



CITY OF SANTA BARBARA

NEIGHBORHOOD ADVISORY COUNCIL REPORT

AGENDA DATE: May 10, 2017

TO: Neighborhood Advisory Council

FROM: Administration Division, Parks and Recreation Department

SUBJECT: Parks and Recreation Facility Public Use and Misuse Update

RECOMMENDATION: That the Neighborhood Advisory Council receive a presentation and discuss public use and misuse issues at City parks and recreation facilities.

DISCUSSION:

Introduction

The purpose of this report is to provide the Commission with an overview of the current use and misuse concerns, management challenges and site impacts related to loitering, undesirable overnight use, criminal activity, vandalism, and other disruptive behavior in City parks and recreation facilities, and creeks and open space areas. This report also outlines various Parks and Recreation Department (Department) management strategies to increase safety, improve usability and reduce negative misuse impacts.

For decades, Santa Barbara has constructively addressed issues created by the chronically poor, mentally ill, and unhoused members of our community. Criminal behavior, especially related to gangs, has also been a major concern. But in the last 15+ years there has been an apparent increase in the misuse of public spaces for disruptive and criminal activities that can limit broad public enjoyment of parks, destroy park resources, increase park maintenance, and at times can create unsafe working conditions for Department staff. Addressing these impacts consumes limited Department resources and adversely affects Department revenues. It is estimated that the Department expends at least \$415,000 a year to address problems related to encampments and to remove trash and human waste. In addition, the Department estimates that the loss of facility rental and program revenue may be as high as \$100,000 or more, on an annual basis when individuals avoid renting a facility and participating in a program as a result of a prior negative experience, knowledge that the area is impacted by misuse, and negative reviews.

Parks and Recreation Department Mission and Responsibilities

The mission of the Parks and Recreation Department is to provide residents and visitors with diverse open space, parks, beaches and community forest resources, creek restoration and water quality enhancements, and to enrich people's lives with varied recreation and community services. The Department manages a total of 60 parks and facilities that range from open space, passive, neighborhood, beach, and community parks, to a golf course, sports facilities and community buildings. The Department provides programs and services to youth, teen, adult and senior residents, students and visitors, and implements diverse creek restoration and water quality improvement programs.

The Parks Division is responsible for providing citizens with safe, clean and usable parks and beaches, and promoting stewardship of the natural resources within open space parks. Park operations staff maintain the park landscapes, sports turf and various amenities such as playgrounds, restrooms, picnic areas, walking paths, trees, benches and BBQs. In addition to addressing park repair needs associated with normal wear and tear, Parks Division staff frequently repairs vandalized park infrastructure and assists with the clean-up of unwanted overnight encampments.

Within the Parks Division, the role of Park Rangers is to ensure that park users enjoy their experiences safely, while complying with various rules, regulations, and ordinances. The Department's three Park Rangers are responsible for patrolling all 60 park and recreation facilities, providing support to Parks Division and Recreation Division staff, and responding to the impacts of misuse of public spaces for disruptive and criminal activities. Although Park Rangers have the necessary training and ability to issue citations for certain criminal behavior, voluntary compliance is the ultimate goal. Over the last two years, the Park Rangers responded to over 2,100 incidents of public misuse of City parks and recreation facilities. Many times, the service needs of the chronically, poor, mentally ill, and unhoused population exceed the resources of the Department and the capacity of Park Rangers so that assistance from the Santa Barbara Police Department (SBPD) is necessary. In addition, there are many occasions when Department staff directly seek SBPD response due to unsafe working conditions as a result of disruptive and criminal activities.

The Recreation Division is responsible for providing high quality and diverse recreation activities that enrich people's lives and promote healthy lifestyles. Recreation staff are tasked with developing and implementing youth and adult programs in City recreation facilities, sports fields and parks as well as coordinating community special events and facility rentals.

The Creeks Division is responsible for improving creek and ocean water quality and restoring natural creek environments through the implementation of storm water and urban runoff pollution reduction, creek restoration, and community education programs. The Creeks Division manages a year-round contract to remove litter and other pollutants from City creeks and beaches. City creek areas are regularly misused for human habitation.

