



Memorandum

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

SUBJECT: Sports Fields Use and Equity Status Report

DATE: May 27, 2025

Approved

Date:

6/4/2025

RECOMMENDATION

Accept the status report on the use of the City's sports fields, including efforts to increase equitable access to them.

BACKGROUND

The Department of Parks, Recreation and Neighborhood Services (PRNS) strives to create healthy communities that inspire belonging by connecting people through parks, recreation, and neighborhood services for an active San José. Sports play a key role in an active, healthy city. Youth sports foster critical life skills such as teamwork, discipline, accountability, and self-esteem while promoting physical and mental health in a safe environment. Adult sports programs provide essential opportunities for physical activity and social engagement, which strengthen community ties and enhance well-being.

PRNS seeks to meet the sporting needs of the City's residents by operating several sports facilities and providing access to 110 sports fields and 104 sports courts for the community.¹ These facilities, fields, and courts serve users from across the city and region but do not meet the huge demand for places where San José's youth and adults can gather and play sports. An October 2008 Community Sports Field Study commissioned by PRNS revealed the total number of sports fields in San José parks to

¹ PRNS operates the Arcadia Ballpark softball complex and the Lake Cunningham Action Sports Park for bicyclists and skaters, and supports the operation of the Police Activities League (PAL) stadium complex that is managed by the Police Activities League nonprofit organization. PRNS is also planning for the reconstruction of Columbus Park into a soccer complex. Before the Great Recession, PRNS also organized and operated sports leagues across the City, but now does so only at Arcadia Ballpark.

be significantly below standards established by the National Recreation and Park Association. With 94 fields available in 2008, the City was approximately 129 fields short of the national standard based on population. Since then, PRNS has added 16 sports fields to its inventory through new park and partnership development and now has 110 fields for baseball, softball and soccer.

Of the City's 110 sports fields, 33 are not reservable and are open to first-come first-serve play daily. However, many users want to know that a field will be available when they can play, so PRNS makes the remainder available for reservation. This means more than two-thirds of City sports fields are primarily available for organized groups to reserve them in advance and pay for their use.

Citywide Sports Program Field Reservations

The PRNS Citywide Sports Program administers the field reservation program and plays a critical role in meeting the sporting needs of the community by offering recreational, athletic, cultural, educational, and social opportunities to residents through the use of reservable sports fields. The program provides organizations with the opportunity to reserve time on the City's 77 reservable sports fields (11 synthetic and 66 natural turf) . The reservation program works as follows:

- The Citywide Sports Program has two reservation seasons, Spring/Summer, and Fall/Winter. The program accepts applications up to three and a half months prior to the beginning of the following season.
- Staff categorizes user groups to ensure fair and prioritized access:
 - Type I includes internal City programs, seniors, adaptive programming, and nonprofit resident youth organizations (about 66%-80% of permits in any year).
 - Type II consists of for-profit youth and resident adult groups (about 20%-25% of permits).
 - Type III includes non-resident groups, both for-profit and nonprofit, serving youth and adult participants (about 5%-7% of permits).
- After each season's application due date, staff screens applications for authenticity and prioritizes them based on their user type. Staff makes field space available to Type I user groups with any remaining field capacity then available for Type II and then Type III.
- When multiple organizations in the same priority category request to use the same field on the same or similar dates and times, they are given an opportunity to try to reach an agreement on how to share use. When applicants cannot reach agreement, staff hosts a virtual field allocation meeting where staff uses a randomized "draft" to allow groups to pick dates and times. The field allocation

process transitioned to virtual meetings in 2020, a shift that has garnered high satisfaction ratings for its convenience, ease, accessibility, and efficiency.

- Once all user dates and times are coordinated, staff issues permits and invoices for final payments.
- User groups may request changes, after which staff will revise permits and seek adjusted payments. Further details can be found in Attachment A, *Field Use Policy & User Guidelines for Reserving Sporting Fields & Courts*.

