



San Jose Parks Advocates

February 5, 2017

Honorable Chairman Rocha, and NSE Committee Members Arenas, Carrasco, Jimenez and Nguyen:

The San Jose Parks Advocates received a presentation on Park Conditions Assessment and reviewed the staff memo to your committee for review on February 9. We developed these comments. We urge the NSE Council Committee to recommend to the full council an increase in funding for Park Maintenance. We also highlight our concerns for various strategies.

San Jose Parks Advocates

San Jose Parks Advocates is an all-volunteer group of neighborhood association leaders, Adopt-A-Park volunteers, “Friends of” group members and community members from throughout the city. We envision a City where quality parks and trails for all of its residents is universally supported as a core City service essential to health and quality of life of residents, workers, and visitors and and source of civic pride. Our Mission is to bring parks into the public political consciousness, to make parks an issue in all discussions of civic priorities, neighborhood services, and community interactions with the City of San Jose. Our experienced leaders serve as mentors to less experienced groups facing similar issues citywide. We are separate from the San Jose Parks Foundation and maintain a collaborative relationship.

Background

San Jose’s Parks provide approximately \$240 million in economic benefit *annually* including property values, stormwater control, health benefits, community cohesion, recreational use and tourism.¹ The City’s park funding is last among other major west coast cities², contributing to a view of San Jose as a poor or less attractive place among other Bay Area cities. The City’s poor finances forced large cuts to maintenance after the 2000 Dot Com bust and the Great Recession of 2008. Since then, increases to the park maintenance budget has been limited to new park additions and supervision, positions linked to fee collection, a groundsworker, and a few rangers. The new Strike Force is funded from Park Trust Fund money not General Fund money and addresses the capital projects within the nexus of where those dollars were collected.

¹ Economic Benefit of San Jose Parks. Trust for Public Land. 2015

² 2016 City Park Facts. Trust for Public Land. SF, Portland, San Diego, Oakland, Sacramento, Los Angeles, Phoenix all exceed San Jose for expenditures per resident.

Faced with a small budget and very limited new general fund maintenance dollars, the department implemented a Business Intelligence/data analytics program to seek efficiencies in workforce allocation. One component is the Parks Conditions Assessment, initiated in 2015 and completed again in 2016.

With Park Conditions data in hand, three key results are apparent:

- 1) Park Conditions will decline without additional resources.³
- 2) Nearly 20% of the City's parks are below minimum standards for safety and usability.⁴
- 3) Shifting resources to improve low scoring parks from 2015, resulted in lowered scores of the best parks.⁵

Parks staff has taken the position that the City's parks will never be funded at the level of pre-economic busts. "Building Forward." Is the name for the potpourri of strategies they are hoping will build a sustainable future.

Our View

1. The City must allocate additional dollars to the City Parks. It is not acceptable to realign resources to degrade the better parks in order to repair unsafe parks.
2. Incremental General Fund Allocation. We support an incremental improvement so that ALL parks meet minimum safety and usability as measured by a score of "3" and an average citywide score of 3.5. PRNS estimates this increase at \$3.5 M and would improve 62 parks. The City's fragile economic state is acknowledged. We also note that the city budget staff revealed that new estimates of revenue are underway and they are feeling hopeful. WE view a Park Condition Score of "3" as a minimum safety standard and not an "acceptable" park condition.
3. Water. We support the 20% water reduction rather than a return to full watering. We urge the committee to recommend funding to cover increased water rates.
4. Citywide Park Maintenance District. We look forward to the results of the Citywide Park Maintenance district investigation (originally scheduled for Fall 2016) and would ask that NSE Committee ask for an update and suggest continued funding to move this concept or something similar forward. We ask that development of this model include a standard of an average of 4 for all city parks. Some members suggest that a Parks Charter Fund similar to the County's may be a better solution. We await the analysis.

³ "Current funding levels will not allow the City to mitigate the decline of conditions." Angel Rios Jr Memo to Neighborhood Services and Education Committee, Report on Sustainable Park Maintenance. Dated 23 January 2017.

⁴ Ibid. 37 of 200 parks are scored 1 or 2. Page 3.

