Memorandum

To: Emily Proudfoot Principal Landscape Architect, Mark Kosmos Landscape Architect, City of Eugene Parks and Open Space Department

From: Suzie Weber

Date: June 4, 2025

Subject: "Equity and Disability Inclusion in Eugene Parks" Thesis Overview

Overview

This memo outlines the results of the thesis research project, "Equity and Disability Inclusion in Eugene, Oregon Parks: A Comparative Analysis of Amazon Park and University Park." The student researcher completed the thesis in partial fulfillment of the requirements for a Robert D. Clark Honors College degree which will be granted by the School of Planning, Public Policy and Management. The memo begins with a brief background of the project, outlines key findings from the research methods, then synthesizes all findings in the analysis which also includes suggestions to make University Park more inclusive to the disability community. The appendix includes the outline of the newly developed Neighborhood Park Accessibility Audit Tool in its current draft.

Background of Thesis Project

This thesis project began in October 2024 and concluded in June 2025. The goal of the research was to uncover what features make parks accessible and inclusive to the disability population, so that information can be applied to parks in Eugene. To investigate park accessibility and disability inclusion in Eugene, two research subjects were comparatively analyzed—Amazon Park and University Park. Note that to ensure research subjects were of comparable size and amenities, Amazon Park's research area boundary was scaled down to approximately two acres; the research area includes the park's playground and its surrounding open green spaces, parking lot, restrooms, and picnic areas. These parks were chosen because of their proximity to one another and to the University of Oregon, and because Amazon Park is well-loved and has some key inclusive features, while University Park is relatively underutilized and inaccessible.

Across the nation, travel to neighborhood and community parks has often been physically inaccessible to people with disabilities. Supposing a disabled individual can travel to a neighborhood or community park, the features and amenities at the park may be inaccessible or exclusive (National Recreation and Park Association, n.d.). Given the City of Eugene's commitment to equity and inclusion, it is important to examine access to and at smaller neighborhood parks, as they serve a vital and irreplicable role in small neighborhood communities.

Research Questions

This study explored the following research questions:

1) What do the park audit evaluation methods "Environmental Assessment of Public Recreation Spaces Parks and Trail" (EAPRS) and "Community Park Audit Tool" (CPAT) reveal about the equity of infrastructure for disabled communities at Amazon Park and University Park?
2) What do disabled community members value about Amazon Park and University Park when considering disability inclusion, and how does analysis of Amazon Park inform a park planning perspective on the presence of disability inclusion in University Park?
3) What improvements could be made to increase the inclusivity of University Park for people with disabilities?

Methods

Four distinct research methods were used in this study.

1) Disability population demographic research: to uncover the approximate number of disabled individuals living near Amazon Park and University Park.
2) Park data collection: including correspondence with two Parks and Open Space Department landscape architects at the City of Eugene.
    a. This method also included a close review of the City's neighborhood community engagement surveys about University Park's upcoming renovation.
3) Series of park audits: Amazon Park and University Park were both audited with the park audit tools "Environmental Assessment of Public Recreation Spaces Parks and Trail" (EAPRS) and "Community Park Audit Tool" (CPAT) to serve as quantifiable data used to compare the parks.
4) Online community engagement survey: about the parks' accessibility and inclusion, sent out through disability organizations and related networks in the area.

Research Findings

U.S. Census Bureau data of disability population demographics contextualized the importance of disability inclusion work in Eugene Parks. About 16.2% of people living in Eugene have a disability, or over 28,000 people (U.S. Census Bureau, 2023). Amazon Neighborhood and South University Neighborhood, the neighborhood locations of Amazon Park and University Park respectively, have similar disability populations according to U.S. Bureau data. About 10% of residents in these neighborhoods have a mobility related disability or a cognitive disability and about 15% are hard of hearing (U.S. Census Bureau, 2025).