Throughout the year, Citywide Sports Program staff accept additional applications; create new or revised permits; monitor field use with part-time Field Marshals (Recreation Leaders); conduct field audits; provide oversight of contracts with partners such as five local little leagues with homefield agreements; coordinate with multiple school districts and schools for joint use fields; determine daily field playability based on weather conditions to ensure safety and quality field conditions; and coordinate with parks maintenance staff to provide field maintenance.

ANALYSIS

Initial Assessment of Sports Field Policies

In recent years, there has been a growing awareness of inequity in youth sports. Participating in youth sports has become increasingly more expensive and many cities make their most desirable fields available for rentals and reservations at a high cost to recoup large capital expenditures and save for future turf replacement and maintenance. PRNS, like other agencies across the region and nation, has recognized that some residents may be unable to access the most sought after and quality sports fields in San José that the Citywide Sports Program makes available to user groups for a fee.

In alignment with the PRNS ActivateSJ strategic plan's Guiding Principle of Equity & Access and the City's racial and social equity initiatives, PRNS has made a concentrated effort to evaluate its reservation system and policy. In February 2020, former Councilmember Jimenez submitted a City Council Policy Priority nomination for Equity in Sports Fields Rentals.² This proposal was initiated due to community concerns of equitable access to sports fields and that non-resident groups were inappropriately representing themselves as resident to gain advantages. Additionally, communities expressed a need for clearer processes, assurance of inclusion for all residents, an evaluation of appropriate criteria for San José residency rates and for-profit versus

² Councilmember Jimenez's nomination can be found on pages 16 and 17 of the packet of Council Policy Prioritization nominations found here:

<https://sanjose.legistar.com/View.ashx?M=F&ID=8087635&GUID=9EDFBFFB-C59F-4DE2-A8A4-4605132A2B02>.

nonprofit status, and priority setting for different user groups. The COVID-19 pandemic delayed staff's policy evaluation work.

In 2021, the Citywide Sports Program began a process improvement project to critically review and improve the field reservation process and policies through the careful examination of program data, industry standards, and stakeholder and community engagement. The program also began working to improve communication and transparency to the organizations PRNS serves. Staff assembled a task force that included multiple staff from neighboring municipalities. This task force sent out surveys to user groups, reviewed existing City of San José policies as well as those of other similar agencies, held one on one discussions with Council Offices, and conducted community meetings with residents and user groups.

After thoroughly reviewing all collected information, the task force made key recommendations and learned key lessons for improvement that were implemented in 2022. These included:

- Keeping rental fees affordable to support equitable access;
- Reinforcing the 75% residency threshold for resident priority access;
- Implementing an online application system through SimpliGov, which streamlined field reservations and program participation;
- Revising user priorities to include senior and adaptive programs in Type I alongside resident youth;
- Adjusting the field allocation structure to:
 - Establish transparency in the allocation process.
 - Recognize that some groups serve significantly more participants.
 - Disincentivize groups from creating fictitious related parties to submit additional field applications;
- Establishing two-hour time blocks for synthetic turf field reservations to:
 - Maximize playable time.
 - Reduce permit adjustments that lead to unused field time.
- Enhancing the verification process for nonprofit status to ensure that qualifying organizations receive priority access and reduced fees (e.g., verifying nonprofit status and confirming the organization's actual existence);
- Strengthening compliance enforcement by developing briefing sheets to document prescribed methods for addressing non-compliance with Citywide Sports Program policies;
- Enforcing consequences for organizations that violate Citywide Sports Program policies or attempt to game the system; and
- Improving communication timeliness and completeness to improve field utilization.

Stakeholders primarily gave positive feedback about the process improvement project. The improvements translated into financial results, with the program generating nearly twice its pre-pandemic revenue. Customer service has been a critical component to the program's progress.

Citywide Sports Revenue from Fiscal Year 2018-2019 through March 2025

Fiscal Year	Revenue
2018-2019	\$1,188,989
2019-2020 (COVID-19 impacts)	\$776,515
2020-2021 (COVID-19 impacts)	\$461,899
2021-2022	\$1,786,279
2022-2023	\$1,819,042
2023-2024	\$2,101,567
2024-2025 (Through March 2025)	\$2,044,193

The increase in revenue reflects staff's progress in maximizing field use among users. As shown in the tables below, the numbers of user groups and permits issued have varied over time but their variations have not affected revenue collection. Staff believes efforts to enforce compliance with Citywide Sports Program policies, especially regarding fictitious related parties, and standardize two-hour time blocks for synthetic turf field use have mitigated growth in the number of user groups and permits.