⁵ Ibid. Page 5.

5. Sports Field/Informal Sports Field. In addition to repairing the formal sports fields, every park should have a well-maintained turf area that supports casual “pick-up” games and safe running area for playing catch or tag. Sports fields are heavily utilized by league teams and are not available to the casual family or community group user (e.g. Brownies). A safe well-maintained turf area should be available for all users at each park without membership in a league being required. Currently, large areas of turf are unsafe for running. We are concerned that limiting rehab to just formal sports fields is a social equity issue that blocks low income families from the benefit of play because they are not members of leagues.
6. Volunteerism. We support continued funding for the Volunteer Management program. A greater analysis of volunteer potential should be made, including commercial sources, and demographic shifts. The City should investigate what features of the “Rosegarden Model” can be replicated and what cannot. Neighborhood association volunteers and groups like Coyote Creek’s 2-2-2 report burnout is a concern with repeated clean-ups and tasks with no perception of improvement or major investment by the City. Volunteer concerns should be addressed about their work becoming an excuse to relocate resources to other parks without volunteers. Volunteers want to supplement city workers and not supplant/replace city workers. They want their work to make a difference so their park is Excellent rather than merely efforts to keep their park from becoming Poor and Unsafe.

Rules about tree planting by Volunteers should be formalized and lists of acceptable species provide. Adopt a Spot rules should be formalized and responsibilities for volunteers and staff clarified to avoid miscommunication. Planting lists should be provided. Groups that raise large sums report difficulty in getting timely services they have paid for and poor lines of communication; PRNS should investigate how to more effectively utilize these funds in a timely way, such as by allowing these groups to hire their own contractor.

In addition, some volunteers report that maintenance conditions have led to unsafe situations and they have abandoned their volunteer work in those areas of their parks.

7. Rangers. We support staff’s continued efforts to build a career ladder for rangers and updated salary survey. It is the city’s custom to place rangers at the 50% level of the surveyed jurisdictions, but by the time it is implemented, the salary is below the 50% level. We suggest benchmarking this survey at 75% in order to build the force which has had 8 vacant positions (50%) for more than a year. We are especially concerned about Neighborhood Park issues that are not addressed by police or rangers in the current staffing situation. Our concerns include homeless encampments, late night parties, drug dealing, and other quality of life and resource management issues.
8. Turf Removal. We oppose any additional turf removal until a management plan is offered. Prior turf removal has resulted in weedy areas that are only weeded once each year, frequently after the weeds are three feet tall and have dispersed their seeds for next year. The messy wood chips spill all over walkways and become a tripping hazard. Volunteers

complain of the need to sweep frequently and arrange for additional wood chips that they must spread. The wood chipped areas are not usable for any form of recreation. In the summer, the wood chipped areas serve as a source of dust when the afternoon winds blow. We believe that turf reduction should be accompanied by a plan for an amenity or a low water use landscape planting that is an attractive alternative. Wood chips fail.

9. Business Intelligence/Data Analytics. We support the department's move into data analytics and urge the continued support for increased technology and analysis. It is our hope that this program will allow for timely repairs so that large area of turf, tree plantings, or landscaping do not die while waiting for a repair, causing the city to incur significant costs to replace.
10. Strike Force. We support continued operation of the Strike Force for the three year term.
11. Contract Services. We support the investigation of contract services for smaller parks, but we believe that the next contract should improve lines of communication and strategies for when non-routine problems arise. Parks that suffer from quality of life issues should be withdrawn from contract services. City workers should maintain control of those parks.
12. Greenprint. We support the activities of the Greenprint and look forward to the recommendations. We urge continued funding.
13. Investigate a Park Bond for Infrastructure Backlog and Park Deficit Areas. We urge funding to prepare for a possible Park Bond in 2018. We note that the infrastructure scores in the Park Conditions report suggest that it is impossible to reach an "excellent" level due to the failing infrastructure.

Great Cities have Great Parks. The City of San Jose must step up its maintenance to build forward towards becoming a great city with great parks.

On behalf of San Jose Parks Advocates,

--Jean Dresden

Jean Dresden
Coordinator