



Memorandum

TO: NEIGHBORHOOD SERVICES AND EDUCATION COMMITTEE **FROM:** Jon Cicirelli

SUBJECT: See below

DATE: January 27, 2025

Approved

Date:

2/6/2025

SUBJECT: Citywide Sustainable Park Maintenance Annual Report

RECOMMENDATION

Accept a status report on citywide sustainable park maintenance, including current service levels and areas of improvement.

BACKGROUND

The City of San José (City) boasts a park system comprising 215 parks covering 3,621 acres (1,801 developed) and 65 miles of urban trails, which are responsibility of the Department of Parks, Recreation and Neighborhood Services (PRNS).

The City's parks provide significant environmental, health, social, and economic benefits, enhancing quality of life and community well-being while supporting [Climate Smart San José](#) goals.¹ Parks improve air quality, manage stormwater, and mitigate urban heat through green infrastructure, such as trees and native gardens, which also foster biodiversity. They encourage physical activity, mental wellness, and community connections through recreational spaces, events, and programs. Economically, well-maintained parks increase property values and attract businesses and tourists, as reported in a 2016 Trust for Public Land report titled The Economic Benefits of the Park & Recreation System in San José, California.²

Despite these benefits, the City faces challenges in maintaining its park system. Aging infrastructure, limited funding, and increased usage strain resources. Environmental

¹ <https://www.sanjoseca.gov/your-government/departments-offices/environmental-services/climate-smart-san-jos>

² <https://www.tpl.org/wp-content/uploads/2016/02/econ-benefit-sanjose-factsheet.pdf>

pressures, including dry conditions and climate change, further complicate maintenance efforts.

The City's park stewardship efforts are led by PRNS, with 181.65 FTE and \$35.8 million allocated to park maintenance in the 2024-2025 Adopted Operating Budget, of which \$15.1 million is for non-personal expenses such as water, supplies and materials and contractual services. PRNS is guided by its strategic plan, ActivateSJ³, and by [Park Maintenance Standards](#) established in April 2021 (Attachment A).⁴ PRNS has adopted a collaborative and strategic approach to park maintenance utilizing staff, contractors, volunteers, and partnerships.

ANALYSIS

Maintaining and improving the condition of existing parks and trails is the first goal in ActivateSJ. The annual Park Condition Assessment (PCA) process plays a vital role in monitoring and improving park quality. In 2024, the citywide average PCA score decreased slightly to 87.4% from 87.8% the prior year, reflecting the need for continued improvement. Equitable resource allocation is prioritized using the Healthy Places Index (HPI) to focus improvements on neighborhoods with the greatest need. Parks in lower HPI areas showed improvements in average scores, demonstrating the effectiveness of these targeted efforts. Additionally, the newly launched Trail Condition Assessment (TCA) pilot aims to standardize trail evaluations, to improve the safety and accessibility for the city's extensive trail network.

Public feedback complements PCA results, offering insights into park user experiences. A 2024 survey revealed strong appreciation for parks' role in recreation, family time, and mental health. However, areas for improvement include restroom cleanliness, turf quality, and safety. These concerns highlight the importance of aligning professional standards with high community expectations. Comments also emphasized the need for more shade structures and updated amenities, particularly in underserved neighborhoods.

Looking forward, PRNS remains committed to sustainable park stewardship, leveraging data-driven strategies and community collaboration to enhance its park system. By addressing infrastructure needs, expanding assessment programs, and prioritizing equity, the City strives to ensure that all residents can access safe, high-quality parks and trails.

³ <https://www.sanjoseca.gov/home/showpublisheddocument/43503/637178743945470000>

⁴ <https://www.sanjoseca.gov/home/showdocument?id=81364>

Stewardship Challenges and Strategies

Despite their value, the care and upkeep of the City's 215 parks and 65 miles of trails is not without its challenges. From aging park infrastructure and limited financial resources to park misuse and environmental pressures, the City faces an array of issues that require a collective approach of staff, contractors, volunteers, and partners.

