



## CITY OF SANTA BARBARA

### PARKS AND RECREATION COMMISSION REPORT

**AGENDA DATE:** December 4, 2013

**TO:** Parks and Recreation Commission

**FROM:** Parks Division, Parks and Recreation Department

**SUBJECT:** Lease of Residence in Skofield Park

#### **RECOMMENDATION:**

That the Commission receive a report and recommend that the City Council approve the lease of the house in Skofield Park.

#### **DISCUSSION:**

The City of Santa Barbara has a diverse parks system, with almost 1,600 acres of parks and recreation facilities located in the waterfront, residential neighborhoods, downtown, and the foothills. City parks enjoyed by City residents and visitors throughout the year provide different amenities and experience a range of use. Three of these parks, Hilda Ray, Franceschi, and Skofield, include residential structures once inhabited by prior landowners. Over the years, parks employees have been tenants with varying park maintenance responsibilities in compensation for all or some portion of rent. Over time, this has been changing due to a number of factors. The house in Hilda Ray Park has been rented to a member of the public since 2005. Rental income supports maintenance of the house and the park. With the retirement of long-time parks employee and tenant of the house in Skofield Park in December 2012, the Parks and Recreation Department determined that rental of the house to a member of the public would provide valuable income to support park maintenance and safety needs. Duties performed by the former parks employee were transferred to other Parks personnel and there was no reduction in service.

Revenue from the house was included in the Department's FY 2014-15 budget approved by the City Council in June 2013. Vacant since December 2012, the Department recently completed extensive renovations and an open rental process. A prospective tenant has been selected, and the annual lease is ready for City Council approval in December. In October, the Department was contacted by several Skofield Park neighbors expressing concerns about the residence no longer housing a Parks employee. Staff invited neighbors to a meeting where a number of concerns were discussed; including afterhours park use, park maintenance, fire safety, and illegal

camping. A Special Meeting of the Parks and Recreation Commission on December 4, 2013, provides the opportunity to hear and address concerns related to Skofield Park.

#### Safety in Parks and Recreation Facilities

Park safety has become an increasing challenge throughout the City's park system with an increasing number of negative incidents or criminal acts by certain park users, often referred to as homeless or transients. These incidents have resulted in increased safety concerns for park users and for Parks and Recreation staff that maintain and manage these facilities. Unfortunately, there is also a growing perception that City parks and recreation facilities are unsafe. In addition to safety concerns, the Department has been experiencing increasing cancellations of planned park and facility rentals, with renters citing concerns for how such negative activities would affect their event. Decreased rentals have a direct affect on the revenue that supports both parks maintenance and recreation programs, which is a concern for the Department.

Working with reduced funding and limited resources, daily park maintenance requires a careful balance of general park duties, and addressing safety issues, including removing homeless encampments, repairing vandalism, and others. Over the years, the Department has found that the Park Ranger program working in tandem with the Police to be the most effective tool to address these types of issues in our parks and facilities. Although the Park Ranger program once included four full-time and several part-time staff, for last seven years, due to budget reductions, there have only been two Park Rangers to cover the entire park system. With 43 City parks, 11 sports facilities, and 15 recreational/community facilities, Park Ranger resources are stretched.

#### Revenue Needed to Support Park Services and Safety

Limited resources must be allocated to best address the greatest needs in the full City park system. After many years of budget reductions and staff losses, the Department prioritized increasing park safety and services in the FY 2014-15 budget. Additional revenue from the rental of the house in Skofield Park was key for funding these services. No reduction in the level of services provided at Skofield Park was part of the proposal. Discussed with the Parks and Recreation budget, the proposal was supported by the Parks and Recreation Commission and ultimately the City Council, and was included in the two-year budget adopted by City Council on June 18, 2013.

In September 2013, the Parks and Recreation Department advertised the house for rent and subsequently interviewed and selected a tenant for the house. The terms of the rental agreement are a one-year lease with the option to terminate with 30 days' notice. The lease agreement requires the tenant to abide by all park rules and operating hours. Staff will be taking the rental agreement to City Council for approval in December. The recruitment process is almost complete for the additional Park Ranger, with an anticipated start date in January 2014.

