



LIVABLE CITY YEAR 2017–2018  
IN PARTNERSHIP WITH  
CITY OF TACOMA

## CITY OF TACOMA

OPEN SPACE SURVEY

UNIVERSITY OF WASHINGTON  
COLLEGE OF THE ENVIRONMENT

ENVIRO 480: SUSTAINABILITY STUDIO

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WINTER 2018





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ACKNOWLEDGMENTS

Students would like to thank Bonnie Smith and the Youth Leadership Council at Gray Middle School and Jaquette Easterlin and the Bobcat Learning Center at Jason Lee Middle School. These community partners were invaluable in their assistance connecting student researchers with middle school students, whose feedback is reflected in this report.

Leadership at the People’s Community Center helped link student researchers to community members, and Christine Cooley of Pierce Conservation District provided key guidance to students.

Finally, students are grateful to Aris Efting, Project Lead for the City of Tacoma, who provided extensive support to students as they carried out this project, and whose flexibility and thoughtful approach to the project was also critical.

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*Note: this report was written by Livable City Year editor Anneka Olson, MA Community Planning student, based on coursework conducted by student researchers.*

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**Recommended citation:** Livable City Year 2018. *Open Space Survey*. University of Washington, Seattle, WA. Prepared for City of Tacoma.



## ABOUT LIVABLE CITY YEAR

The University of Washington's Livable City Year (LCY) initiative enables local governments to engage UW faculty and students for one academic year to work on city-defined projects that promote local sustainability and livability goals. The program engages hundreds of students each year in high-priority projects, creating momentum on real-world challenges while enabling the students to serve and learn from communities. Partner cities benefit directly from bold and applied ideas that propel fresh thinking, improve livability for residents and invigorate city staff. Focus areas include environmental sustainability; economic viability; population health; and social equity, inclusion, and access. The program's 2017–2018 partner is the City of Tacoma; this follows a partnership with the City of Auburn in 2016–2017.

The LCY program is led by faculty directors Branden Born (Department of Urban Design and Planning), Jennifer Otten (School of Public Health) and Anne Taufen (Urban Studies Program, UW Tacoma), with support from Program Manager Teri Thomson Randall. The program was launched in 2016 in collaboration with UW Sustainability and Urban@UW, with foundational support from the Association of Washington Cities, the College of Built Environments, the Department of Urban Design and Planning, and Undergraduate Academic Affairs.

LCY is modeled after the University of Oregon's Sustainable City Year Program, and is a member of the Educational Partnerships for Innovation in Communities Network (EPIC-N), the collection of institutions that have successfully adopted this new model for community innovation and change.

For more information, contact the program at [uwlcy@uw.edu](mailto:uwlcy@uw.edu).



## ABOUT TACOMA

The third largest city in the state of Washington, Tacoma is a diverse, progressive, international gateway to the Pacific Rim. The port city of nearly 210,000 people has evolved considerably over the last two decades, propelled by significant development including the University of Washington Tacoma, the Tacoma Link light rail system, the restored urban waterfront of the Thea Foss Waterway, the expansions of both the MultiCare and CHI Franciscan health systems, and a significant influx of foreign direct investment in its downtown core.

Washington State's highest density of art and history museums are found in Tacoma, which is home to a flourishing creative community of writers, artists, musicians, photographers, filmmakers, chefs, entrepreneurs, and business owners who each add their unique flair to the city's vibrant commercial landscape. The iconic Tacoma Dome has endured as a high-demand venue for some of the largest names in the entertainment industry.


A magnet for families looking for affordable single-family homes in the Puget Sound area, Tacoma also draws those seeking a more urban downtown setting with competitively priced condos and apartments that feature panoramic mountain and water views. The city's natural beauty and proximity to the Puget Sound and Mount Rainier draws hikers, runners, bicyclists, and maritime enthusiasts to the area, while its lively social scene is infused with energy by thousands of students attending the University of Washington Tacoma and other academic institutions.

The City of Tacoma's strategic plan, Tacoma 2025, was adopted in January 2015 following unprecedented public participation and contribution. The plan articulates the City's core values of opportunity, equity, partnerships, and accountability, and expresses the City's deep commitment to apply these values in all of its decisions and programming. Each Livable City Year project ties into the principles and focus areas of this strategic plan. The City of Tacoma is proud of its 2017–2018 Livable City Year partnership with the University of Washington and of the opportunity this brings to its residents.



# TACOMA 2025 STRATEGIC PLAN


The *Open Space Survey* project supports the Livability and Equity and Accessibility goals of the Tacoma 2025 Strategic Plan and was sponsored by the City's Office of Environmental Policy and Sustainability.

