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Seattle Adopts an Old Way to Pay for New Parks.

Seattle produces some of the finest brewed coffee in the country, and some of the top software. Even its long mild winters are among the best in the world. But if you ask Seattleites what gives them the greatest civic pride, many will point to their world-class city parks. Seattle's leaders often use parks in the same sentence with words like "community identity," "bridging generations" and "social justice."

That's why it's so encouraging that Seattle voters recently reconceived how they'll pay for them. Like Amazon with online retailing or Costco with big-box stores, Seattle might be out ahead with yet another disruptive trend for its citizens.

Let me start with some basics. "General" and "essential" are synonyms in the traditional lexicon of local public finance. Essential local services like police, fire, libraries and parks are funded with general property and sales taxes. These services are so important that everyone pays, regardless of how much or little they use them. The revenues flow into the city's general fund, where local elected officials decide how to spend them. Essential services are, by definition, high priorities in the general fund budget.

Of course, there are exceptions. In rural areas, for instance, it's often cheaper to spread the costs of fire protection over a wide geographic area. In that case, it's appropriate to levy a special property tax that covers multiple cities. The opposite is also true. Essential infrastructure that mostly benefits a particular group of properties is a good candidate for a special assessment where only the owners of the affected properties pay the tax. In these cases, it makes sense to pay for essential services with special revenues rather than general revenues.

Seattle has turned this logic inside out. In a recent election, voters approved the creation of a new metropolitan parks district. There's nothing special about this district or its services. Its geographic boundaries match the city of Seattle's. The city council will serve as the district's governing body. The only difference — and it's a crucial one — is that the taxes it collects will bypass the general fund and go directly to parks. Cities such as Chicago, Washington, D.C., and even nearby Tacoma have funded parks this way for decades. Seattle voters seem to think this throwback model is the only way to protect this essential service from the political machinations of the general fund.

Some parks advocates have called this a huge win. No more cutting maintenance on parks facilities during recessions. No more choosing between parks and police. New parks that have lived on the drawing board for years can now come to life. Property owners can literally see what they get for part of their property tax dollar. These are all good things.

Other things aren't so positive. When money comes from the general fund, taxpayers can take their concerns directly to the city council. If they don't like the council's answer, they can vote to replace a member. When the money comes from a special levy, like the one that now funds part of Seattle's parks, residents can vote to end that levy. In the special district model, the lines of accountability aren't so clear. Voters' only direct recourse may be to dissolve or restructure the district with a separate future ballot initiative.

The biggest concern is that under this new model, access to stable revenues might be controlled not by policymakers, but by the ability to organize a get-out-the-vote initiative. Some worry this could leave many citizens, especially the poor, out of the mix. So far that's not the case, but critics worry about the possibilities.

It's easy to see why advocates for parks — and other essential services — might want to pursue this model. As general fund resources become harder to find, why not take the case for essential services directly to the voters? If Seattle is a bellwether for things to come, we'll need to fundamentally rethink much of what we know about local public finance.

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