The informational interviews with staff at the City of Eugene Parks and Open Space Department were informative about the parks' backgrounds. The researcher learned that Amazon Park has Eugene's only inclusive playground for children with disabilities, and that University Park's upcoming renovation will include the creation of a van ADA parking spot, an infilled hill to be ADA slope grade compliant, and a wider path throughout the park, all of which will contribute

significantly to improved disability inclusion. While combing through the results from the community engagement surveys about University Park's renovation, the researcher noted eleven instances of written-in responses addressing hopes for improved accessibility or disability inclusion. The surveys received over three hundred participant responses, so City staff did not identify accessibility services at University Park as a priority for the community. However, these responses indicate the existence of disabled individuals who desire to use University Park but may be currently unable to do so because of inaccessible features.

The audit tools were useful in familiarizing the researcher with specific features at the park and their condition and cleanliness. Although not every section and question in the audits addressed accessibility, the researcher completed the audits with a focus on access and inclusion. The most striking distinction between the parks is their playground areas, with Amazon Park's being far more accessible to people with disabilities. Other significant findings from the audit include: wet and muddy open green spaces (the audits were completed in January), and the flat, accessible paths at Amazon Park while University Park has steep paths with cracked pavement.

Lastly, findings from the community survey informed the researcher regarding what park components at Amazon and University were important to users. Sixty-five people completed the survey, and more participants indicated that they used Amazon Park more frequently than University Park (see Table 1 below).

How frequently do you visit this park?				
Frequency	**Amazon**		**University**	
	Percentage	Respondent #	Percentage	Respondent #
Daily	7%	3	2%	1
2-4 times/week	20%	9	5%	2
Once/week	13%	6	2%	1
Every other week	11%	5	5%	2
Once a month	9%	4	9%	4
< Once a month	35%	16	30%	13
Never	7%	3	47%	20
Total		46		43

Table 1: Results from the survey question "How frequently do you visit [this] park?"

Another important finding came from the survey question asking about ease of travel to these parks. See Figure 1 and Figure 2 below for a representation of respondents who agreed, disagreed, or answered "it depends" to the statement "Traveling to and from [this] park is easy."

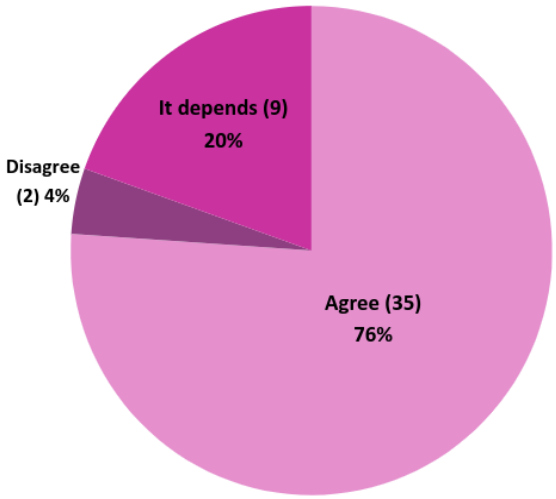

Figure 1: Amazon Park results.

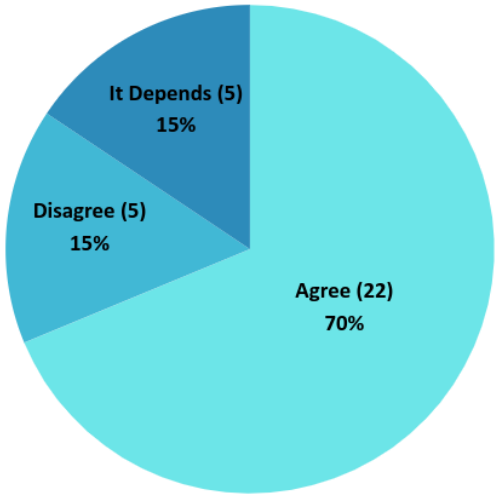

Figure 2: University Park results.

For Amazon Park, the two respondents who both cited challenges with finding parking as an explanation. Nine survey participants selected "It depends," stating their travel mode and starting location affects how easy it is to travel to and from Amazon Park.

Note that fewer participants answered the question about University Park because fewer survey participants had ever visited the park. Some respondents who agreed University Park is easy to access conceded things like:

- Respondent 1: "Parking is ok but not all that accessible. Reaching it is not challenging by bus, car, bike."
- Respondent 2: It's easy but we don't use it since Amazon is so close to us."
- Respondent 3: "Car is easy, bike is more complicated."