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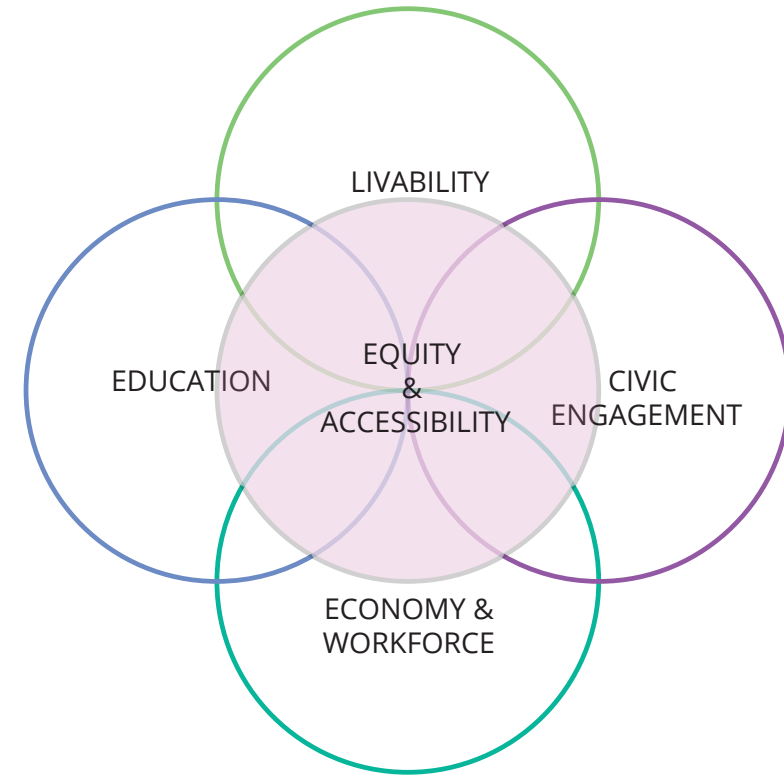
**Goal #1 Livability**  
**The City of Tacoma will be a city of choice in the region known for connected neighborhoods, accessible and efficient transportation transit options, and vibrant arts and culture. Residents will be healthy and have access to services and community amenities while maintaining affordability.**
- 

**Goal #2 Economy and Workforce**  
By 2025, Tacoma will be a growing economy where Tacoma residents can find livable wage jobs in key industry areas. Tacoma will be a place of choice for employers, professionals, and new graduates.
- 

**Goal #3 Education**  
Tacoma will lead the region in educational attainment amongst youth and adults. In addition to producing more graduates from high school and college, more college graduates will find employment in the region. Lifelong learning and access to education will be prioritized and valued.
- 

**Goal #4 Civic Engagement**  
Tacoma residents will be engaged participants in making Tacoma a well-run city. The leadership of the city, both elected and volunteer, will reflect the diversity of the city and residents and will fully participate in community decision-making.
- 

**Goal #5 Equity and Accessibility**  
**Tacoma will ensure that all residents are treated equitably and have access to services, facilities, and financial stability. Disaggregated data will be used to make decisions, direct funding, and develop strategies to address disparate outcomes.**



## RESOURCES

- Tacoma 2025 Strategic Plan:** [https://www.cityoftacoma.org/tacoma\\_2025](https://www.cityoftacoma.org/tacoma_2025)
- Office of Environmental Policy and Sustainability:**  
[http://www.cityoftacoma.org/government/city\\_departments/environmentalservices/office\\_of\\_environmental\\_policy\\_and\\_sustainability](http://www.cityoftacoma.org/government/city_departments/environmentalservices/office_of_environmental_policy_and_sustainability)
- Livable City Year:** <https://www.washington.edu/livable-city-year/>
- University of Washington College of the Environment:**  
<https://environment.uw.edu/>

## INTRODUCTION AND METHODS

The Passive Open Space Program is part of the City of Tacoma's Environmental Services Department's Surface Water Program. The program, which is responsible for maintaining 488 acres of wetlands, forests, and other critical environmental areas in Tacoma, engages volunteer community members who serve as Habitat Stewards and help the City maintain these open spaces and ecologically critical areas.

The goal of this project was to better understand how the City of Tacoma could increase awareness of, and participation in, the Passive Open Space Program, with a particular focus on the inclusion of historically underrepresented communities. Student researchers reached out to 20 community organizations and to more than 40 representatives of extracurricular programs at schools to set up focus groups. Of their initial outreach attempts, students successfully conducted two survey collection and activity sessions with middle school groups and outreach at one community center.

## FINDINGS

Surveys and feedback sessions, involving two groups of middle school students, revealed opportunities and barriers to engaging young people in the Passive Open Space Program. In general, participants expressed that they found these programs most appealing when they dovetailed with activities and hobbies they enjoyed, such as combining volunteer opportunities with food, music, and art. However, limited time due to school and other commitments, as well as transportation constraints, can make it challenging for young people to participate in the Passive Open

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The goal of this project was to better understand how the City of Tacoma could increase awareness of, and participation in, the Passive Open Space Program, with a particular focus on the inclusion of historically underrepresented communities.