User Group Types by Calendar Year (2019-2024)

User Types	2019	2020	2021	2022	2023	2024
User Type I	68%	80%	70%	70%	56%	65%
User Type II	23%	17%	23%	34%	34%	26%
User Type III	9%	3%	7%	6%	10%	9%
Total	155	89	149	178	155	169

Number of Permits Issued by Calendar Year (2019-2024)

User Type	2019	2020	2021	2022	2023	2024
User Type I	382	224	422	503	394	376
User Type II	151	52	110	123	127	127
User Type III	32	4	25	36	38	35
Total	565	280	557	662	559	538

Each of these organizations can have anywhere from 50 to 500 participants, with approximately 275 participants per organization, which equates to 25,000 or more sports participants on City sports fields and courts annually.

This large number of end-users relates to one of the challenges for the task force and staff: the lack of information on the demographics of end users of the City's reservable sports fields. To verify which groups are appropriately prioritized for residency, staff requires each group to submit rosters with user addresses. Historically, staff would evaluate each roster to ensure at least 75% of participants were residents, but otherwise would not validate or further analyze that information. To make informed program decisions on how to increase equitable access to sports fields, staff needed to better understand end-user demographics including but also beyond addresses.

Advancing Towards Sports Field Equity

While the financial results since the process improvement project have been exceptional, they also serve as a reminder that the Citywide Sports Program fundamentally rents City fields to groups that can afford to pay rent. An unanswered question from the process improvement project was how the Citywide Sports Program could assess whether user groups truly served low-income players from traditionally underserved areas of the City. Because the program's customers were leagues and groups, not the end users of the fields, collecting and validating end-user data required staff time that was well beyond the resourcing of the Citywide Sports Program in 2021 or 2022.

To support continued evaluation of sports field use and equity, PRNS requested and received approval for a temporary Parks, Recreation and Facilities Supervisor to provide the leadership and capacity needed to not only sustain past progress but also make further strides toward equitable field use. The position was first authorized in 2023-2024, filled in May 2024, and extended into FY 2024-2025.

With this added leadership and capacity, the Citywide Sports Program has taken many steps towards improving equitable access. To make information more accessible, the program translated key documents and materials into Spanish and is working towards Vietnamese translations by the end of 2025. This ensures that more residents can easily navigate the application process and understand policies, fostering greater inclusivity in the community. The program also strengthened partnerships, including a collaboration with the San Jose Earthquakes that supported a pilot program that benefited local neighborhoods. A User Type I temporary exemption pilot program was also introduced, providing small start-up sports leagues with higher-priority field access while they work toward securing nonprofit status. Additionally, in partnership with the Santa Clara County Probation Department and Empowering Our Community for Success (EOCS), staff has permitted free field use during non-peak times for Pro-Com, a program that offers organized sports opportunities for youth who may not otherwise have access.

Critically, with added capacity, the program prioritized further data aggregation and analysis. Staff identified in-house talent who created an automated process to analyze user group rosters for resident vs. non-resident addresses to help ensure the 75%

residency requirement is met for Type I priority. The information below includes raw data analyzed from the last two reservation cycles.

Citywide Sports Participant Breakdown in League Rosters Spring & Summer 2024

City	Count	Top SJ Zip Codes	Count
San José	10,697	95125	1,216
Campbell	242	95123	1,034
Santa Clara	208	95124	798
Cupertino	117	95127	613
Sunnyvale	98	95120	534
Milpitas	86	95136	480
Los Gatos	81	95129	416
Saratoga	71	95118	410
Morgan Hill	63	95111	394

Fall & Winter 2024-2025

City	Count	Top SJ Zip Codes	Count
San José	11,198	95125	1,661
Campbell	230	95123	1,011
Santa Clara	163	95124	769
Cupertino	128	95127	714
Sunnyvale	101	95111	511
Milpitas	94	95118	499
Los Gatos	93	95136	497
Saratoga	74	95120	472
Morgan Hill	63	95126	448

The automated process also vets the rosters for duplicate and potentially fictitious addresses (e.g., 123 Easy St.). By cross-referencing Census data at the Census Tract level, it produces a profile for each user group with implied demographics for each participant on the roster and overall Healthy Places Index (HPI) percentiles. The raw aggregated data above shows that many of the end users of sports fields are concentrated in a few Zip Codes.

