Columbia County Parks Five-Year Sustainability and Fee Review

Board discussion draft September 2026

Purpose and Recommendation

This report brings the five-year financial outlook, the proposed fee schedule, and the county comparison into one discussion. Columbia County operates a comparatively large park system with lean staffing, low spending per resident, and no ongoing General Fund operating support. The official forecast shows that existing revenue will not keep pace with projected costs. I recommend a targeted fee update now, continued work to increase overnight use, disciplined operating costs, and Board discussion of outside funding and restoration of prior Parks transfers.

Current Picture

Measure	Columbia County
Developed park acreage used for comparison	445 acres
Total system context	22 parks, forests, and trails plus about 311 timber acres
Parks staffing	3.2 FTE
Annual Parks budget	$1.0 million to $1.2 million
Ongoing General Fund operating support	None
Published fee schedule	In effect since May 1 2020

Five-Year Outlook

Under the official forecast, Parks reserves decline from about $1.1 million at the beginning of FY 2026-27 to a projected negative balance by FY 2028-29. The projected FY 2030-31 funding gap is approximately $443,000. The forecast does not assume new Parks positions, new vehicles, ongoing General Fund support, future TLT revenue, or unidentified grant proceeds.

Fiscal Year	Official Ending Balance	Projected Funding Gap
FY 2026-27	$774,291	-
FY 2027-28	$412,224	-
FY 2028-29	($10,752)	$10,752
FY 2029-30	($490,240)	$490,240
FY 2030-31	($442,974)	$442,974

Why a Fee Update Is Needed

The current published fee schedule has been in place since May 2020. Since then, labor, utilities, maintenance, materials, and replacement costs have increased. Holding every rate flat shifts more of those increases onto reserves and makes the self-supporting model harder to maintain.

The proposed schedule does not apply one percentage to every fee. It uses rounded prices based on the service provided and comparable public park rates. The larger adjustments apply where the current charge is furthest below the market or where the County has added capacity or amenities. The proposal keeps the 10 percent senior citizen and disabled veteran discount.

The 19 percent input is a planning proxy for the combined fee package, not a 19 percent increase to every charge. Dump and shower fees remain unchanged, campsite rates increase by different amounts, and cabins and event rentals receive larger adjustments.

How the Main Proposed Rates Compare

Fee	Proposed	Comparable Public Rate
Full hookup campsite	$38	Oregon State commonly $52 at busy parks; Jackson $43 to $47; Benton $48
Water and electric campsite	$35	Jackson $35; Linn River Bend $37; Benton $38
Tent campsite	$25	Oregon State commonly $21 to $29; Jackson $28 to $30
Camp Wilkerson cabin	$65 plus unchanged $25 dog fee	Oregon State rustic cabins $72 or more; Benton $70; Linn River Bend $98
Day use parking	$6	Jackson $6; Oregon State resident day use $10
Firewood bundle	$7	Jackson $8; bundle size should be confirmed

Connection to the Five-Year Model

The five-year workbook keeps the official forecast separate from an editable sustainability scenario. At the current activity level, a 19 percent increase applied to the $440,000 day use and overnight fee base produces about $83,600 in first year revenue. That estimate is a planning assumption. Actual revenue will depend on the mix of reservations, discounts, cancellations, and visitor use.

Sustainability Item	Illustrative Input	First Year Effect
Targeted fee update	19 percent planning input	About $83,600 first year
Overnight occupancy and use	5 percent planning input	About $15,000 first year
Materials and Services savings	1 percent planning input	About $5,112 first year
Prior Parks transfer restoration	$229,000 annually for four years	Phased funding if approved
Potential TLT allocation	$75,000 annually (illustrative)	Not included in official forecast

FY 2030-31 Ending Balance Comparison

Scenario	FY 2030-31 Ending Balance
Official forecast	($442,974)

Scenario	FY 2030-31 Ending Balance
Parks Operating Path — fees, use, 1% M&S and illustrative TLT	($18,346)
Yellow Combined Path — Parks Operating Path plus phased restoration	$897,654

The Parks Operating Path uses the 19 percent fee proxy, 5 percent additional overnight use, 1 percent Materials and Services savings, and an illustrative $75,000 annual TLT allocation. The Yellow Combined Path adds $229,000 of annual reserve restoration for four years. Neither illustrative path is included in the official forecast.