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Limited time, due to school, work, and other commitments, as well as transportation constraints, make it challenging for young people to participate in the Passive Open Space Program.

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Space Program. Therefore, the City of Tacoma may find efforts to develop sustained and programmatic partnerships with existing school clubs and youth groups most effective for increasing youth participation.

Despite reaching out to a large number of community organizations, student researchers struggled in attempts to set up the focus group sessions they originally intended to carry out for this project. While the project's tight timeline contributed to this outcome, some organizations told students that past challenges working with the City made them hesitant to participate.

To overcome these barriers, several organizations and individuals recommended that the City of Tacoma engage in more meaningful outreach efforts to better understand community needs. In addition, several organizations suggested that future City efforts to reach historically marginalized communities could include formalized partnerships with community-based organizations, to include collecting funding for these organizations to assist with community outreach. While this relationship-building work often requires more time and energy, it may be necessary for the City to garner community interest and support for open space stewardship programs in neighborhoods and communities throughout Tacoma.



## ABOUT THE PASSIVE OPEN SPACE PROGRAM

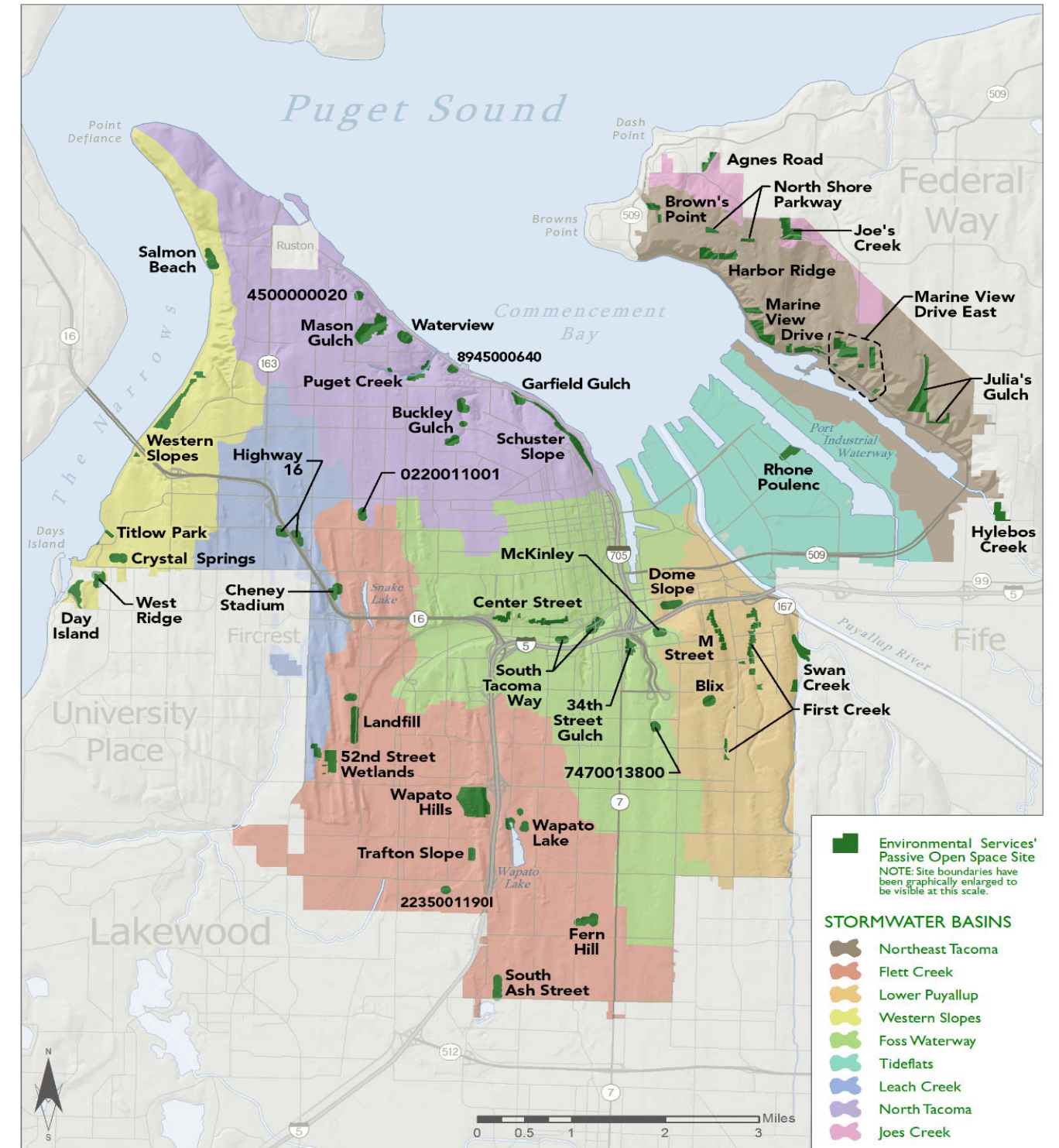
The City of Tacoma's Passive Open Space Program forms one part of the City's Environmental Services Department's (ESD) Surface Water Program. Its purpose is to maintain 488 acres of wetlands, forests, and other critical environmental areas. These areas perform important ecosystem services: they retain surface water, improve air quality, provide shade to cool the city, and offer urban habitat. Many of the areas overseen by this program are identified as ecologically critical, located on steep bluffs or shorelines. Most of these sites require active management to ensure that open spaces are ecologically viable for decades to come; for example, regular maintenance ensures that invasive species do not overtake native plants and that these sites perform ecosystem services optimally. Each area is managed through a Landscape Management Plan, which guides City staff in efforts to achieve an appropriate and stable ecosystem for each site (City of Tacoma, 2016).

