



CITY OF SANTA BARBARA

PARKS AND RECREATION COMMISSION REPORT

AGENDA DATE: July 24, 2013

TO: Parks and Recreation Commission

FROM: Recreation Division, Parks and Recreation Department

SUBJECT: Skate Park Status Report

RECOMMENDATION: That the Commission receive a status report on Skater's Point skate park operations.

DISCUSSION:

Skater's Point skate park, located in the City's busy waterfront area, has been a popular destination for many youth and adult skate boarders since it opened in 2000. Not without its operational challenges over the years, overall the popular unsupervised, drop-in facility has operated with only occasional problems that rise to the level that require intervention such as that which occurred earlier this month. For the most part, the skate park users self-regulate use, and the park operates fairly well without incident.

The Parks and Recreation Director authorized a temporary closure of Skater's Point July 2 and 3, 2013, in response to an escalation of illegal and inappropriate behaviors by skate park users. There was considerable public comment, for and against the closure. This report provides an overview of skate park operations, regulations and enforcement practices, and challenges. Also included is a summary of the events leading up to, during, and following the two-day closure. The Department is meeting with a number of skate park stakeholders to determine how best to address some of the operational and enforcement challenges going forward. A status report on those discussions will be provided at the July 24th Commission meeting.

Background

Skater's Point Skate Park – Opened in 2000

On August 6, 2000, Skater's Point, Santa Barbara County's premier skateboard park opened to the public with great excitement and anticipation. Santa Barbara area skaters had waited 13 years for the park to become a reality after a lengthy search for a suitable site and a collaborative effort between the City Parks and Recreation Department and the public to develop the design elements of the park itself. Although the skate park has continued to be a highly popular, heavily used recreational facility since its opening, the

Parks and Recreation Department has faced a number of operational challenges related to the design of the facility, enforcement of rules and regulations, vandalism, and programming.

The skate park was designed to be a drop-in, unsupervised facility, a common practice for skateboard park facilities operated by public agencies. In compliance with state law, the City adopted an ordinance requiring all users of the park to wear helmets, knee and elbow pads and posted signs at the facility notifying users of the ordinance and that failure to comply may result in a citation. Designed primarily as a skateboard facility, bikes are prohibited.

Management and Operations

The Parks Division maintains the skate park facility, which includes daily inspection, litter and trash pickup, landscape maintenance around the facility and minor repairs as needed. The Recreation Division Sports Section oversees programming and use. As with any public facility, there are occasional issues with how the facility or park is being used, compliance with regulations, vandalism, or criminal activity. Problems related to the skate park over the years include the routine, such as failure to comply with posted regulations (wearing of safety gear, no bikes, no drug use, etc.), to those which are more serious in nature such as drug sales, other criminal activity, and threatening behavior towards other skaters, park visitors, and City staff. Several times a year, the Department receives calls or emails from citizens concerned about the lack of safety gear and actions by a few skaters which make other facility users (mostly children) feel unwelcome or unsafe. For the most part, the skate park users self-regulate use and the park operates fairly well without incident.

Since opening in 2000, there has always been some level of public expectation that the City should supervise the skate park to insure appropriate and safe facility use and compliance with safety regulations. Despite limited funding, the Department initially provided park monitors during high use periods to promote awareness and compliance of safety regulations related to required safety gear. This funding was reduced and eventually eliminated due to budget reductions in 2009. Since then, park rangers in conjunction with police provide occasional monitoring, but primarily respond only to reports of criminal or dangerous behavior.

Staffing the park has been a challenge and not without incident. Facility monitors, park rangers, and police are often faced with combative and threatening behaviors while enforcing park rules. In one particularly disturbing incident in 2001, a park monitor was physically assaulted by skateboarders such that he required hospitalization. Over the years it has been challenging to hire and retain skate park monitors, as most found the work frustrating or expressed concerns for their personal safety while on the job.

Due to the open design of the facility, a minimum of three park monitors are needed to achieve general control of the facility. However, calls for assistance were a frequent occurrence to park rangers and police.