### Skofield Park Neighbor Concerns

In October, the Department was contacted by a number of Skofield Park neighbors with concerns that the residence would no longer house a Parks employee. Parks and Recreation and Police Department Staff met with the neighbors on October 22, 2013, to discuss their concerns. These concerns included home vandalism and property theft, fire danger, and park maintenance service levels.

- Home Vandalism and Property Theft – Police Officer/Beat Coordinator Adrian Gutierrez informed residents they needed to contact the Police regarding such concerns and that it would not be appropriate for anyone other than law enforcement to intercede or respond. Assigned to this area for 10 years, Officer Gutierrez indicated that they had not received many calls for service, as compared to other areas. Police records show that in the past five years there have been 31 calls for service at Skofield Park compared to 519 at Pershing Park, 238 at Plaza del Mar, 291 at Oak Park and 119 at Oak Park Tennis Courts.
- Fire Danger – Neighbors expressed concern for increased fire danger in the park due to campfires in park facilities and illegal campfires within the park. Neighbors suggested that a parks employee living in the house provided a greater deterrence or response related to fire. Staff responded that any tenant in the house, whether or not a City employee, would be expected to call 911 noting that it is everyone's responsibility to report illegal fires or fire concerns especially in a high fire danger area. In response to concerns raised related to camp fires with picnics or overnight camping, Staff reviewed current park monitor and Park Ranger responsibilities for monitoring and securing the park. Staff also reviewed how the Parks Division works closely with the Fire Department to ensure that all required Vegetation Management work is completed on an annual basis.

Staff suggested a follow up meeting to review how the Department permits and monitors picnics, group rentals, and overnight camping. The Department will review any proposed changes that could reduce concerns.

- Park Maintenance – Staff reviewed that the park maintenance duties have not decreased in the last 12 months. Maintenance at Skofield is conducted in the same manner as with all other City parks. All maintenance duties previously conducted by the retired employee have been assigned to other staff.

Residents misunderstood the role of the former parks employee related to Skofield maintenance, believing that the employee was assigned to the park for 100% of his duties. The previous tenant was assigned work duties at both Skofield and other City parks. As a point of reference, for the five months before he retired, this employee averaged 71 hours per month working at Skofield. For the past 10 months, Parks Division staff has averaged 73.5 hours per month

working in Skofield. These hours do not include Supervision, Park Rangers, Park Monitor, or tree contracting work performed in the park. In addition, the City's agreement with the Service Employees International Union (SEIU) limits the role of the tenant employee during after hours, to tasks such as opening and closing the park. The caretakers are not on duty when they are at home.

Overall, the meeting provided a valuable opportunity to address neighbor concerns, review park maintenance and safety issues, and discuss how the Department relies on park users and neighbors throughout the City to contact Police, Fire, or Parks, since City staff cannot be present full-time.

#### Summary

Increasing park safety is a priority for the Department. Renting the residence in Skofield Park provides critical funding for an additional Park Ranger. The Department has successfully rented the house in Hilda Ray Park for eight years. Park maintenance at Skofield is not reduced as part of the change in tenancy. Although the new tenant would not be functioning as a City employee, as with any resident, the City anticipates that any observed safety concerns will be reported to the Police, Fire, or Parks and Recreation Department. Staff investigates issues seriously and solicits the assistance of the Police Department when necessary.

The Department must balance its limited resources in the best interests of the entire City park system. It is important to note that there are far more significant park safety issues at other park facilities. This does not make incidents at Skofield Park less important; however, this is a key consideration when allocating limited resources and prioritizing the higher community demand. Unfortunately, illegal camping, unpermitted after hours use, other illegal activities, risk of fire, etc., are issues that are routinely addressed on a weekly, if not daily basis in most of the parks, beaches, and many sports and recreation facilities. Oak Park, Stevens Park, Franceschi Park, Parma Park, Pershing Park, Chase Palm Park, and Douglas Family Preserve are far more heavily used by the community than Skofield Park.

**ATTACHMENT(S):**

1. Letters/Emails from Neighbors
2. Crime Statistics in Parks
3. Skofield Park House Lease Agreement
4. SEIU Side Agreement

**SUBMITTED BY:** Santos M. Escobar, Parks Manager

**APPROVED BY:** Nancy L. Rapp, Parks and Recreation Director