Although the major obstacles students encountered prevented them from conducting the study as originally planned, their findings are still instructive for the City of Tacoma.



First Creek in East Tacoma, one site included in the City's Passive Open Space program. CITY OF TACOMA

## City of Tacoma's Environmental Services' Open Space Sites



488 acres of City-owned wetlands, streams, and habitat areas (shaded in dark green on the map) are managed as part of the Passive Open Space Program. These areas are located in neighborhoods throughout Tacoma. CITY OF TACOMA & FORTERRA



**ENGAGING COMMUNITY MEMBERS IN OPEN SPACE CONSERVATION**

The 2017 *Environmental Services Customer Satisfaction Survey Report of Results* indicated that almost 40% of respondents either “hadn’t heard of” or “didn’t know” about the City’s Passive Open Space Program. This indicates an important opportunity for the City to take direct action to increase broad community awareness of the program (City of Tacoma, 2017a).

This is especially crucial because community awareness and participation form an important cornerstone of the program. According to the Strategic 20-Year Passive Open Space Plan, one of the City’s key implementation strategies includes engaging local volunteers and community partners and encouraging them to serve as volunteers on local restoration projects. Community members willing to take on leadership roles in these programs are trained as Habitat Stewards and lead other community members in restoration activities.

Recognizing the potential benefits of participating in this program—which include community building, increasing public health, and fostering connection to the natural world—the plan highlights the importance of inclusion of all of Tacoma’s neighborhoods and sub-communities. This is outlined specifically in “Community Objective 2: Develop and Implement Strategies to Achieve Social Equity and Inclusion of a Diverse Community of Volunteers,” which states:

The Environmental Services Department (ESD) will look to strengthen efforts to provide equitable and inclusive opportunities for the entire Tacoma community. Environmental conservation organizations across the country and here in Puget Sound typically struggle to engage communities of color, recent immigrants, and low income families...ESD will need to employ additional creative strategies during the next 20 years...to enhance social equity and diversity (City of Tacoma, 2017b).

**PROJECT GOALS**

The goal of this project was to better understand how ESD could increase awareness of, and participation in, the Passive Open Space Program, with a particular focus on historically underrepresented communities. In addition, City of Tacoma staff sought to better understand how they might improve their community outreach strategies and survey question design to connect with diverse community members.

This report outlines student findings based on their initial outreach, which included sessions with middle school students as well as conversations with adult community members. Importantly, students faced several challenges as they carried out this report. For instance, some of the community organizations and individuals who students contacted reported limited organizational capacity or past negative experiences collaborating with local government. Although the major obstacles students encountered prevented them from conducting the study as originally planned, their findings are still instructive for the City of Tacoma. Several organizations offered useful suggestions for how the City might improve its outreach methods and form more effective partnerships in the future. In developing programs to promote open space stewardship, this process of community consultation can help to ensure that these programs are aligned with, and meeting, existing community needs and goals (more detail on this point is covered in the “Findings” section of this report).



Student researchers present their findings to fellow students and City of Tacoma staff.. TERI THOMSON RANDALL



## RESEARCH QUESTIONS

The student research team employed a mix of quantitative and qualitative methods to carry out this project. Two research questions, agreed upon by students and City of Tacoma staff, guided the project:

1. What are the best strategies to increase awareness among historically underrepresented demographics at Open Space restoration events?
2. What barriers prevent people in the community from volunteering at these events?