Creek clean-up work can often create unsafe working conditions for Department staff and contractors, and require assistance from the SBPD.

Park and Recreation Facility Issues and Resource Impacts

Of the Department's 60 parks and recreation facilities, there are 22 that experience the most significant misuse issues and hence suffer the greatest impacts to broad public use. In addition to the daily requirements for site maintenance, the number of complaints and enforcement actions may be daily, weekly and/or seasonal according to the time of year, type of programming, and whether there are special events. The 22 locations are within the waterfront area and downtown as well as in the Oak Park, Westside, Eastside and Northside residential areas. As the table on page 5 illustrates, these parks and facilities experience unwanted overnight use, illegal drug sales and use and alcohol use, prostitution and vandalism. In addressing these issues, Parks staff can be exposed to verbally abusive behavior, and health and safety concerns associated with cleaning up human waste, removing excessive trash and disposing of used syringes. In some instances, interactions with individuals have resulted in physical assaults. Addressing these issues reduces staff productivity, affects morale, and complicates their ability to keep parks clean, safe, and available for the public.

The broader public can also experience exposure to verbally abusive behavior and criminal activity, obstruction of areas intended for sports field use, picnicking or play areas, and misuse of park restrooms. The safety of children who participate in activities or recreate at park playgrounds is a paramount concern, as parks spaces are intended for youthful recreation. In many instances, the public has become frustrated with the issues identified in this report and chosen to seek out alternative parks located outside of their neighborhood, or change their fitness routines as a result of feeling unsafe.

The park location and certain park features contribute to attracting the chronically poor, under housed and mentally ill population. These include parks located near commercial areas which provide places to sleep after business hours and on weekends, and parks that are in close proximity to shelter and welfare services, free meal programs, fast food chains and liquor stores. Park features such as BBQs, picnic tables, benches, playgrounds, and restrooms also provide a draw.

Use of Parks to Provide Free Meals

The presence of unorganized and organized groups providing free packaged food and meals specifically impact a number of parks include MacKenzie Park, Oak Park, Plaza del Mar, Plaza Vera Cruz and Alameda Park. Retail establishments, such as Trader Joe's, as well as private individuals, provide free bags of food to individuals who then eat, store and discard food waste in the parks. Four weekly, organized, and un-regulated free meals are provided by three separate groups at two City parks. Two of them include medical services provided by Doctors Without Walls – Santa Barbara Street Medicine, and in some instances, veterinarian services are provided for pets. The meal events occur at Alameda Park (Monday/Thursday), and Plaza del Mar (Wednesday/Sunday). These events bring

together large groups of people who desire these services, resulting in significantly increased park trash and restroom maintenance responsibilities. Moreover, the appearance of these large groups as organized events can deter both programmed and un-programmed recreational use of the park

Recreation Programs and Facility Rentals

The Recreation Division operates sporting and enrichment activities at ten recreation centers, sport fields and facilities located in parks that are identified in this report. Key behavior and misuse issues for recreation program participants include parental concerns regarding the presence of large groups of adults for long periods of time, criminal activity, public intoxication, fighting, and verbally abusive behavior. As a result, parents of youth participants have expressed fears about the overall safety of these areas, and the safety of their children when using onsite park restrooms. There is little direct evidence to substantiate an actual safety threat, or a history of assaultive crimes, but the public perception remains a genuine expression of community concern about complex social issues.

The Recreation Division also permits private gatherings and events at six facilities located in parks that are identified in this report. Staff is challenged with renting facilities when customers experience the presence of large groups of adults near the facility, especially when these groups appear to be intoxicated or become verbally abusive when asked to relocate.