Regulations and Enforcement

Citations are given for not wearing required safety equipment, smoking, possessing an open container, fighting, throwing water balloons, riding bikes in the Skate Park, and failure to obey a park official, ranger, or police officer. By City Ordinance, fines are \$50 for the first occurrence, \$100 for the second, and \$175 for each additional violation within one year. The frequency of citations has declined over the years with 500 citations written in the first six years of operation (2000 – 2005), and just 117 citations during the period 2006 to 2013.

Rangers and police have the power to issue citations; police also have the power to arrest. The skate park is one of many parks and facilities the park rangers are responsible for during their shifts, so time spent there has been understandably limited. Citations and arrests at the skate park have historically been a lower priority for police over other calls for service. The police regularly monitor and address reports of drug sales or drug use at the facility. Citations are issued by park rangers and police for failure to follow established rules and regulations. Issuing citations to those who do not obey the park rules has not been effective in controlling behavior in and around the facility. The primary challenge is the level of required police involvement and that such calls are a lower priority compared to other police calls for service.

Facility Design Challenges

The design of the skate park contributes to management challenges. Facility users can easily jump in and out of the park over the low walls when being approached by monitors, rangers or police, making enforcement of rules and regulations very difficult. The low walls and absence of entrance gates also make it difficult to close access, restrict access as a behavior modification tool, or reserve the facility for exclusive programming such as camps. Wall height was lowered through the design review process to reduce the obstruction of ocean views from Cabrillo Blvd.

Adding gates that could be locked or controlled and increasing wall height with wrought iron fencing would improve access control and deter people from jumping over walls. Any modifications to the skate park will require a revised design to go through the City's design review process. There are currently no plans or funding identified for this purpose.

Vandalism

Since its opening, Skater's Point has been the target of a large amount of vandalism. Incidents occur an average of five times per year at the cost of \$5,000 – \$10,000 per occurrence. The time and effort required removing graffiti and repairing damage to the park can be extensive, often requiring three to four parks staff approximately three or more days of work.

Injuries

Since the park's opening, staff has maintained records of all known or reported injuries at Skater's Point. Injuries are typically reported by police, skate park monitors, park rangers or by the injured party's family. Reported injuries, which include simple first aid responses and serious incidents resulting in calls to 911, were more frequent when the park opened, with 13 – 18 reported injuries per year in the first three years of operation compared to an average of three per year over the last 10 years.

Programming

Minimal programming has been scheduled to avoid having to restrict public access to this popular drop-in facility. Half-day Skate camps and clinics have been offered during summer and school breaks, and occasional skateboarding special events have taken place. In 2006, in response to public demand, the Department implemented a restricted, supervised drop-in time on Saturday mornings for skaters 12 and under. Although popular with families, this funding was eliminated in 2011 due to budget reductions.

2006 Skater's Point Advisory Committee

In 2006, the Parks and Recreation Commission established the Skater's Point Advisory Committee. This was in response to a significant number of incidents between skateboarders and members of the Sunday Arts and Crafts Show, reports of intimidation and rough treatment of younger skaters in the park by older, more aggressive skaters, and lack of compliance with required safety gear. At that time, Skater's Point was being monitored during peak operational hours only, Friday, Saturday, and Sunday.

The Committee was charged with re-engaging the skateboard community and gathering community input in the operation of the skate park. Members included two youth skaters, one parent of a skater, one adult skater, one adult affiliated with a local skate shop and one adult community member. In addition, there were eight non-voting liaisons from the following: Parks and Recreation Commission, Youth Council, Arts and Crafts Show Advisory Committee, Santa Barbara Police Department, Park Ranger, Sports Supervisor and Recreation Manager. All meetings were publically noticed at the skate park and a

number of other venues, but ultimately, there was very little or no participation at meetings from members of the skate park community.