## COMMUNITY OUTREACH

Students contacted a variety of community-based organizations and school-affiliated youth groups and requested an opportunity to conduct a focus group or survey. They used an outreach list created by the City of Tacoma's Office of Equity and Human Rights to guide them in inviting to their study more than twelve community-based organizations in Tacoma and eight student organizations at the University of Washington Tacoma. In addition, they contacted 44 representatives of youth clubs that serve eight middle schools and five high schools. Although students' outreach generally targeted historically underrepresented populations, in their efforts to engage with young people, they contacted schools in neighborhoods throughout the city.



Student researchers conducted tabling outreach to connect with community members and learn more about their interests and impressions of the Passive Open Space Program. LCY STUDENT TEAM

## SURVEY DEVELOPMENT

Students created two surveys: one for adult community members and one for youth. The adult survey contained seventeen questions, all based on the Environmental Services Department Annual Survey; students added more open-ended questions (this survey is administered by the National Research Center, a market research firm). By participating, all adult survey respondents were entered into a raffle to win a \$50 gift card. Students tailored the youth survey to be appropriate for younger participants, and added questions about the kinds of programming that would be most effective in engaging students in open space restoration activities.

## SURVEY OUTREACH

The student research team administered the surveys one-on-one or in small groups:

- **Adult survey:** Student researchers also conducted outreach by tabling at the People's Community Center, in the Hilltop neighborhood. There, they spoke with a number of community members, five of whom agreed to participate in the survey. In addition, several community members provided feedback to students, but declined to formally participate in the survey.
- **Youth survey:** In two classroom visits with middle school students, the student researchers collected 32 survey responses. These visits also involved post-survey sessions, where the research team led an interactive activity, inviting participants to share more qualitative context for their survey responses.
- **Interview:** In addition, the student team interviewed a staff member who works on open space conservation issues at Pierce Conservation District. This individual provided additional context for their survey data and offered ideas for more effective community partnership.



The City of Tacoma is currently working out a 5-year stewardship plan for Wapato Hills. PHIL VENDITTI

### STUDENT CHALLENGES/LIMITATIONS

Students reported several challenges as they carried out the project. These unanticipated limitations impacted the scope, design, and findings of their project.

- Research design:** Students noted that the surveys did not always allow them to capture the full complexity of each participant's input. Initially, the scope of work for this project included three focus groups; however, as we discuss later in the report, students were not able to schedule focus groups due to a variety of timeline and community constraints. It is possible that a different research design—such as one that focused primarily on an unstructured focus group and/or one-on-one interviews or town hall meeting formats, rather than a set of pre-defined survey categories—would have been more useful for capturing this qualitative information.
- Report documentation:** At the culmination of this project, no student researcher was available to write this final report, so a Livable City Year report editor, in consultation with the City of Tacoma project lead and other LCY staff, compiled this document. Because the informal conversations between student researchers and adult participants and the post-survey feedback sessions with middle schoolers were not recorded, or otherwise documented in field notes, the findings of this report rely solely on survey data and student impressions, as recorded by students in their final term paper.
- Community responses:** One of the most significant limitations for this project was the low response rate that students received from community partners. As indicated above, students heard back from around half of the twelve organizations they contacted, but only two responses resulted in in-person meetings; nine of the 44 school groups they contacted replied, but only two resulted in in-person meetings. (Note: two organizations replied too late in the process to be included in the project.) While response rate stands out as common challenges for student projects, which run on a short, ten-week timeframe, the fact that few organizations agreed to participate in this project may signify additional capacity issues, mission misalignment, or lack of trust in local government institutions. This is explored further in the next section of the report, "Findings."

### Wapato Hills Park, Tacoma



### ENGAGING YOUNG PEOPLE

The youth surveys and post-survey conversations with middle school students shed light on some factors that could help the City better engage young people in the Passive Open Space Program.

A fairly high percentage of young people indicated that “protecting the environment” and “improving the neighborhood” motivate them to participate in volunteer activities. This is closely followed by their interest in “meeting new people” and “working with others”. Researchers found that age-appropriate activities that overlap with other student interests encourage student participation. In feedback sessions, participating youth indicated that music, art, and opportunities for socializing with friends would also increase their interest in volunteering. Respondents overwhelmingly expressed that “food” would make volunteering more fun and increase their likelihood of engaging with an open space stewardship program. According to an administrator from Gray Middle School, many students experience food insecurity, so providing food or food-related programs could also help meet students’ basic needs.