One respondent who disagreed University Park is easy to access said it is "impossible to find parking," and participants who said "it depends," stated "24th [Avenue] can be hard to cross with lots of traffic," and "it's a commute to get there," and "walking alone is easy, walking with strollers is difficult because the sidewalks are very uneven, cracked, etc."

The next set of questions asked about what features at the park are easy or difficult to use. See Figure 3 below for a comparison of respondents who listed features at Amazon Park as difficult to access with respondents who listed features from University Park as difficult to access.

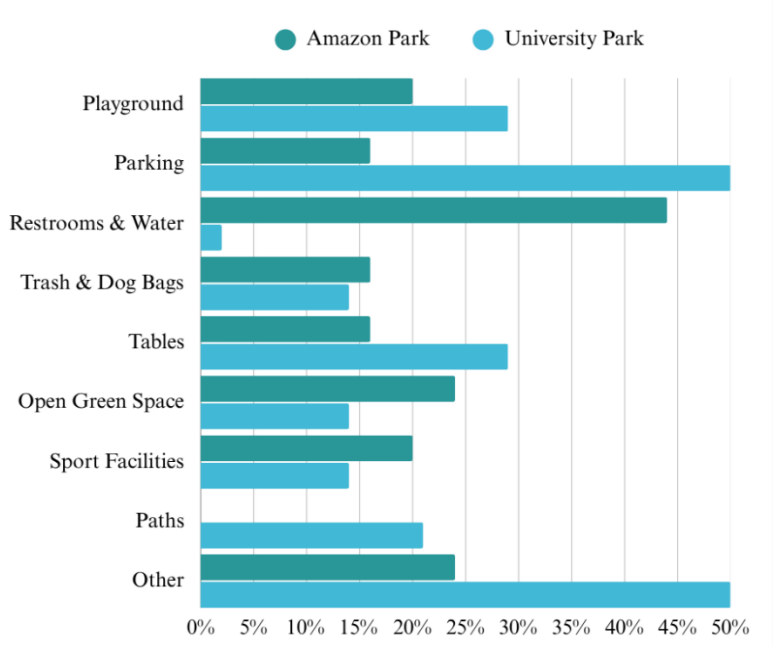

Figure 3: Graphic representation of difficult features to access.

The question respondents answered was "Once at the park, what park features are difficult for you to access? Select all that apply." Note: responses from the "other" category include stiff buttons on drinking fountains, Amazon Park's dinosaur play structure, and University Park's performance area and steep hill.

The last set of questions in this community survey asked about the creation of a park accessibility audit checklist and what survey participants think should be included in this newly created park audit. Most respondents (over 50%) selected the following park features as important components of accessible parks: playgrounds, restrooms and drinking fountains, walking paths, picnic areas, parking, and open grassy areas.

Analysis & Conclusion

The park audits and the community engagement survey informed the researcher that Amazon Park is overall more inclusive to people with disabilities than University Park. Amazon Park's playground has more options for people with mobility limitations, sensory disabilities, and children of varying ages. Conversely, University Park's playground area is outdated and not accessible by wheelchair, and cracked pavement makes the park difficult to maneuver. The steep paths of University Park make it difficult to access, and other ADA infractions like a lack of wheelchair seating at picnic tables, the baseball bleachers, and the basketball court sidelines all create an exclusive environment that could disenfranchise people with disabilities.

To more easily assess the accessibility of parks in Eugene, the researcher determined that a more robust park accessibility audit tool would be beneficial. To address this need, this study culminated in a new audit tool with four sections which was developed after reviewing research from multiple studies evaluating park accessibility (Dalpra, 2022; Firkin et al., 2024). The questionnaire includes a comprehensive review of accessibility concerns reflected in the

community engagement survey created for this study, and an evaluation guide is in development as part of this new audit tool. See the Appendix for the audit tool in its current draft.

