next to office) into campground. An additional .5 FTE/1 position will be required to provide 7 day coverage during spring/summer/fall.

6. Develop 2nd of two day use areas/trailheads to access trails. Most likely at the flat area near Little Beech Creek. This could also serve the new trail development on the southerly property.
7. Develop some new trail on the southern part of the property with access from the campground first, and then expanding toward day use trailhead and future camping area.
8. Develop the area on East side of the highway, just south of the small house (identified as Winegar property addition) for bicycle camp, walk-in camping, group area, and cabins.
9. Develop the 2nd existing flat open field area (bottomland at Little Beech Creek) in the middle of the property to provide walk-in camping and possibly cabins.

Phase 2: Main House and adjoining property

Two options for use of the Main House and property around it have been identified: (1) a concession operation with the house serving as a lodge with meeting rooms and (2) the house being used as a visitor/interpretive/education center. A market analysis of the house and best potential use of this area would have to be conducted. The ample groundwater source for potable water supports all options discussed below. There are challenges to the either of the options given constraints of the narrow, steep entrance road.

1. Option 1: Convert the main house into a concession operation to provide lodging, possibly cabins and meal service for many functions, such as reservable public events, education classes, and recreation users such as equestrian, hiking, and non-motorized biking. It would require a commercial kitchen upgrade. This is the preferred choice as it would require minimal amount of park staff to operate/maintain and would move some operational costs to the concessionaire. Road will need significant improvements.
2. Option 2: Convert the main house into a visitor/interpretive/education center to provide service for many functions, such as reserved public events, education class rooms, and visitor/interpretation programs. It could also serve as a base for equestrian use. Additional park staff would be needed to operate, with OPRD paying for all operational costs. This would require an additional 1.5 FTE to 2 FTE to operate for seven days a week coverage seasonally, more for year round operation or if OPRD provides guided horse rentals. Road will need significant improvements.
3. Develop additional equestrian facilities with existing horse stables area for use with either option.
4. Develop camping for the equestrian use at lower elevation near the day use trailhead. This would switch over to Phase 1 if the Main House use is part of the purchase or delayed in development.
5. Install cabins for use with concession, equestrian use, education center, and provide alternative camping option at the park.
6. Develop some new trails on the northern part of the property with access from the equestrian/visitor center location. Also, link trails into the adjacent Forest Service trails.

Preliminary Financial Projections

Entire Park

Current statistics for similar size facilities in the region show 13,500 camper nights, and an estimated 175,000 visitors annually. Although it is difficult to precisely project revenue at this time from the operation of a state park at the current location, an existing state park in the county, Clyde Holliday which is located just 6 miles south, reported gross revenue in excess of \$78,000 last fiscal year (7/01/12 to 6/30/13).

A comparable campground operation at Clyde Holliday, with approximately 31 electrical camp sites realizes gross revenue of \$77,000 to \$83,000 annually. From this, and our experience operating campgrounds at Hilgard Junction, Red Bridge, and Ukiah-Dale, located just north, and Bates, located East, we project that the campground operation at Grouse Mountain could potential gross approximately \$75,000 annually if at least 35 electrical sites were installed. If primitive campsites are developed the revenue projection drops to \$7,500 for Ukiah-Dale to \$13,000 for a Hilgard Junction.

With most areas in the region providing free access, we do not see a day use fee being a viable option for revenue generation for the park at this time. Also, electrical service to the camping areas would have to be provided else campers will likely choose free camping on Forest Service property.

Concession/Visitor Center

For the Main House, fixed costs to keep this building open to the public, as a visitor/interpretive center including electricity/propane, telephone, water and sewer, totals an estimated \$8,000 per year. Building and grounds maintenance is estimated at an average of \$9,000 per year. This includes park staff time for identified tasks such as painting, road plowing/maintenance and misc. maintenance tasks on the house. A visitor/interpretive center would not generate the revenue to cover the cost of operations. The concession operation at Frenchglen Hotel generates OPRD \$20,000 annually with 8 rooms and food service. It grosses over \$300,000 annually. It is in an isolated location on the east side of the state, but the Steens Mountains and bird viewing attract visitors. If specific attraction can be developed such as wildlife viewing tours, horn hunting, and limited hunting to achieve wildlife management goals, a viable concession could possibly operate with other recreation use of the park. It may require OPRD to manage it for 3 or 4 years to establish use numbers and some revenue generation numbers before interest could be generated from possible concessionaires.