Aging park infrastructure is a major concern, as many facilities require continual repairs or modernization to ensure safety and usability. Without these repairs or updates, parks may become less inviting and functional for residents. For example, irrigation infrastructure in many City parks is decades old and requires extensive maintenance. In 2023-2024, PRNS staff recorded 10,721 hours on irrigation maintenance, repairs, and troubleshooting. These hours translate to 5.2 full-time equivalent (FTE) of staff time directly spent on irrigation upkeep alone or nearly 7 FTE when compensated absences and administrative time are included. With funding for the modernization of infrastructure, those staff resources could be directed to other aspects of park maintenance and improvement for community safety and enjoyment. Funding for infrastructure modernization is limited, thus necessitating continual staff time on repairs. Funding constraints and needs for park development and maintenance will be explored extensively in an upcoming City Council study session scheduled for the evening of April 8, 2025.

High levels of usage and improper usage increase wear and tear. For instance, since the start of the Covid-19 pandemic, staff has observed an increase in unpermitted special events in City parks. While special events may contribute to public life, unpermitted special events have been destructive to park infrastructure as the event organizers do not engage with or follow protocols to ensure park safety and can destroy irrigation systems by driving through parks and often leave messes that staff must clean. When that happens, staff must report to the park and make repairs and clean up, rather than work on other scheduled maintenance activities. Additionally, some parks are subjected to extensive graffiti and illegal dumping, requiring more staff time to return the parks to clean and safe conditions and diverting the staff time from other landscaping. Meanwhile, environmental challenges, including California's persistently dry conditions and other climate-related changes, require innovative solutions to sustain healthy and resilient landscapes while conserving limited natural resources.

To confront these challenges, PRNS has adopted an approach rooted in collaboration and community involvement that utilizes staff, contractors, volunteers, and partners. Staff are guided by Park Maintenance Standards, which are designed to ensure consistent and quality care regardless of location. Daily maintenance tasks, such as health and safety checks, litter removal, pathway clearing, and landscaping, are undertaken by Park District teams, who organize parks into smaller zones for efficient oversight. Maintenance schedules are tailored to each park's size, amenities, and usage patterns, with most parks receiving visits two to three times per week. Specialized staff teams provide critical support for more complex maintenance needs in

PCA categories where overall scores tend to be lower year after year. The Integrated Pest Management (IPM)/Turf Team focuses on pest management and turf care, including aeration and fertilization. The Centralized Mowing Team ensures consistent mowing citywide, addressing equipment or staffing shortages that might otherwise disrupt park maintenance. Additionally, the Parks Rehabilitation Strike Team handles targeted upgrades like replacing benches and maintaining bleachers, while the Centralized Repair Worker Team undertakes playground, drinking fountain and irrigation repairs. These teams all need staff to succeed and so PRNS made hiring for park maintenance a major point of emphasis in 2023-2024 and filled 31 full-time vacancies during the year, reducing the vacancy rate from 27% in June 2023 to 7% by June 2024. With most positions filled, PRNS is focused on training and development.

Contractors extend the City's capacity by handling specialized tasks, including restroom cleaning, landscape maintenance for smaller parks, and large-scale tree care and weed abatement. These partnerships allow City staff to focus on broader maintenance and improvement efforts.

Collaboration is a cornerstone of San José's stewardship strategy. External partners like the Guadalupe River Park Conservancy and the San Jose Conservation Corps play vital roles in maintaining specific areas and supporting environmental initiatives. The Climate Change pathway of the Resilience Corps, operated by the San Jose Conservation Corps under a PRNS contract, provides young adults facing multiple barriers to employment with case management and skills training. Since the Resilience Corps was launched in 2021, PRNS has hired 52 participants into park maintenance roles, including 17 into full-time jobs with benefits, and dozens more have completed internships with park maintenance teams, BeautifySJ and the Department of Transportation. Internally, partnerships with departments such as the Department of Transportation, Environmental Services, and Public Works support tree canopy management, green stormwater infrastructure, and facility maintenance, respectively.