Recommendations

Below is a list of recommendations for the City of Eugene to consider adopting to make University Park more accessible and inclusive. The recommendations are organized using a cost-benefit analysis, starting with the easiest to implement solutions and ending with the more expensive solutions. Additionally, these recommendations could be applied to other parks in Eugene.

Immediately Responsive Solutions:

1. Add rubber mats over the playground wood chips as paths to the play structures.
2. Partner with the City of Eugene Public Works department to identify major cracks and obstructions in the sidewalks surrounding University Park to be spraypainted with a bright color to make these hazards more noticeable.
3. Designate a public art wall in the park where people can paint and draw to express themselves creatively and create a sense of belonging in the park.
4. Create a seasonal event with pop-up sensory activities to draw activity to smaller neighborhood parks by providing disabled community members with inclusive tools, activities, and games. See the case study of Minneapolis' Parks and Recreation Department in references below (Cohen, 2018; National Recreation and Park Association, 2011).
5. Update the Parks and Open Space page on City of Eugene's website with inclusive messaging. This can be as simple as adding the sentence "All people are welcome at Eugene parks."

Midrange Solutions:

6. Consider creating or adopting an audit evaluation tool for assessing the accessibility of Eugene parks. This tool would inform City staff of the parks that need improvement, and which areas of each park need the most attention to become accessible. An example of an accessible park audit checklist can be found in the appendix.
7. Update park welcome signs with inclusive messaging. This can be as simple as adding the sentence "All people are welcome at Eugene parks" at least 24-point size font.
8. Consider implementing community surveys or public feedback sites to uncover what the disability community values about Eugene parks. This could be in the form of a QR code on park signs directing visitors to a community feedback form.
9. Connect with Eugene's disability community substantially by building relationships and collaborating with disability organizations in the area. This would be a great way to develop a disability inclusion advisory board with disabled community members who can provide feedback and ideas about Eugene parks.

Long Range Solutions

10. Post renovation, University Park will be more physically accessible for people with disabilities. Recreation Services, Adaptive Recreation, South University Neighborhood Association, and disability organizations in the area could take advantage of this by

programming inclusive activities at University Park like outdoor theater, movie nights, sports programming, outdoor yoga, and nature walks.

11. Invest in park features that engage multiple senses such as a community garden, sensory touch walls, or musical instruments.
12. Consider long term investment in accessible play equipment: Playgrounds are a social learning space where children grow autonomously. Inequitable playgrounds prohibit children with disabilities from exploring their surroundings. Implementing spacious play structures with ramp entrances, wheel-friendly turf, sensory walls, and musical instruments and spaces for other creative expression will ensure all children in Eugene belong at the parks. One opportunity exists in consultation with the nonprofit Harper's Playground for help in designing an inclusive park, raising money for construction, and rallying the community behind the project.

Conclusion

This study's research efforts confirmed that Amazon Park performs better across all categories of evaluation concerning disability inclusion efforts. However, University Park's renovation will significantly improve the accessibility of the park. The researcher suggests recommendations to include the disability community at Eugene parks and specifically at University Park. These recommendations range from immediate solutions to longer term solutions. This project also culminated in a park accessibility audit tool and a public facing pamphlet with information for disabled people in Eugene looking for accessible.

References

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Appendix: Neighborhood Park Accessibility Audit Tool

Neighborhood Park Accessibility Audit Tool

Section 1: Access to the Park and Access to Information

Section 1A: Location

1. Were you able to locate this park on a map?
    a. Does the park have a website or page including the park location?
2. Was the park easy to find?
3. Is the park located near a potential pollutant? (i.e.: factories, large agriculture site)

Section 1B: Travel Options

4. Is there a public transit stop within site of the park?
    a. If not, how far is the nearest public transit site?
    b. Does the public transit readily accommodate people with mobility disabilities?
    c. Is the path from the nearest transit stop unobstructed and accessible by wheelchair or other mobility aid?
5. Do the surrounding streets have designated bike lanes?
    a. What type of bike lane? (ie: "sharrows," protected, separated, bike-only path)
6. Do the surrounding streets have sidewalks?
    a. What condition are the sidewalks?
    b. Are there curb cuts and adequate crosswalk signaling (raised, bumpy surface, brightly colored)?
7. Are there painted crosswalks within site of the park?
    a. If nearby crosswalks have a signal, do any have an auditory component and visual component?
8. What type of parking exists near or at the park?
    a. How many ADA parking spaces are provided? ADA Van spaces?

