



**CITY OF SANTA BARBARA**  
**PARKS AND RECREATION COMMISSION REPORT**

**AGENDA DATE:** July 22, 2020

**TO:** Parks and Recreation Commission

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

**SUBJECT:** Parks Division Report

**RECOMMENDATION:**

That the Commission receive a presentation on the status of various Parks Division projects, including the Division's response to the COVID-19 pandemic, and programs and projects in progress or recently completed.

**DISCUSSION:**

COVID-19 Pandemic Response:

The coronavirus pandemic (COVID-19) has highlighted the essential role of the Parks and Recreation Department (Department) in providing equitable recreation opportunities to the local community. Early on, the Department swiftly mobilized to keep beaches, trails and open spaces, and most parks, open to support physical and mental health, while delivering essential and vital community services.

The Parks Division has been on the frontline since the "stay at home order" was issued and State and County Public Health restrictions put in place. These directives and guidelines created a need to take steps to protect the health, safety, and wellness of employees and the public. Parks staff received special training in the use of personal protective equipment, cleaning and sanitization, and coronavirus prevention and precautions. Extra restroom cleaning and sanitization were implemented, along with closures of all playgrounds, fitness equipment, basketball courts, group picnic areas, and select parks and restrooms. In addition, the Parks Division provided COVID-19 awareness outreach through a signage campaign, where staff posted closure and restriction notices on facilities and amenities along with COVID-19 awareness and precaution messages.

*Park Rangers*

Park Rangers play a vital role in supporting and assisting staff with managing resources. The significant increase in public use of City parks, beaches, and trails has required a consistent, focused response from the Park Ranger Program. The Park Rangers have met current challenges through schedule adjustments, updated enforcement directives, and

flexible and adaptable teamwork. The Rangers enforce and educate the public regarding allowed activities, homelessness, and social distancing; all while wearing masks and practicing social distancing. Recent holidays, especially the Fourth of July, have further shown how important and complex enforcement is during the pandemic, and the value of our Park Ranger Program.

### *Staffing*

The staffing challenges due to the release of hourly staff in March required adjustments to permanent operations staff's work schedules to include seven day week coverage. In addition, a Citywide temporary hiring freeze left three positions vacant. Despite these challenges, staff remained dedicated and positive, pushing through normal daily work duties, plus launching special projects to maintain forward momentum on achieving Department initiatives and goals.

### Plaza Vera Cruz Renovation:

The Department has been working with the Police Department and the Neighborhood Improvement Task Force (NITF) for several years to find solutions to manage the loitering and blatant park misuse at Plaza Vera Cruz. Both the Department and the Police Department receive frequent calls for service to respond to illegal activities in and around the park and playground. As a result, community members and their families feel unsafe and avoid the park altogether. Staff also has trouble in performing simple tasks, such as mowing, without the assistance from the Park Rangers to move the illegal campers and their belongings away from work areas.

To begin making improvements to increase park safety and usability, Plaza Vera Cruz was fenced in late May. The closure of the park allowed staff and contractors to safely remove and level the underutilized playground and adjacent hardscaped areas. The Forestry crew also undertook a comprehensive pruning job on all the trees in the park. Contractual support removed invasive weeds from approximately 13,500 square feet of planter beds. New grass will cover the former playground site, and a recreational field space will be established for community use.

### Oak Park Tennis Court Landscape Project:

The Parks Division recently completed landscape enhancements at the Oak Park tennis court area. This work was completed exclusively by in-house park maintenance staff, which complemented the court resurfacing project that the Recreation Division completed in March. In addition to enhancing the overall aesthetics of the courts, this project involved mitigation of soil erosion, court drainage, and gopher and weed intrusion issues. Staff really took a lot of pride in this project and did a great job.

### Forestry Park Tree Care Projects:

The Forestry Program had another busy year maintaining the City's Urban Forest. Prior to the end of fiscal year 2020, all of the Canary Island Date palms in Alameda Park and Alice Keck Park Memorial Garden were pruned. As part of this effort, the Forestry Program implemented a new approach for pruning Canary Island Date Palms, with the use of only hand tools as well as sanitization of tools between each tree to minimize the transmission of harmful fungal pathogens that can rapidly kill these iconic landscape palms.

During the next fiscal year, Forestry will be implementing new strategies to focus on improving the health of some of the City's most valuable trees. A primary project will improve the health of three large Moreton Bay Fig trees in East Alameda Park. In conjunction with other Parks staff, staff will be removing all turf around the three trees and providing some cultural improvements, utilizing a newly acquired air spade to radial trench underneath the tree's dripline. Radial trenching is a modern arboricultural technique to reduce compaction within the tree's root zone and create an environment of nutrient rich, highly oxygenated soil that is an ideal environment for fibrous root growth. Staff will also be evaluating other areas within City parks where these techniques can be employed.

The Forestry Program has also begun a mulching program for the historic Moreton Bay Fig tree to increase the organic matter and nutrient cycling under the tree's canopy. In addition to mulching, staff are developing a long-term strategy to programmatically utilize fungicidal applications to control the presence of Phytophthora, which has long plagued the tree. The strategy will be presented to the IPM Advisory Committee for approval in late July. Consistency is key in managing this pathogen, and if approved, staff is hopeful that implementing a long-term strategy to manage the pathogen will provide measurable improvements to the section of canopy over the roadway that has been in various states of decline for the last couple of decades.

The planting of street trees will continue in the next fiscal year with funds pledged by Santa Barbara Beautiful for the purchase of 225 trees, and Measure C funds of \$250,000 for planting and maintenance.

### Parks Division Staffing Resources:

In early July, the Department received approval to rehire critical hourly staff that provide support to both park and forestry operations. In addition, the Division has approval to fill three permanent positions, including a Senior Tree Trimmer and two Grounds Maintenance Workers.

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