The PRNS Volunteer Management Unit strengthens these efforts by engaging the community in park care. Programs like Adopt-A-Park, currently involving 94 parks, empower residents to take active roles in improving and maintaining green spaces. Volunteer events also focus on areas with greater needs, fostering equity and enhancing park conditions across the city. In 2023-2024, volunteers contributed more than 28,000 hours of service in City parks.

By leveraging these diverse strategies and partnerships, San José is working to overcome challenges and build a sustainable, accessible, and resilient park system with all parks meeting Park Maintenance Standards.

Parks Condition Assessments

The Department strives to ensure equity in park maintenance by adhering to Park Maintenance Standards. These standards set minimum expectations for each park

amenity and guide maintenance efforts and performance assessments. The condition of parks is evaluated annually through the Park Condition Assessment (PCA) process, which provides a systematic measurement against the established standards. During the PCA process, teams of two or three staff visit a set of assigned parks and civic grounds and, using a mobile survey tool, evaluate each park amenity against the established standards. Staff compiles the results to create an overall PCA score for each park, which is an arithmetic mean of each amenity's scores, as well as aggregate PCA scores for parks within Council Districts and citywide.

It is important to recognize that PCAs offer a snapshot of park conditions at a specific point in time. Assessments are completed during late summer and early fall, and they reflect the service levels experienced in the previous fiscal year. For example, assessments conducted in the summer and fall of 2024 are indicative of the maintenance and services provided throughout the 2023-2024 fiscal year. However, these assessments can also be influenced by immediate circumstances; if a park's maintenance crew experiences staffing shortages during the evaluation week, the park may not meet cleanliness standards. Park conditions may also fluctuate based on seasonal factors, weather events, equipment shortages, and special events in parks.

In 2024, the average PCA score *citywide* was 87.4%, down 0.4% from 87.8% in 2023. Attachment B provides a comprehensive list of each assessed park and civic ground with respective scores from 2021 to 2024. Figure 1 shows the average PCA score for each Council District for 2024 and 2023.

Year	1	2	3	4	5	6	7	8	9	10
2024	88.3%	90.1%	89.7%	85.3%	88.1%	84.1%	87.0%	87.7%	89.1%	85.0%
2023	88.0%	88.0%	87.6%	79.8%	88.3%	88.0%	88.1%	88.3%	90.6%	91.1%

Fig 1. Average PCA score for all facilities by Council District for 2023 and 2024. Color scale reflect difference in average score with darker green trending toward higher scores.

When looking *only* at parks, in 2024 the average PCA score citywide was 86.9%, down from 87.3% in 2023. Figure 2 shows the average score for these parks by Council District.

Year	1	2	3	4	5	6	7	8	9	10
2024	86.9%	88.9%	89.1%	84.6%	87.8%	83.2%	89.1%	87.6%	88.2%	83.6%
2023	86.4%	86.2%	86.5%	78.4%	89.0%	87.5%	89.0%	87.7%	89.8%	90.4%

Fig 2. Average PCA score for neighborhood parks, dog parks, regional parks, sports facilities, and joint-use sites by Council District for 2023 and 2024. Color scale reflect difference in average score with darker green trending toward higher scores.

In 2024, across all parks and civic grounds, 35 achieved a perfect score, covering 5.9% of developed acreage (Figure 3). In 2024, 79% of developed acres were rated 80% or above (outlined in Figure 3), up from 64% in 2023. While there was a decline in the percentage of park acres scoring 90% or above, there was a larger decline in the percentage of park acres scoring below 80%, indicating more consistency across parks in the City.