Parks and Recreation Facilities with Significant Misuse and Behavior Impacts

Park or Facility	Location	Amenities						Challenges				
		BBQ Grills & Picnic Sites	Playgrounds	Swimming Pools	Sport Courts	Sport Fields	Restroom	Loitering	Illegal Camping	Drugs & Alcohol	Prostitution	Vandalism
Alameda Plaza	Downtown		✓				✓	✓	✓	✓		✓
Andrée Clark Bird Refuge	Waterfront							✓	✓	✓		✓
Cabrillo Ball Park	Waterfront					✓	✓	✓		✓		✓
Cabrillo Pavilion/Bathhouse	Waterfront		✓				✓	✓	✓	✓		✓
Carrillo Recreation Center	Downtown							✓	✓	✓		✓
Chase Palm Park	Waterfront					✓		✓	✓	✓	✓	✓
Chase Palm Expansion	Waterfront		✓				✓	✓	✓	✓		✓
De La Guerra Plaza	Downtown							✓		✓		✓
Douglas Family Preserve	Mesa							✓	✓	✓		✓
Dwight Murphy Field	Waterfront	✓	✓			✓	✓	✓	✓	✓	✓	✓
East Beach	Waterfront	✓	✓				✓	✓	✓	✓	✓	✓
Eastside Neighborhood	Eastside	✓	✓				✓	✓		✓		✓
La Mesa Park	Mesa	✓	✓				✓	✓	✓	✓		✓
Leadbetter Beach	Waterfront	✓					✓	✓	✓	✓		✓
Louise Lowry Davis Center	Downtown				✓			✓	✓	✓		✓
MacKenzie Park	Northside		✓			✓	✓	✓	✓	✓		✓
Municipal Tennis Center	Eastside				✓		✓	✓		✓		✓
Moreton Bay Fig Tree	Downtown							✓	✓	✓	✓	✓
Oak Park	Northside	✓	✓	✓			✓	✓	✓	✓	✓	✓
Ortega Park	Eastside		✓	✓	✓	✓	✓	✓	✓	✓	✓	✓
Pershing Park/Plaza del Mar	Waterfront					✓	✓	✓	✓	✓		✓
Plaza Vera Cruz	Downtown		✓					✓	✓	✓		✓

Parks and Recreation Management Strategies

The Department implements a number of management strategies to deter improper and criminal use of public parks and facilities, and to increase the perception of safety, and reduce resource impacts. More often than not, the strategies include the removal of park amenities that would otherwise be enjoyed by the general public. Physical changes include installation of fencing, bench and picnic table removal, bleacher removal, BBQ removal, installation of security cameras, additional lighting, park gates, vegetation removal, and new regulatory signage. Site security and programming changes include reduced park hours, reduced restroom hours, restroom closures, prohibition of alcohol, working with local service providers to increase the amount of activity at a park or facility, increased site visits by Park Rangers, and, in the case of Chase Palm Park, hiring security officers during special events. Over the last number of years, the Department implemented the following changes in various City parks:

- *Additional Fencing:* Cabrillo Ball Park, Dwight Murphy Field
- *Additional Lighting:* Chase Palm Park, Eastside Neighborhood Park, Plaza Vera Cruz, Bohnett Park, Franklin Neighborhood Center, Plaza del Mar, Westside Center
- *Restroom closure/Reduced hours/Renovation:* Cabrillo Ball Park, Cabrillo Pavilion, Plaza del Mar, Ortega Park, Municipal Tennis Center, Oak Park, Chase Palm Park
- *New regulatory signage:* Alameda Plaza, Andrée Clark Bird Refuge, Plaza del Mar
- *Reduced Park hours:* Oak Park, Spencer Adams, Ortega Park
- *BBQ Removal:* East Beach Park, Ortega Park, Stevens Park
- *Alcohol Prohibition:* Oak Park
- *Vegetation Removal:* Andrée Clark Bird Refuge, Cabrillo Ball Park, Cabrillo Pavilion, Chase Palm Park, Douglas Family Preserve, Dwight Murphy Field, MacKenzie Park, Oak Park, Pershing Park, Plaza del Mar, Plaza Vera Cruz
- *Facility Restrictions:* Cabrillo Bathhouse, Louise Lowry Davis Center
- *Security Cameras:* Ortega Park
- *Bench/Picnic Table/Bleacher Removal:* Plaza Vera Cruz, Chase Palm Park, De la Guerra Plaza, Ortega Park, Louise Lowry Davis Center, Stevens Park