Proposed Fee Schedule

The recommended structure replaces the two seasonal campsite schedules with a one-year-round rate. This makes the schedule easier to explain and administer while keeping Columbia County at or below comparable public park prices for the main camping products.

Fee or Service	Current Price	Recommended Price
Day use parking	$5 daily or $40 annual	$6 daily or $45 annual
Full hookups	$31 off season or $33 peak	$38 year round
Water and electric	$28 off season or $30 peak	$35 year round
Tent campsite	$20 off season or $23 peak	$25 year round
Camp Wilkerson cabin	$45 midweek or $50 weekends and holidays	$65 year round; $25 dog fee remains
Additional tent or vehicle	$7 nightly	$10 nightly
Camp Wilkerson corral site	$20 off season or $23 peak	$25 year round
Camp Wilkerson Adirondack	$23 off season or $28 peak	$30 year round
Bicycle camping	$5 to $10	$10 year round
Group camping reservation fee	$75	$100

Check-in is 2:00 p.m. and check-out is 12:00 p.m. No change is recommended to the 10 percent senior citizen or disabled veteran discount for camping and annual passes. The senior discount remains available at age 60 or older.

Services Facilities and Events

Fee or Service	Current Price	Recommended Price
Firewood	$5 per cubic foot bundle	$7 per bundle
Sewage dump for non-campers	$10	$10
Showers for non-campers	$5 per person	$5 per person
Open picnic area up to 100 people	$100	$115
Open picnic area 100 to 250 people	$200	$230
Long term winter camping at Scappoose RV and Hudson Parcher	Hudson Parcher $600; Scappoose RV not offered	$800 flat rate at either location
Camp Wilkerson Lodge and Schoolhouse weekend package	$2,500 peak season	$3,000 year round
Camp Wilkerson entire campground weekend package	$5,000 peak season	$6,000 year round
Camp Wilkerson weekday event rental	$200 daily	$300 daily
Hudson Parcher cabin	$150 daily	$175 daily

Policy Items

- Keep the current campsite cancellation structure, including the $15 handling fee and one night charge when notice is insufficient.
- Allow campers at Big Eddy to stay up to 14 consecutive days during designated hunting seasons. Other stay limits remain unchanged.
- Keep event reservation fees nonrefundable.
- Continue separate County review for commercial filming, custom events, and other nonstandard uses.
- Review rates annually and return to the Parks Advisory Committee at least every two years.

How Columbia County Compares

The peer information should be read as directional because counties organize Parks differently. Even with that limitation, the comparison is useful. Columbia maintains more developed park acreage per resident than Yamhill and operates with only about 3.2 FTE, while spending substantially less per resident than Josephine, Benton, and Linn.

Measure	Columbia	Yamhill	Josephine	Benton	Linn
Approximate annual Parks budget	$1.0M to $1.2M	$654K	$2.8M	$5.1M	$7.0M
Budget per 1,000 residents	$18,500 to $22,200	$6,150	$31,251	$52,238	$52,508
Developed acres per 1,000 residents	8.2	1.1	10.2	8.3	10.2
Staffing	3.2 FTE	2.95 FTE	Dedicated recreation staff	14.0 FTE department	Dedicated Parks department
Ongoing General Fund support	None	County allocation and other sources	Enterprise Recreation Fund	Mixed structure including about 46 percent General Fund	None

What the Comparison Shows

- Columbia provides substantial acreage and public access with a small staff and no ongoing General Fund operating support.
- The projected funding gap is not evidence that Parks is overstaffed or operating at a high cost compared with peers.
- Yamhill is the lower spending exception, but its smaller developed system and reported deferred maintenance make it an unsuitable cost target for Columbia.
- A sustainable plan should preserve service and assets rather than reach the lowest possible annual spending level.