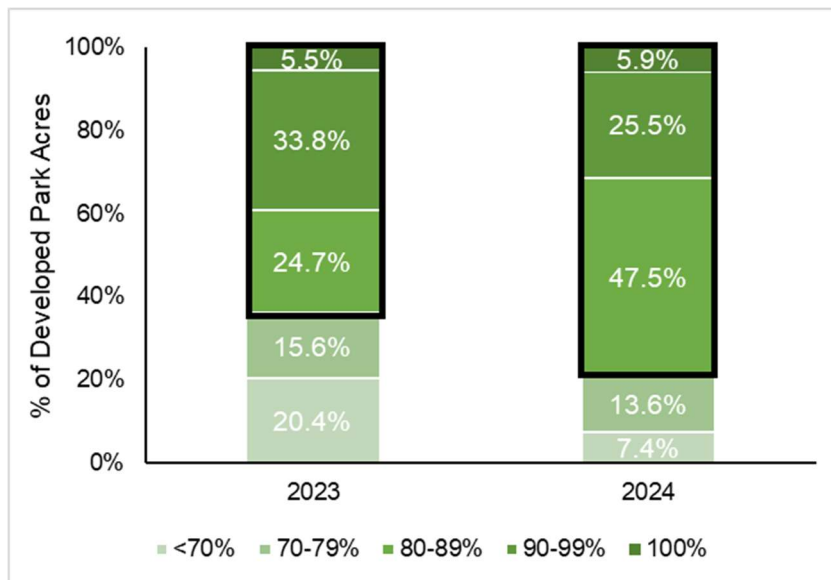


Fig 3. Percentage of developed acres by PCA score range for the assessment year 2024.

Attachment C includes further analyses of PCA results. At an amenity level, drinking fountains received the lowest rating, as they did in 2023. Contracted parks as a whole received higher ratings than staff-maintained parks, as they are smaller and include fewer amenities, though contracted parks saw their average score drop from 91.7% in 2023 to 89.5% in 2024 while staff-maintained parks saw their average score rise from 85.3% in 2023 to 85.7% in 2024.

Public Feedback on Park Conditions

PRNS supplements PCA scores by actively soliciting community input through a park user survey, which assesses the perceived quality and safety of San José's parks. This feedback is integral to shaping maintenance strategies and addressing concerns, fostering the continuous improvement of the City's park system. Between June 1 and November 10, 2024, 292 park users participated in the survey. Outreach efforts included engaging attendees at Viva Parks events, distributing surveys to Camp San José participants for their guardians, reaching out to Citywide Sports and Community Garden participants, and connecting with volunteers.

Survey participants rated park quality across 17 categories aligned with Park Maintenance Standards using a 5-point scale, where '1' indicated 'Very Poor' and '5' represented 'Excellent.' Similarly, they assessed safety perceptions at their most frequently visited park using the same scale. The survey also collected demographic data, including age, race, gender identity, disability status, household size, frequency of park visits, and residential zip code. Notably, 17% of respondents resided in zip code 95112 (Council District 3), with 7.8% from 95125 (Council District 10), 7.5% from 95126 (Council District 6), 5.8% from both 95116 (District 3) and 95120 (Council District 10),

and 4.8% from both 95111 (Council District 7) and 95123 (Council District 10). In total, respondents represented 45 unique zip codes.

Staff's analysis of responses revealed that, across all respondents, Skate Parks (3.51), Trees (3.48), and Hardscapes (3.35) received the highest average ratings. Drinking Fountains (2.41), Restrooms (2.47), and Turf/Grass Areas (2.97) received the lowest average ratings from the public.

In comparison, staff conducted PCA scores for parks were highest for Bike Parks (95.8 percent), Parking Lots (95.1 percent), and Hardscapes (94.3 percent), and were also lowest for Drinking Fountains (76.2 percent), Picnic Areas (78.0 percent), and Dog Parks (78.9 percent).

While the scale for soliciting feedback from the public is different from the internal tool staff use for PCAs, insights can still be made by reviewing the difference in highest to lowest scored amenities. This feedback highlights potential gaps between professional standards and those of park users, reinforcing the need to align park services with residents' high expectations.

