

Neighborhood Parks

Report of the 1999-2000 San Francisco Civil Grand Jury

SUMMARY

The Civil Grand Jury made a study of the Recreation and Park Department, focusing on the level of maintenance at and safe usability of smaller neighborhood parks and facilities. In addition, the Civil Grand Jury investigated the impacts of the parks bond (Proposition A from the March 2000 ballot) and of the open space fund extension (Proposition C from the March 2000 ballot) on these type of smaller neighborhood parks and facilities.

The Civil Grand Jury found that recognition of a need for change was developing among various Recreation and Park Department staff, parks advocates, and the media. There was a widespread acknowledgement that no significant capital expenditures or plan for neighborhood parks had been in place for nearly half a century. Small neighborhood parks sometimes would have key components unusable:

- damaged play structures might be fenced off;
- bathrooms might be kept locked; or
- playing fields left unusable.

The department facilities have long relied on whatever General Fund monies were annually made available and whatever staff energy and creativity could do to mitigate or slow any blight. Since funding was never certain from one year to the next, rehabilitation has been hard to plan and implement in a timely way. This is especially timely and relevant now that the rental and concessions revenue from 3Com (Candlestick) Park will dramatically drop, due to the permanent move by the San Francisco Giants to their new, privately-owned PacBell Park.

In 1999, the Recreation and Park Department prepared an extensive facilities improvement plan and capital use time-line for all its various facilities. What was particularly helpful was that this survey grouped facilities by the Supervisorial District in which they were located. This survey allowed residents and city staff alike to look at needs from a more neighborhood-oriented basis, i.e., at the sites closest to where people live and which they see most often.

BACKGROUND

The Recreation and Park Department was formed in 1949 as a consolidation of the parks and recreation divisions. The Department manages and operates all city parks, some county parks, 3Com Park, and a wide variety of other facilities.

METHODOLOGY

Members of the Civil Grand Jury visited the headquarters of the Recreation and Park Department on two separate occasions. They also interviewed residents, employees of neighborhood parks and recreation centers, and parks advocate groups.

RESULTS OF THE INVESTIGATION

A. Budget and Funding

The annual budget for the fiscal year (July 1999 - June 2000) is \$93 million. Funding is derived from the following sources:

1. Open Space program from property tax;
2. A one-time allotment item set by the Mayor;
3. A bequeathed oil well in Lake County;
4. Concessions from city parks and 3Com Park.

The Department oversees and receives income from concessions from 3Com Park. With the recent opening of PacBell Park, new home to the San Francisco Giants, income from 3Com lease payments and concessions will decrease. 3Com's only income from lease and concessions will be derived from the eight to ten Forty-Niners football games played there and from any special events, e.g., concerts and exhibitions. PacBell Park is privately owned and is not under the jurisdiction of the Recreation and Park Department

The Department has calculated that a stream of \$400 million is needed to improve and update community parks. The building of the funding would be through a ten-year program. The breakdown is as follows:

- \$150 million from the Open Space Fund. (March 2000 ballot's Proposition C authorized extension). Open Space funding, usable for some park and recreation purposes, would have soon run out and needed to be reauthorized by the voters if that funding stream were to be reliable for future capital spending purposes.
- \$30 million from the State Park Bond Program
- \$30 million from federal funding (L&WCF)
- \$110 million from the general obligation bond (March 2000 ballot's Proposition A)
- \$40 million from philanthropic sources (grants, sponsorships, bequests, etc.)
- \$40 million from the Urban Park Fund

Funds are directed to those parks that are in urgent need of repair, rather than dividing funds equally among parks. Each community park has been designated on a listing of urgent attention. Instead of each park waiting until it has enough funds in order to do something, the funds are directed to a park that needs immediate assistance.

In addition, the Civil Grand Jury noted that some neighborhood parks have even resorted to putting "spare change" fundraising jars in neighborhood businesses, so as to promote wider awareness of that park's need for rehabilitation.

B. Permits

Most activities in community parks do not require a permit. Most people do not acquire permits for their activity in smaller community parks or more obscure areas of Golden Gate Park. The Department encourages park users to obtain permits, thereby officially reserving a specific space. Permits may be obtained for such events like a soccer game or baseball game at DeHaro Field. Most people follow the "first come, first serve" process.

Each year the Department issues approximately 25,000 permits of varying types at a price of \$15-\$25 (\$375,000-\$650,000 annually). There is also a conscious effort to encourage the use of smaller less popular areas in hopes of evenly utilizing the parks.

C. Technology

The Recreation and Park Department recently contracted for and implemented a new computer software database program. The new database program acts as a reservation scheduler, which also monitors reservations and types of activities. The software contains a database of all groups and individuals that have made reservations for facility/space. The database program contains categories for--among others-- payments, problems, and wrongful use.