With the individual participant implied demographics and user group profiles, staff estimated that for one reservation cycle about 25% of users came from neighborhoods with a 90-100 HPI percentile, another 25% came from neighborhoods with an 80-90 HPI percentile, and, overall, about 80% came from neighborhoods in the top half of HPI percentiles. That means, conversely, about 20% of sports field users came from neighborhoods in the bottom half of HPI percentiles. These results, while preliminary, pose provocative questions about who is served by reservable City sports fields. Staff

needs to do more data collection and analysis and community engagement to better understand what these preliminary results mean.

SJ4All Collaboration

To start answering these questions, in Fall 2024, the Citywide Sports Program began collaborating with the City Manager's Office of Racial and Social Equity (ORSE) and the SJ4All advisory group. As part of this effort, PRNS worked with ORSE and SJ4All to enhance community engagement by presenting an overview of the Citywide Sports Program, including its strengths, budget, and challenges, at an advisory group session. This presentation provided members with a high-level understanding of program details, constraints, and future projects.

The community engagement efforts resulted in valuable recommendations and feedback, particularly on increasing outreach and ensuring accessible methods for field access. Additionally, the PRNS team received input from SJ4All on expanding sports leagues in low-HPI areas and increasing the availability of neighborhood leagues. This feedback also highlights the challenge that the Citywide Sports Program does not create or support leagues on its own. Where leagues do not exist to serve residents, PRNS would need to seek partnerships to start them and consider what further policy changes can incentivize a new group to fill the gap.

This recent collaboration with SJ4All received overwhelmingly positive feedback, with community members valuing direct engagement. The Citywide Sports Program collaboration contributed to a rise in SJ4All's perception of City collaboration from 55% to 80%, highlighting the impact of meaningful community connections.

Equitable Sharing of Sports Courts

In recent years, there has been a rise in user conflicts at sports courts between tennis and pickleball players as there are not enough courts to meet the growing demand. Citywide Sports Program staff created a pickleball and tennis user survey and held community meetings to address challenges in court sharing, gathering stakeholder input to inform policies, programming, and a structured reservation process. The community survey, released to the public in August 2024, garnered 975 responses. Staff has since convened a working group of players from tennis and pickleball communities to brainstorm rules for court sharing and plans to pilot an approach in the coming months before bringing potential rules to the Parks and Recreation Commission for feedback. After court-sharing rules are implemented, staff also plans to add pickleball courts into the Citywide Sports Program reservation system allowing for reserved time for coaching, training, or league play.

Next Steps

The Citywide Sports Program is committed to mitigating barriers faced by lower-income and smaller organizations in accessing facilities while developing solutions that enhance inclusivity and promote participation across all demographics. Looking ahead, staff will focus on completing the following key next steps to sustain the momentum:

- Continuing and expanding community engagement to better understand who the program serves and why some people are not served by the program.
- Providing greater visibility and resources to underserved organizations.
- Evaluating potential program or policy changes to enable greater access, including the potential for open play programs.
- Evaluating the Citywide Sports Program's Field Marshal deployment model and budget, which is not sufficient for full coverage at reserved fields.
- Standardizing Little League contracts so each group has the same benefits and obligations.
- Continuing to oversee and ensure compliance for joint use agreements.

COORDINATION

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

/s/
Jon Cicirelli
Director of Parks, Recreation and
Neighborhood Services

For questions, please contact Shannon Heimer, Division Manager of Parks Destinations, Events and Sports, PRNS at Shannon.Heimer@sanjoseca.gov or (408) 608-9670.

ATTACHMENT:

Field Use Policy & User Guidelines for Reserving Sporting Fields & Courts