Amenities	Public	Staff
Skate Parks	3.51	91.1%
Trees	3.48	88.1%
Hardscapes	3.35	94.3%
Parking Lots	3.32	95.1%
Athletic Courts	3.31	93.6%
Benches	3.30	91.3%
Bike Parks	3.30	95.8%
Dog Parks	3.23	78.9%
Picnic Areas	3.17	78.0%
Athletic Fields	3.12	83.9%
Playgrounds	3.09	86.1%
Planting/Landscaped Areas	3.08	88.7%
Exercise Stations	3.02	88.8%
Waste Receptacles	3.01	87.6%
Turf/Grass Areas	2.97	80.6%
Restrooms	2.47	82.2%
Drinking Fountains	2.41	76.2%

Table 1 presents the public score alongside the staff PCA score.

When asked, "Why do you visit San José parks?" 98 respondents cited spending time with kids and family, 122 highlighted recreation or exercise, and 34 mentioned attending social and community events such as Viva Parks. Emphasizing the importance of parks, one respondent shared, "It's the closest green space near me," while another noted,

“For my kids to play, we like being outdoors, playgrounds, walking, shade when it’s hot, the open space, detoxing from technology, and for my mental health.”

A total of 166 respondents provided feedback to the open-ended question, “Please comment on any strengths or areas of improvement for the parks you typically visit.” Among these, 37 pointed out the need for updated amenities or repairs, 26 expressed concerns about feeling unsafe, 24 requested improved upkeep and cleanliness of restrooms, 21 mentioned general cleanliness issues, and 20 emphasized the need for more shade structures. One comment that was reflective of the whole read, “I’m concerned about the current state of the parks in East Side San Jose. Many of our playgrounds seem neglected, with worn-out surfaces, broken equipment, and a serious lack of shade. The limited number of trees and canopies leaves play areas exposed, making it difficult for children to enjoy them safely, especially during hot weather. I urge you to prioritize investment in our local parks to ensure they are safe, well-maintained, and enjoyable spaces for our children.”

The insights gathered from this publicly accessible survey complement staff’s PCA assessments by providing additional context and perspectives. Additionally, the survey serves as a platform for fostering communication and collaboration between staff and park users. Discussions for future iterations of the survey have included using the same 1-10 rating scale and exploring alternative outreach strategies to significantly increase participation across all Council Districts.

Utilizing Health Equity Indicators in Decision-Making

Following the completion of all PCA data collection, staff integrates a health equity indicator to establish priorities for improvements. To develop corrective work plans, PRNS utilizes the Healthy Places Index (HPI) percentiles to prioritize areas within the City that heavily rely on the green spaces offered by City parks, aiming for equity.

The HPI comprises domains related to social conditions, encompassing education, employment opportunities, environmental quality such as clean air and water, and other indicators that correlate positively with life expectancy at birth. An HPI percentile serves as a ranking at the Census tract level specific to the City of San José, where a higher percentile signifies more favorable community health conditions. HPI is updated with each census round, and HPI 3.0 is the most up to date with data integrated from the 2020 Census. This is visually represented in Figure 4, which displays census tracts.