The Committee met for a little more than one year. They reviewed park rules, State laws and Municipal Code regulations, operational costs; considered ideas to increase compliance with the safety equipment requirements; weighed the idea of implementing a park user fee but determined it was not feasible; and, conducted a needs assessment with skate park users for additional skate park facilities. The Committee reviewed the "Youth Only Hours" on Saturdays, and determined the time should be changed to one hour later to accommodate more youth and allow more adults to skate in the earlier hours. After a report to the Commission, the program hours were changed. After months of meetings and interacting with skaters at the park, the Committee ultimately concluded that effective enforcement of the mandatory equipment rules was impossible without the ability to secure the entrances and exits of the park. The Committee was disbanded after a year.

Skate Park Closure as a Management Tool and July 2 – 3 Closure

Over the years, the Department has been challenged with how to manage the facility in response to increased reports of inappropriate behaviors, threats to public safety, and damage to public property. When specific individuals can be identified, police have followed up with appropriate law enforcement actions. However, other times this has not been easily discernable or the inappropriate behaviors are by a large group of facility users. In these instances, by order of the Director, the skate park has been closed for a number of hours up to several days. Closing the facility entails installation of a wood barrier at the two entrances, a chain woven through skate elements to restrict skating, and posted signs that the facility is closed. This action has been taken on two or three occasions before this latest closure on July 2, 2013. In each instance, Parks staff required police assistance to clear and close the facility, and the facility remained closed without incident. Following each park re-opening there has been a noticeable decrease in the problem behaviors.

The decision to close the skate park on July 2, 2013, followed several reports of drug use and threatening behavior, and incidents which resulted in the police being called to respond on Sunday, June 30, 2013. Drug use was observed, and several skaters were involved in throwing water balloons into traffic on Cabrillo Blvd. at the Sunday Arts & Crafts Show exhibits, exhibitors, and visitors, and at the responding Parks and Recreation staff person who directed the youth to cease the activity. Park Rangers were called. Several skaters made hostile and threatening comments and actions towards the park ranger who then called police for assistance. Police arrived and a decision was made to briefly close the facility. It required the park ranger and several police officers to remove skaters and close of the facility, which remained closed for an hour. In consultation with staff following these events, the Parks and Recreation Director

authorized the closure of the facility effective noon on Tuesday, July 2 through Thursday, July 4. Wood barricades were installed at the two entrances, chains were installed crossing the skate surfaces, and signs were posted. A press release was issued to inform the public.

Despite a heavy presence by staff, park rangers, and police, on Tuesday and Wednesday the barricades were repeatedly kicked down and signs were removed. As soon as law enforcement was no longer present, there were reports of 20-50 skaters who jumped the walls or kicked down barriers to enter the facility. On Wednesday, July 3, while both staff and police were present, someone stole the bolt cutters from a Parks employee truck. Once staff and police left the area someone cut and removed the chains, throwing them into Mission Lagoon. Photos of this activity were posted on local social media as well as new media sites.

On Wednesday afternoon, July 3rd the Parks and Recreation Director, Parks Manager, and Police reviewed the activity in response to the closure, the level of law enforcement which was needed to enforce the closure, and the public safety concerns related to 4th of July activities planned down in the Waterfront. A joint decision was made to re-open the skate park Wednesday evening July 3rd with an increased presence by police and park rangers through the holiday weekend to insure safety in the area. The park was re-opened without incident over the busy holiday weekend. The Police Department has initiated a case to identify and press charges against individuals who damaged park property.

Moving Forward

Several community skate park stakeholders reached out to the Department during and following the closure. They expressed concern that the actions of a few resulted in a closed facility for others and about the negative portrayal of skateboarders in the media. They offered to work with the Department to come up with solutions going forward. The group has met twice with staff, with a focus on how this group can provide leadership for the skateboarding community and skate park users to encourage and model responsible facility use. Different ideas have been discussed for reaching out to skate park users and hearing their concerns, and building a better relationship between skaters, staff, police and the community. The group is planning an event at the skate park on Wednesday, August 14th at 6:00pm to engage the skateboard community. Staff looks forward to working these and other skate park stakeholders to improve relationships and promote responsible use of this popular recreation facility.

SUBMITTED BY: Nancy L. Rapp, Parks and Recreation Director