

## **Metro ballot measure 26-225**

**Official Title:** Renews local option levy; protects natural areas, water quality, fish

**Question:** Should Metro protect water quality, fish, natural areas, parks; renew 5-year operating levy, 9.6¢ per \$1,000 assessed value, beginning 2023? This measure renews current local option taxes.

**Financial Impact:** This measure renews current local option taxes, and it does not increase tax rates. The existing levy is 9.6 cents per \$1,000 of assessed value, so a home assessed at \$250,000 would pay \$24 per year. The proposed rate will raise approximately \$18 million in the first year (2023-24) with a steady increase up to \$21 million in 2027-28. (The current levy raises about \$16 million per year.)

*Notes: Assessed value (AV) is the value used to calculate property tax. It is shown on the property tax statement. It is NOT the same as real market value (RMV), which is the market price of the home.*

**Probable Results of “Yes” Vote:** If the levy passes, funding will be used for ongoing restoration of natural areas. Priorities include maintaining and improving water quality and protecting the habitats of native fish.

**Probable Results of “No” Vote:** If the levy fails, the annual tax rate for Clackamas, Multnomah, and Washington counties would decrease. Funding now provided by the levy for parks and nature programs would expire.

**Background:** In total, Metro manages about 17,000 acres of parks and natural areas. The majority of funding for the Parks and Nature department comes from its Bond Fund. Voters in the tri-county Metro region first approved a bond measure in 1995, raising \$136 million. The Natural Areas Bond was approved by voters in 2006, followed by the Parks and Nature Bond in 2019. The 2006 bond raised \$227 million, while the 2019 bond will raise \$475 million. Metro’s portfolio has continually expanded in the last two decades, including two new parks, Chehalem Ridge and Newell Creek Canyon, which opened in December 2021.

Capital bonds can only be used to purchase property, while a levy helps pay for operations and maintenance. The first local option levy was approved by voters in 2013 and renewed in 2016. The 2016 renewal provides funding through 2023. Resources from the levy are part of the Parks and Nature Operating Fund, which also receives revenue from charging visitors for amenities including campsites and boat ramps.

According to Metro’s 2022-23 adopted budget, the Parks and Nature Operating Fund makes up about 22 percent of the department’s total budget—about \$23 million, out of a total of about \$106 million. (As noted above, the current levy provides \$16 million or about 70 percent of the funding for the Operating Fund.) Projects funded by the Operating Fund include Ennis Creek Road Repair, North Newell Stream Restoration, and Beaver Creek Stream Restoration. In the upcoming year, 5.5 FTE (full-time equivalent) staff will be added to the fund to “support the Park Operations program and provide more education programming and community engagement support.” In total, Parks and Nature has 132.7 FTE.

According to the measure referral filed by Metro, if the levy is passed, about half of the funding will support ongoing restoration of parks and natural areas. About half will support providing access to nature to residents across greater Portland. Priorities include maintaining facilities and visitor services and supporting nature education programming.

The Levy Renewal Framework adopted by Metro's Council indicates an annual minimum funding allocation of 40 percent to habitat restoration and land management, 35 percent to regional park operations, and 15 percent to community-led investments and education. This distribution would mean that up to 10 percent of annual funding is unallocated.

**Summary of Measure:** The levy will enable Metro to continue to:

- Maintain and improve water quality in local rivers and streams
- Protect and restore habitat for salmon, other native fish
- Restore wetlands, forests and floodplains, providing habitat for birds, wildlife
- Manage natural areas to better withstand heat, wildfire, extreme weather
- Maintain parks and trails; maintain and improve restrooms, picnic shelters, play areas, trailheads, and other visitor facilities and services
- Increase opportunities for children from low-income families and communities of color to connect with nature

Accountability for the levy would be provided through annual audits. Program expenses would be presented in the budget adopted by the Metro Council.

**Supporters Say:**

- Parks and nature support the livability of the region and improve quality of life.
- Natural areas help lessen the effects of climate change, such as hot summers, wildfires, and other extreme weather.
- The levy renewal would advance racial equity, in line with Metro's commitment to diversity and inclusion. Community partners rely on Metro's parks to provide programming.
- Without the levy, there would be significant program impacts: habitat decline, loss of trees, and increase in invasive species. Although parks and natural areas would stay open, maintenance would have to be deferred, fees would be increased, and there would be insufficient funds to restore newly acquired lands.

**Opponents Say:**

- According to the Cascade Policy Institute, Metro does not publish any metrics to measure its success at habitat restoration and protection, and the long delay between purchasing land and providing public access contradicts Metro's mission of improving access to nature.
- Over the past ten years, Metro has increased property tax collections and spending, but its properties are often hard to find, far from public transit and outside the urban growth boundary.