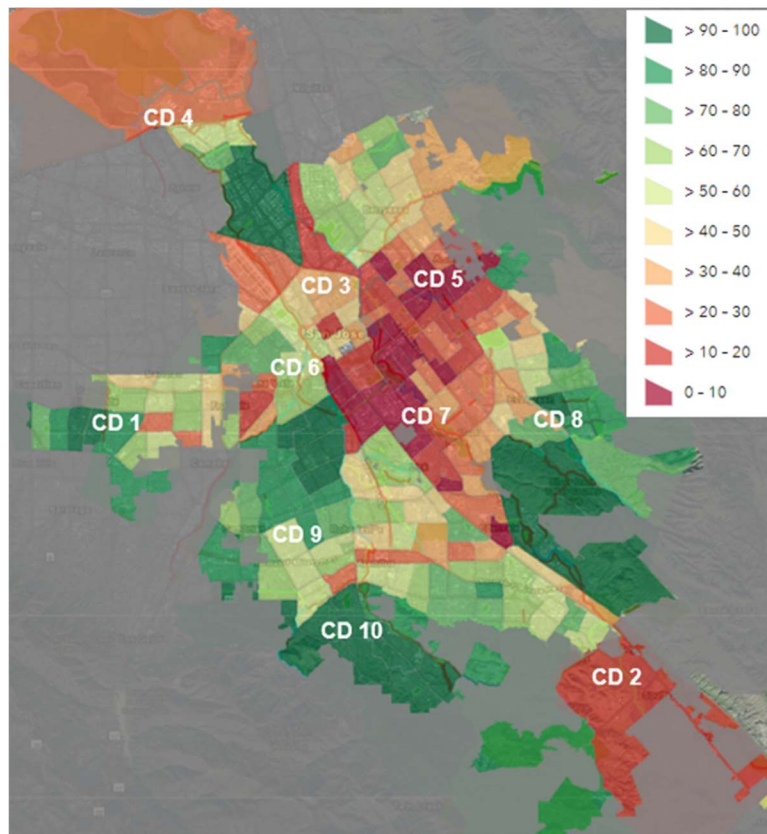


Fig. 4 Map of City neighborhoods with corresponding HPI percentiles.

The PCA results highlight that the highest HPI neighborhoods do not necessarily have the highest scoring parks by PCA score, indicating that lower HPI areas like Districts 3 (28%), 5 (16%), and 7 (25%) are benefiting from targeted equity-based enhancements to sustain high standards of maintenance and accessibility for all residents. For example, PRNS is undertaking turf renovation projects at Backesto Park in District 3, LoBue Park in District 5, and Tully Community Ballfields in District 7.

Council District	Avg Overall PCA	Avg HPI
1	88.3%	64%
2	90.1%	56%
3	89.7%	28%
4	85.3%	54%
5	88.1%	16%
6	84.1%	65%
7	87.0%	25%
8	87.7%	55%
9	89.1%	66%
10	85.0%	76%

Table 2 presents the PCA score alongside the average HPI percentile by Council District, offering insights into the relationship between health equity indicators and park condition assessments across different areas of the City for 2024.

Census tracts with an HPI percentile of 9.9% or less had an average PCA score of 90.4%, reflecting well-maintained parks despite more challenging conditions. Table 3 shows the efforts of park maintenance to prioritize resources in lower HPI neighborhoods. Parks in the lower 50th percentile averaged 87.9%, up from 87.1% in 2023 despite having a lower citywide overall PCA in 2024.

HPI%	Avg Overall PCA 2023	Avg Overall PCA 2024
9.9% or less	88.4%	90.4%
10-19.9%	89.5%	86.9%
20-29.9%	87.6%	87.7%
30-39.9%	83.5%	85.1%
40-49.9%	86.4%	89.3%
50-59.9%	83.3%	83.8%
60-69.9%	92.8%	89.3%
70-79.9%	88.0%	85.5%
80-89.9%	90.0%	88.9%
90-99.9%	89.3%	87.7%

Table 3 Average PCA score in 10% increments of HPI percentiles.

Trails and Trail Condition Assessment (TCA) Pilot

San José boasts one of the largest urban trail networks in the nation, with 65 miles of trails developed and open to the public. The system is divided into three distinct categories, each offering a unique experience for residents and visitors:

1. **Core Trails** – Provide extensive pathways for both recreational use and daily commuting.
2. **Edge Trails** – Create connections to nature and open space, offering peaceful recreational experiences.
3. **Hiking Trails** – Feature steep inclines and sweeping valley views, providing a more strenuous outdoor adventure.

These trails serve dual purposes, acting as vital transportation corridors while also supporting recreational activities. With over 3,000 daily users, regular maintenance is essential to ensure trails remain safe, clean, and accessible. To this end, PRNS staff perform weekly inspections to remove litter and debris, maintain tree and weed clearance, and address other basic upkeep needs.