In addition to operation management strategies, the Department works with community partners and identifies park and facility improvement projects through the City's Capital Improvement Program (CIP) that are intended to enhance park resources to support community use, increase safety and discourage inappropriate behavior and park use. Some active efforts include:

Cabrillo Pavilion and Bathhouse Renovation: The renovated facility will have improved exterior lighting, exterior and interior security cameras, and increased programming to keep the facility and surrounding area actively programmed and deter undesirable overnight use and vandalism. The Department is also evaluating whether to include a full-time security officer on-site.

Louise Lowry Davis Center Renovation: The Department is completing conceptual plans to renovate the interior of the Louise Lowry Davis Center and enclose the exterior patio. In addition to increasing facility use for senior programs and community events, the renovation design will deter overnight occupancy.

Ortega Park: The Department is working with various youth serving agencies to increase activity in the park, at the pool, and in the Welcome House. To increase the safety, the Department will provide permitted and restricted use of the swimming pool restrooms for youth sporting groups. The Department is also evaluating the feasibility of dedicating the Welcome House for weekly/daily SBPD shift briefings.

Pershing Park/Plaza del Mar: The Department is working with Santa Barbara City College (SBCC), the Foresters, and a local youth concert promoter to increase programming at Pershing Park and host organized concerts at the Plaza del Mar band shell.

Free Meals Provided in Parks: In discussion with the Central Coast Collaborative on Homelessness (C3H), the Department will be developing strategies to decrease the impacts from the free meals and services provided to the chronically poor, unhoused and mentally ill. In meetings with C3H, the Department has outlined the need to engage the various faith-based organizations who host the organized feedings to either relocate or secure necessary park permits with requirements to mitigate impacts to the neighborhood and the park.

Santa Barbara Police Department (SBPD) Management Strategies

Over the years, the Department has worked with the SBPD to address park misuse concerns. In April 2016 the Department began a more focused effort to secure additional support for enforcement and address criminal activity and disruptive behavior in park and recreation facilities most impacted by public misuse and critical for summer programming. Prior to the start of summer 2016, the Department provided the SBPD with a comprehensive document of programmed summer camp locations and activities and requested an increase in police presence ahead of and on the first day of programming. More recently, the Department worked with SBPD to address park safety concerns at Ortega Park. At a community meeting on October 26, residents, business owners, stakeholders, and school officials, discussed their safety concerns and the impacts of large groups of adults who persistently occupy the park.

SBPD in collaboration with Parks and Recreation will continue to coordinate resources for coverage of the parks and to share ideas and information towards strategic plans of action. In addition, the departments will work to ensure that there is timely response to police issues or park maintenance problems. Part of the police response may include deploying uniformed personnel to confront criminal activities, conduct patrol briefings in the field for presence within the parks, and coordination of directed patrols in the areas. The analysis of activity will soon be assisted with technology called "Crime View", which is software that will assist in identifying "hot spots." The trends and analysis will focus

patrol deployments as well and specialty enforcement activity related to evidence based policing concepts. Watch Commanders along with Beat Coordinators will continue to outreach to community members in efforts to combat nuisance issues as well as support for guardians in a shared community ownership within the parks. In the next year, the Police Department will initiate a volunteer program which will incorporate uniformed senior volunteers who can act as community ambassadors and provide additional positive presence in City parks. The community ambassadors along with the addition of 20 new Police Officers in training will assist the Police Department in filling strategic positions focused on the proactive crime specific issues as well as long term problem solving.

BUDGET/FINANCIAL INFORMATION:

The annual Department costs arising from park misuse, vandalism and overnight occupancy are estimated to be at least \$415,000. The Creeks Division contributes \$105,000 of the annual total to address unwanted encampments and remove trash and human waste. In addition, the loss of facility rental opportunities and program participation has an immediate and long-term impact to Department revenue. Annually, the cost could be as much as \$100,000 or more.

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