Statewide Context

A review of Oregon county park structures supports describing Columbia as unusually lean. An exact ranking of all 36 counties would imply more precision than the public data allows. Some counties combine parks with fairs, natural areas, roads, forests, cemeteries, or recreation programs. Others use enterprise funds, park districts, General Fund support, dedicated lodging taxes, or combinations of those sources. For that reason, this report uses a detailed comparison of the counties with the clearest published benchmarks and uses the statewide review as context rather than presenting a misleading 36 county ranking.

Yamhill County Context

Yamhill is the lowest cost peer shown, but its spending level should not automatically be treated as a goal. Yamhill County maintains about 1.1 developed acres per 1,000 residents compared with Columbia at about 8.2. Yamhill County documents also identify deferred maintenance, outdated infrastructure, limited staffing capacity, and continuing funding constraints. During its FY 2026-27 budget process, Parks requested restoration of a vacant 1.0 FTE and additional operating and capital support. That experience shows why the lowest spending figure can reflect reduced capacity as well as efficiency.

Parks Funding History

Columbia Parks has historically relied on user fees, State RV apportionment, grants, interest, and periodic timber revenue rather than ongoing General Fund operating support. County Board records describe Carcus Creek timber proceeds to replenish the Parks Fund and support future budget cycles. Maintaining reserves between harvests is therefore part of the historical funding model.

$916,000 of Forest Parks and Recreation resources was transferred to the General Fund over the last two fiscal years, in transfers of $464,000 and $452,000. The five-year workbook illustrates restoration at $229,000 annually for four years so the Board can see the effect of a phased approach. Restoration remains a discussion item and is not included in the official forecast.

Capital Planning

Capital decisions should preserve existing assets, improve visitor service, generate revenue, or reduce long-term operating costs. The Camp Wilkerson cabin project illustrates this approach. The five-year plan includes about $70,000 for design and site planning. The remaining estimated $530,000 construction cost is future and unfunded. Completing design first allows the County to pursue grants and other outside funding before committing Parks reserves to construction.

Shared Responsibility for Sustainability

Parks should address the items it can control, including fees, overnight use, operating costs, grants, and revenue producing improvements. Fees do not close the gap by themselves. The County can separately discuss restoration of prior transfers and whether Parks should receive a portion of future TLT revenue if it becomes available. Using more than one tool reduces the need for a single large fee increase or an immediate General Fund subsidy.

Recommended Board Direction

I recommend that the Board provide direction in the following areas:

- Advance the proposed targeted fee schedule through the Parks Advisory Committee and Board adoption process.
- Effective date of January 1, 2027, for fee adjustments.
- Monitor occupancy and revenue after implementation, with particular attention to winter use.
- Continue pursuing grants and outside funding for capital projects before using Parks reserves for construction.
- Continue reviewing Materials and Services for practical savings that do not reduce service or defer necessary maintenance.
- Discuss phased restoration of the $916,000 previously transferred from Parks related resources to the General Fund, illustrated at $229,000 annually for four years.
- Determine whether Parks should receive a portion of future TLT revenue if voters approve it and the Board determines the use is allowed and appropriate.

Committee Action Requested

Recommend that the Board of County Commissioners adopt the proposed campsite, day use, cabin, event, and service fees and the Big Eddy hunting season stay exception. Staff may make minor wording corrections that do not change approved amounts.

Sources and Notes

1. Columbia County General Services and Parks Five-Year Operations Plan for FY 2026-27 through FY 2030-31.
2. Columbia County Parks published fee schedule effective May 1, 2020.
3. Columbia County Parks Master Plan and County park acreage information.
4. Yamhill County Park System Plan 2025 including peer benchmarking and system condition findings.
5. Yamhill County FY 2026-27 budget materials.
6. Oregon State Parks reservation rates and day use permits accessed September 2026.
7. Official Benton, Jackson, Linn, Tillamook, and Clatsop County park fee schedules, accessed September 2026.
8. United States Census Bureau QuickFacts 2024 population estimate for Columbia County.
9. Columbia County Board records regarding Carcus Creek timber harvests, including 2011 and 2016 discussions of Parks Fund replenishment and budget planning.

Peer source years, department structures, acreage definitions, and funding models vary. Figures are approximate and are intended to support Board discussion rather than establish an exact statewide rank.