PRNS also conducts an annual trail user count and survey. In 2024, PRNS collected 535 survey responses. Health remained the top reason for trail use, cited by 60% of users. Nearly 80% agreed that proximity to trail positively impacts their choice of

residence. Results showed that challenges to trail use include inadequate shade, limited parking, unavailable water fountains, and fast motorized bicycles. A major concern was the presence of unhoused individuals near trails, along with associated issues like off-leash dogs, glass, graffiti, and debris, which created feelings of unsafety. Suggestions for increased trail usage and satisfaction included better garbage removal, quicker cleanup after flooding, more water fountains, seating, and continued safety patrols by the San Jose Conservation Corps.

PRNS has taken significant steps to address these safety concerns. Bollards and gates have been installed at key access points along Guadalupe River Park & Gardens, from Hedding Street to Coleman Avenue and other locations, to deter unauthorized vehicles and manage encampments. Additionally, the PRNS established a “No Return Zone” along a stretch of Guadalupe River Trail to prohibit re-encampment and continued one-time funding for the San José Police Department’s Trail Patrol Program that deploys Police Officers on bikes three to four days per week to have a focused law enforcement presence. These enhancements reflect the City’s commitment to maintaining and improving the quality, accessibility, and safety of San José’s trails for all users.

This year, PRNS drafted Trail Maintenance Standards (Attachment D) and launched a pilot Trail Condition Assessment (TCA) program to ensure standardized trail maintenance. The pilot assessed eight trail reaches in CD 1, 3, 4, 6, 7, 8, 9, and 10 across ten categories: Aesthetics, Benches, Deterrents, Drinking Fountains, Landscaping, Pavement, Striping, Vegetation, Walls and Gabions, and Waste Receptacles. The Overall average across these eight reaches was 76.4%. Three Creeks – Reach 3 (Coe Ave to Broadway Ave) had the highest score at 97.9% and Thompson Creek – Reach 1 (Tully Rd to Quimby Rd) had the lowest at 33.3%. Looking at the categories across all reaches Waste Receptacles scored the highest (100%) and Aesthetics the lowest (57.1%).

Reach	CD	Length (miles)	
Three Creeks - Coe Ave to Broadway Ave	6	0.17	97.9%
Saratoga Creek - Bollinger Rd to English Dr	1	0.87	90.6%
Albertson Parkway - Cresta Vista Dr to Curie Dr	10	0.40	90.5%
Guadalupe River - San Carlos St to Woz Way	3	0.80	84.5%
Guadalupe River - Chynoweth Ave to Blossom Hill Rd	9	0.84	83.3%
Coyote Creek - Tully Rd to Idlewood Dr	7	0.51	72.9%
Penitencia Creek - Jackson Ave to Hwy 680	4	0.32	58.3%
Thompson Creek - Tully Rd to Quimby Rd	8	0.86	33.3%

Table 4 presents the pilot overall trail condition assessment (TCA) score for eight reaches as well as their corresponding Council District and reach length.

Trail Category	
Waste Receptacle	100.0%
Landscaping	93.5%
Vegetation	92.9%
Deterrents	91.7%
Pavement	87.5%
Benches	75.0%
Drinking Fountains	75.0%
Walls	73.3%
Striping	62.5%
Aesthetics	57.1%

Table 5 presents the overall category scores across all of the assessed trail reaches.

The next steps include debriefing with staff who participated in the pilot and refining the survey tool before expanding the TCA across all trail segments next year.

COORDINATION

This memorandum was coordinated with the City Attorney's Office and the City Manager's Budget Office.

/s/

Jon Cicirelli

Department Director

Parks, Recreation and Neighborhood Services

For questions, please contact Torie O'Reilly, Division Manager of Parks, at Torie.O'Reilly@sanjoseca.gov.

ATTACHMENTS

Attachment A – Park Maintenance Standards 2023: <https://www.sanjoseca.gov/home/showdocument?id=81364>

Attachment B – 2024 Park Condition Assessment Scores by Park

Attachment C – 2024 Park Condition Assessment Analyses

Attachment D – DRAFT Trail Maintenance Standards