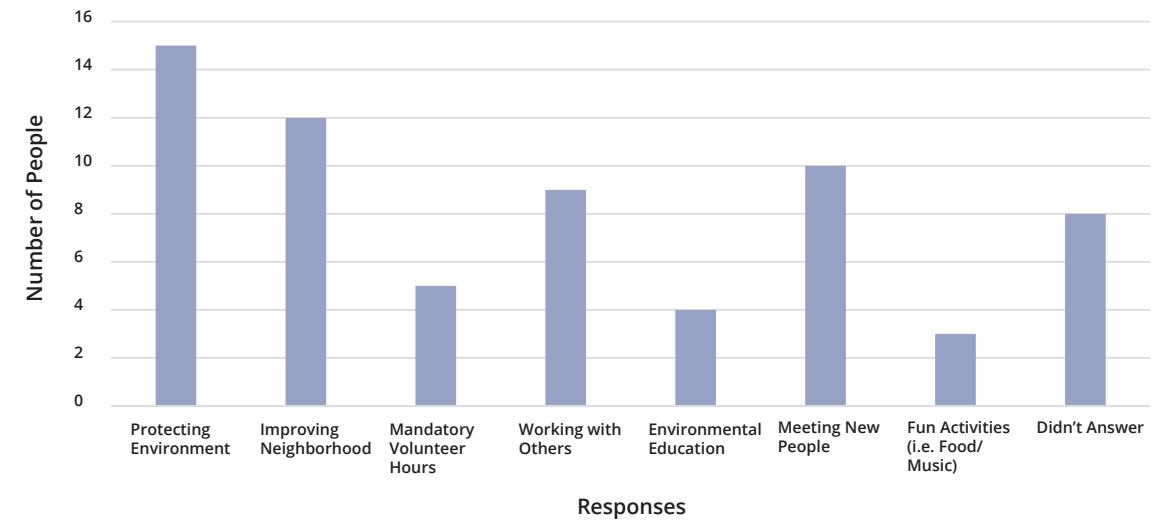
When asked about potential barriers to their participation, young people indicated “personal activities” and “no time” as problems, in addition to transportation concerns. In their survey responses, one participant wrote: “students are busy with school.” However, 77% of the survey respondents indicated that they would be more likely to volunteer if their schools took part in organizing stewardship clubs. In addition, one participant suggested that monetary compensation could help encourage the participation of older students.

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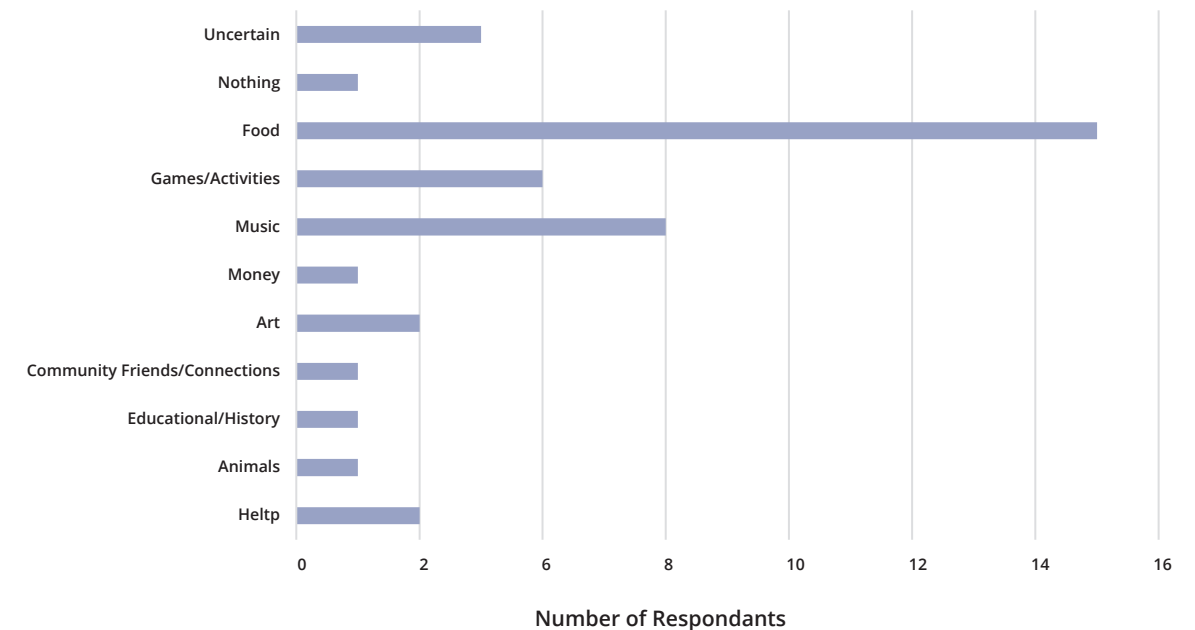
A fairly high percentage of young people indicated that “protecting the environment” and “improving the neighborhood” motivate them to participate in volunteer activities.

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### What would prompt you to volunteer for restoration activities in an urban forest that does not have public recreation?



### What would make volunteering more appealing and increase the likelihood that you would engage in volunteer activities?