Section 1C: Access to Information

9. Are there park signs?
    a. Is there a welcome sign?
    b. Are there park rules signs?
    c. Is text font at least 24 points in an easy to read font? Example size
    d. Do any signs have an auditory button to read aloud sign information?
10. Does signage use inclusive language to welcome all users?
11. If the park has a web page, is there any accessibility information provided?
    a. Is there any inclusive messaging present?

Section 2: Physical Accessibility

Section 2A: Travel Throughout the Park

12. How many points of entry does the park have?
    a. How many are ADA compliant? (i.e.: ramp entrances, 8.33% slope grade of ramps and hills, wheelchair maneuverable path material)
13. Does the park have paths?
    a. What material are the paths? Are they wheelchair maneuverable?
    b. Do all paths lead to a park feature, connect to a larger trail system, or have another purpose? (This question would receive a "no" if any paths have a dead end)
    c. What is the condition of the paths?
    d. Are the paths relatively flat throughout?

Section 2B: Playgrounds

14. Does the park have a designated play area?
15. Is the ground infill material surrounding the play area wheelchair accessible?
16. How many large play structures are present? (Answer the following questions for each structure)
    a. Does the structure have a ramp entrance?
    b. Is there a 1:1 ratio of ground play components and higher play components?

Section 2C: Sport Facilities

17. How many sport facilities (courts, fields, pools, etc.) are at this park? Answer the following question for each sport facility.
18. Is the ground material wheelchair maneuverable?
19. Are there observation areas with wheelchair accessible seating?

Section 2D: Open Green Spaces

20. How many open green spaces are there?
21. What condition is the grass or other ground material?
22. Are there wheelchair accessible paths to access the green spaces?

Section 2E: Rest and Picnic Areas

23. How many benches with a back rest are at the park?
    a. How many benches have shade coverage for at least 4 hours during the daytime?
    b. How many benches have wheelchair seating spaces next to them?
    c. How many benches have a direct view to play areas?
24. How many picnic areas are there? (There must be two tables nearby a trash receptable to be marked as a picnic area)
25. How many have shade coverage?

26. How many are wheelchair accessible? (Table dimensions must have a minimum of 30-inch width, 29-inch height, and 24 inches of overhand for the wheelchair accessible space)

Section 2F: Restrooms and Water Spigots

27. How many restroom stalls have handrails?
28. How many restroom sinks have ADA compliant dimensions? (Must be no higher than 34 inches from floor, with knee clearance of at least 27 inches high, 30 inches wide, and 11-25 inches deep)
29. Is there a changing table?
    a. What is the load baring weight of the changing table?
30. How many ADA compliant water spigots are there?

Section 2G: Other

31. Researcher should note any other park features and rate their physical accessibility.

Section 3: Sensory Accessibility

32. How many art pieces are at the park?
    a. How many are functional? (i.e.: can be used as seating, climbing structure, artistic expression, touch sensory experience)
33. How many auditory components exist at the park? (i.e.: musical instruments, wind chimes, auditory signage)
34. How many functional park components create a touch or smell sensory experience? (i.e.: textured walls, community gardens, sandboxes, water features, diverse landscaping, flower beds)

Section 4: Access to Play and Recreation Experience

35. Is there a recreation area that would suit the needs of each of these age groups: infant to toddler, 3-5 years, 6-12 years, 13-16 years, young adult, adult, middle-aged, senior?
36. Do the play and recreation areas at this park offer diverse stimulation?
    a. Is there an area or component suited for dramatic play? (stage, performance area, talk tubes, imaginative play equipment like a fire engine climbing structure)
    b. For physical play? (climbing structures, sports facilities)
    c. Cognitive play? (puzzles, number games, chess tables)
    d. How many of these sites are reachable by wheelchair?