D. Children's Playground and Sporting Facilities

The groundskeeper/maintenance personnel regularly inspect children's playground, usually once a day. They look for possible hazards, such as deterioration of wood and metal structures. Many community parks are in need of new playground structures, yet there seems no schedule for replacement of substandard playground equipment. In some cases, structures were simply fenced off, prohibiting activity on or near them.

The basic cost of these playground structures range from \$30,000 - \$75,000 (unassembled) and are sometimes donated by individuals and/or organizations. However, installation costs through the Department of Public Works (DPW) can range up to 600 percent over costs. As an example, one playground structure we reviewed cost \$30,000, but the cost of installation was \$619,000--roughly 2000 percent of costs. Furthermore, installation may be slowed when incorporating interdepartmental coordination as compared to using one general (private) contractor.

In addition, neighborhood baseball diamonds and soccer fields show lack of consistent maintenance that would allow and promote easy and regular use by nearby residents.

E. Park Apparatus and Other Services

Purchase and installation of park benches, signage and/or lighting fixtures is done through various city government departments, divisions, bureaus, and agencies.

F. Recreational Facilities

In 1999, the Recreation and Park Department prepared an extensive facilities improvement plan and capital use timeline for all its various facilities. The facilities plan (Appendix A) detailed:

1. The projected source of income;
2. When and where planned for use, and
3. Inter-relationships with other government agencies (Port, Water, CalTrans, and Golden Gate National Recreation Area) having some control or direct impact on that neighborhood park.

G. Facilities

1. Restrooms were sometimes not open--even during high use times such as weekends and holidays.
2. Water would leak for long periods from water fountains, sprinklers, and bathroom facilities.

H. Community Outreach

1. Advocacy groups such as Coleman Advocates for Youth issued "report cards" for selected neighborhood parks.

2. The Recreation and Park Department conducted some evening forums around the city to solicit responses from neighborhoods.

CONCLUSIONS AND RECOMMENDATIONS

Conclusion (1)

There is a high cost of installing new playground structures. Often it is more economical and efficient to have a private contractor install the equipment; however, the Department is bound by the City Charter to permit other city agencies to have first opportunity at the job. The incorporation of various departments (e.g., surveying and landscaping) raises costs and prolongs the process. In a cited example, it took the DPW six months to survey, design and install a children's playground. A private contractor could do the same in four to five weeks.

Recommendation

The Civil Grand Jury recommends the implementation of a procedure for streamlining cumbersome inter-departmental rules and requirements for procurement when items critical to use of a facility are out-of-service. The Civil Grand Jury also recommends that the Recreation and Park Department better coordinate with the DPW for a more efficient timeline of installation of playgrounds. Work that DPW estimates cannot be timely performed should then be sourced out to private contractors.

Required Response

Mayor
Board of Supervisors
Recreation and Park Department
Department of Public Works

Conclusion (2)

The Recreation and Park Department has long failed to fully investigate all possibilities as to city funding, purchasing and coordination of services, instead taking what was easily available or what it was politically pressured to provide.

Conclusion (3)

Neighborhood and community/vest-pocket parks have gotten less attention than high-profile, tourist-oriented parks and facilities.

Recommendation

The Civil Grand Jury recommends:

1. There be formalized some permanent process, within city government, to analyze and plan for Recreation and Park facilities and site repair.
2. There be developed long-range funding plans that don't substantially depend on annual General Fund support.

Required Response

Mayor
Board of Supervisors
Recreation and Park Department

Conclusion (4)

There is a growing consensus that neighborhood parks are the ones that residents use most, warranting substantial involvement of residents in the planning of improvements and changes.

Recommendation

The Civil Grand Jury recommends that, within the Recreation and Park Department, some form of ongoing advisory or consultation process involving neighborhood park users and nearby residents be developed.

Required Response

Recreation and Park Department

Conclusion (5)

The multi-source capital-funding plan together to meet the needs outlined in the report in Appendix A might be stretched to cover the estimated \$400 million need for repair and development in neighborhood parks.

Recommendation

The Civil Grand Jury recommends that there be developed some contingency and priority plan for what are the most critical facilities' needs, in the event that expected monies do not materialize or project costs significantly exceed budgeted amounts.

Required Response

Mayor

Recreation and Park Department

Conclusion (6)

The Recreation and Park Department doesn't always know who's using its facilities and for what purpose. This makes it difficult not only to track unusual wear-and-tear or damage but also makes it hard to educate any and all users about what activity is and isn't appropriate for that facility.

Recommendation

The Civil Grand Jury recommends that there be some simple process for making information widely available to city park users about how to treat their parks.

Required Response

Recreation and Park Department

Conclusion (7)

The Recreation and Park Department does not reliably and regularly track wear-and-tear on all its facilities.

Recommendation

The Civil Grand Jury recommends that the Department rely on newly-emerging attitudes of commitment to the parks and on new technology to institute annual updating of the physical needs of each facility.

Required Response

Recreation and Park Department

APPENDIX A
RECREATION AND PARK DEPARTMENT
CAPITAL PLAN:
Facility Improvement Phasing,
April 20, 2000