Participating youth indicated that music, art, and opportunities for socializing with friends would also increase their interest in volunteering.

Overall, students and educators (such as those from the Youth Leadership Council groups and the Safe Streets Mobilization specialists who assisted with this project), highlighted the importance of understanding and prioritizing existing student and partner needs, and building on these needs to develop open space programming.

Recommendation

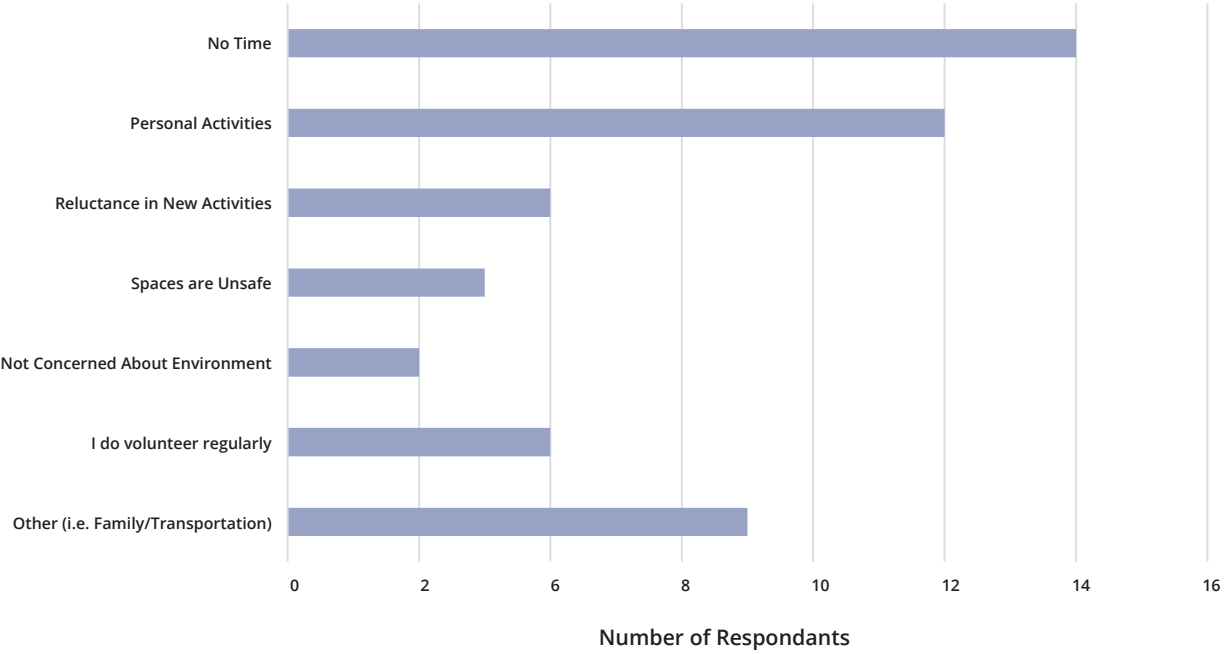
Programmatic interventions may be the most effective way to connect with students, either through school partnerships or by creating new programs to employ students in restoration initiatives. Existing curricular and extracurricular school programs could serve as bridges between young people and open space stewardship.

Connecting with Community Partners

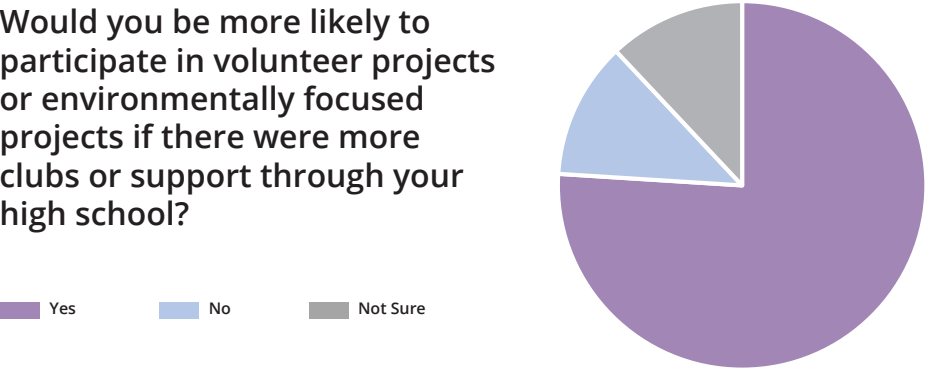
Given the small amount of survey data that student researchers collected from adult community members, several findings emerge from the correspondence and informal conversations that students had with community-based organizations and individuals.

