

Salem Parks and Recreation Advisory Board

(SPRAB)

October 21, 2025

Dear Mayor Hoy and City Councilors:

During your August 25, 2025 City Council meeting, a substitute motion was approved directing the Salem Parks and Recreation Advisory Board to review the seasonal no-mow/restoration program for the Upper Oak Grove at Bush's Pasture Park and provide City Council with recommendations.

The Salem Parks and Recreation Advisory Board reviewed and discussed this subject at our September 11 and October 9, 2025 meetings.

Context

Beginning this year, Salem Parks and Recreation implemented a seasonal no-mow strategy for two sub-areas of Management Area 13 Upper Oak Grove in Bush's Pasture Park. This area is in the southwestern corner of the park.

The city decided to implement this seasonal no-mow program in 13a Oak Refocus & Stabilization and 13c Picnic and Playground as part of an expansion of a no-mow strategy that has been on-going for more than 5 years in area 13b Oak Woodland Restoration. The city's decision is directly aligned with the objectives and strategies outlined in the Cultural Landscape Management Plan for the park approved by City Council in 2021.

The Upper Oak Grove is a treasure to Salem and the entire Willamette Valley. The unique nature of this area was recognized in the Cultural Land Management Plan (CLMP), a guiding document that was extensively researched, discussed, and put in place to preserve, protect, and manage this unique area with cultural, historical, and natural significance. The CLMP aims to balance ongoing use of the area with long-term stewardship while maintaining values that make this place so important.

The CLMP identifies the key goal of Management Area 13 Upper Oak Grove as "promoting the long-term resiliency and dynamic health...by supporting native vegetation, decreasing soil compaction, and protecting roots" (p. 129). The plan identifies a desire to restore areas "to reflect a more native system with... woodland companion plants, forbs, wildflowers and shrubs" and to manage the area "so it can be fully enjoyed, but in a more balanced and responsible way than in times past" (p. 129).

The CLMP specifically identifies a key action of "waiting to mow these areas until mid-summer or later" to promote native wildflowers and plants and to minimize soil compaction from mowers and leaf collectors.

The oak trees in Area 13 are aging. Without changes to the current management and area uses to foster, encourage, and support growth of new oak trees in the area, the long-term presence of the valued oak forest is endangered. Staff has recognized this, and in keeping with the CLMP, have proactively tried to change the management to support natural continuation of the oak grove forest

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area. One of the biggest impediments to new trees and plants thriving in this area is soil compaction, primarily due to excessive foot traffic. Excessive foot traffic comes from overuse by park goers in that area through picnicking and recreation. This foot traffic is discouraged by less mowing, which creates more difficult access, but also leads to less available use by park users. The more natural appearance is also not pleasing to many, and may appear to be through neglect rather than a purposeful and well-thought-out long-term management plan.

Conflict

The no-mow strategy implemented this year by City staff has raised concerns from some city residents and park patrons. Based on the public testimony provided to our SPRAB discussions, these concerns primarily cover:

1. Lack of ability or comfort with using the area subject to the no-mow strategy for traditional family picnics and other gatherings,
2. Unsightliness or unkemptness of the park (i.e., the no-mow area does not align with the idea that park goers have when they think of a city park),
3. Perceptions of increased wildfire risk to the neighborhood because of un-mowed, dry grass.

SPRAB also heard public testimony that was broadly supportive of the seasonal no-mow effort and the implementation of management actions that are designed to protect and restore the upper oak grove.

Key Question(s)

This issue boils down to specifically identifying the appropriate “balance” called for in the CLMP between the desire for preservation and restoration of this historic oak grove with the ongoing desire to use this area of the park as in times past.

Recommendations

SPRAB members emphasized support for the CLMP’s guidance throughout our discussions. We—the city and its residents—are stewards of the treasure that is Bush’s Pasture Park, and are tasked with the responsibility to help it thrive for generations to come.

Additionally, we express our deep trust and gratitude for the guidance and experience provided by our well-qualified and dedicated staff members. They are experts in balancing care and respect for our natural environment with the need to share it with our community members.

Alongside those two key emphases, we appreciate the voices of our community and park-goers. Through the community-engaged development of the CLMP, the people of Salem expressed an overarching vision that prioritizes the current and future value of Bush’s Pasture Park through the protection and enhancement of its oaks and wildflowers, and the ability to explore nature, play, gather with family, connect with history, and to have a place for reflection.

Therefore, with respect to the seasonal no-mow policy at Bush’s Pasture Park, SPRAB recommends:

1. **Continue the seasonal “no-mow” policy across the full area of 13a Oak Refocus and Stabilization and 13b Oak Woodland Restoration.** The seasonal no-mowing effort is a key

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method for achieving the restoration and preservation of the upper oak grove in the park. Failing to implement this management approach will hasten the destruction of the oak grove and result in Salem losing a key aspect that makes this park such a valuable treasure to the city and region.

2. **Identify areas within 13c Picnic and Playground for locating designated and developed picnic areas, and revive the playground.** Sub-area 13c Picnic and Playground is part of the oak grove forest, and needs protection and management to thrive long-term. However, this area more than the others is historically a picnic and playground area. To balance the restoration and recreation goals, we recommend moving away from dispersed, movable picnic sites toward a picnic area that boasts developed, mowed sites with secured picnic tables capable of hosting large family gatherings. Such designations would enable pockets of seasonal no-mow implementation in the area. Designated areas should consider the safety risks of sudden limb drop that can occur under the old oaks, and thus be targeted at adjacent areas.
3. **Provide public education about the purposeful management of these areas.** Signs, posters, fences, and other designations will help encourage appreciation for this valuable and historic oak grove in the middle of Salem. Such educational efforts are important to offset misunderstandings and perceptions about “unkemptness” and can be accomplished with things like improved signage and educational sign boards that explain the natural history of oaks and their importance in the area. Communications about the results of the seasonal no-mow effort and the progress being made in restoration of the oak grove would aid this education.

Implementation

To implement these recommendations, we advise Council to direct staff to:

1. Evaluate subarea 13c for potential designated and developed picnic areas
2. Consider a CIP project(s) within area 13c for accessible picnic area improvements, such as covered and reservable shelters
3. Consider a CIP project(s) within area 13c for playground renewal
4. Identify partnerships or other avenues for creating and posting signs educating park patrons about the ecology of oak groves, and the schedule, purposes and results of the seasonal no-mowing efforts
5. Evaluate budget proposals for these efforts and present them to Council.

Thank you for the opportunity to consider this issue and discuss it with City staff and our fellow community members. If you have any questions or would like further evaluation on this topic, please let us know.

Sincerely,

A handwritten signature in black ink that reads "Keith Norris". The signature is written in a cursive, flowing style.

Keith Norris

Chair, Salem Parks and Recreation Advisory Board