As outlined in the Methods section of this report, the student team reached out to almost 20 local advocacy organizations and student groups, and heard back from about six. Their list of contacts included both large and small organizations, including Pierce Conservation District, the Black Collective, Latinx Unidos of the South Sound, Asian Pacific Cultural Center, Associated Ministries of Tacoma and Pierce County, the Tacoma YMCA, members of Tacoma’s Neighborhood Councils, the People’s Community Center, and Hilltop Action Coalition, as well as student organizations from University of Washington Tacoma, including the Black Student Union, South Asian Student Union, Desi Student Alliance, Filipino American Student Organization, Khmer Student Organization, Latinxs Embracing Education, Muslim Student Association, and Somali Student Association.

If you are aware of opportunities to care for or restore open, natural spaces in Tacoma, what prevents you from participating?



Would you be more likely to participate in volunteer projects or environmentally focused projects if there were more clubs or support through your high school?



Students and educators highlighted the importance of understanding and prioritizing existing student and partner needs, and building on those needs to develop open space programming.

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## Some organizations noted that they would require compensation to cover staff time and provide childcare and translation services at the event.

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Despite their outreach attempts, several of these organizations expressed apprehension about working with the City and declined to participate in this project. In a write-up of their experience, the student research team pointed out that “given past negative experiences, the trepidation towards the City stems from a perceived sense of ineffectiveness and investment in the underserved communities of Tacoma.” In addition, some organizations noted that they would require compensation to cover staff time and provide childcare and translation services at the event. The City contracting system can often be protracted, which can pose a challenge for small organizations, so this might be an additional consideration for the City as it seeks to develop formalized partnerships with community groups. During this project, one organization initially agreed to host a focus group that would pay participants a small stipend for participating, but ultimately pulled out because the process took too long.

Students also stated that organizations “expressed fatigue with the engagement of focus groups and surveys, which they felt did not address their concerns or values, or help them to implement solutions to better serve their community.” In a one-on-one conversation at the People’s Center, a community member noted that they would prefer to have “direct contact with City employees who can implement change” than to merely participate in a survey. In several cases, community members declined to take the survey even with the incentive of being entered into a drawing for a \$50 gift card because they felt that their input would not result in change.

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**We found that people were more likely to communicate their opinions, values, and concerns when given the space to speak freely, without the direction of a survey.**

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From their own experience carrying out the project, student researchers noted that they gleaned the most beneficial information from community members in more open-ended conversations, and not from survey formats. Students wrote in their final report:

We found that people were more likely to communicate their opinions, values, and concerns when given the space to speak freely, without the direction of a survey. Since there was trepidation of working with the City, providing community members with an open forum for discussion allowed for more honest feedback.

As with the youth survey results, community representatives highlighted the fact that effective partnerships between the City of Tacoma and community-based organizations would emerge from developing programs of mutual benefit to the City and organizations.

### Recommendation

Collaborative outreach that provides open forums for participation, and that compensates community organizations for their time, energy, and other resources, could help the City to understand community interests and needs regarding the Passive Open Space Program. In addition, the City could connect more effectively with programs that align or overlap with existing partner or community needs

### NEXT STEPS

Despite their challenges in connecting with community organizations, students reported that a number of community members would be open to volunteering in the Passive Open Space Program. In order to reach these individuals, the City could partner with groups already doing related restoration and ecosystem management work. Students identified a few possible partner organizations in their research, but did not contact them due to time constraints. These groups include Hilltop Urban Gardens, a community-based urban agriculture, social justice, and equity organization in Tacoma; and Tacoma Needs Trees, a volunteer-run, urban forestry advocacy group. In addition, the City could extend itself to extracurricular school leadership groups—such as those coordinated through Safe Streets and Youth Leadership Council—to connect with young people.

As outlined by the City's Environmental Services Department in its Strategic 20-Year Passive Open Space Plan, the success of Tacoma's Passive Open Space Program depends upon the successful engagement of community volunteers and habitat stewards. This project highlights some of the key challenges of engaging youth and adult community members, particularly those from historically marginalized communities, in the City of Tacoma's Passive Open Space Program. Students identified several opportunities to build programmatic bridges to engage young people in this program in a sustained way. To connect with adult volunteers, program leads from the City might consider building partnerships with community-based organizations to devise a more meaningful and interpersonal outreach strategy, finding areas of mutual benefit to both parties.

While this relationship-building and programmatic work may require more time and resourcing from the City, it could also guide the City to establish stronger community ties, to develop trust with community members and organizations, and to effectively connect with future open space stewards in neighborhoods and communities throughout Tacoma. Concerted efforts to engage with diverse communities of Tacoma can ensure that Tacoma's environmentally critical areas perform their key ecological functions, benefitting our watershed's ecosystem and its residents.

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The success of Tacoma's Passive Open Space Program is dependent on the successful engagement of community volunteers and habitat stewards.

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Final student presentations. TERI THOMSON RANDALL





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