



Memorandum

TO: NEIGHBORHOOD SERVICES AND
EDUCATION COMMITTEE

FROM: Jon Cicirelli

SUBJECT: Park Ranger Annual Report

DATE: September 23, 2024

Approved

Date:

10/3/2024

RECOMMENDATION

Accept the annual report on the Park Ranger Program including updates on programming and hiring efforts.

BACKGROUND

The City of San José's Park Ranger Program (Program) is an integral part of the Department of Parks, Recreation and Neighborhood Services (Department). The Program's mission is to provide a safe, enjoyable park experience by protecting and educating the public; providing recreational opportunities; and protecting, preserving, and enhancing the natural and cultural resources of the City's parks, trails, and open spaces. This mission supports the Department's ActivateSJ 20-year strategic plan that was adopted in December 2019, which defines the Department's vision, mission and guiding principles of Stewardship, Nature, Equity & Access, Identity, and Public Life.

The Park Ranger Program has its roots in natural and cultural resource protection and visitor services. The City established the Park Ranger Unit in 1972 after a period in the 1960s and early 1970s when San José's park system expanded rapidly, and crime and vandalism were deterring residents from using parks. The City convened a community task force to identify strategies to address crime issues at Alum Rock Park and other neighborhood parks, which resulted in the recommendation of creating the Park Ranger Program.

Over the course of the Program's 50-year history, San José Park Rangers have worked to ensure a safe and enjoyable atmosphere in City parks. Park Rangers assist park users by providing information on appropriate park use and educating visitors on park rules and procedures. Park Rangers also render emergency medical care, conduct search and rescue operations, perform wildland fire prevention patrols, as well as provide initial attack wildland fire suppression in City parks. As stewards of the City's

natural and cultural resources, Park Rangers work to protect and monitor parklands, restore native vegetation, maintain rustic hiking trails, and educate the public on the cultural and natural history of San José.

Today's Program reflects the generalist service model that the City Council accepted on January 29, 2019.¹ The generalist service model includes and reinforces the importance of all aspects of the Park Ranger Program's mission. As generalists, Park Rangers serve as stewards of the park system, providing public safety services (wildfire suppression, medical response, search and rescue, and rules enforcement), protecting and preserving natural and cultural resources, and inspiring future generations to love and nurture nature. Park Rangers provide crucial maintenance and restorative work on natural and historical elements within City parks and offer nature-based programming for individuals of all ages and abilities to inspire a love for the outdoors and encourage access to the City's parks system. They educate and enforce state and local laws and enforce park rules so that park visitors can enjoy their visit, aiming to resolve situations with the lowest appropriate level of enforcement. Park Rangers are often first on scene for medical, fire and other emergencies in the parks they oversee.

ANALYSIS

In 2023-2024, by focusing on hiring and training, the Department made strides to begin a multi-year rebuilding process to reclaim the Park Ranger presence in the City's parks that the community, City Council and Department desire. Hiring and training will be the focus again in 2024-2025, as staffing levels remain the determining factor for the Program's scope and impact.

Due to staffing constraints, the Department has identified Alum Rock Park and Kelley Park as the primary focus and practical limit for regular Park Ranger patrol and projects at this time. Alum Rock Park features a unique geography with over 700 acres of isolated land and Kelley Park experiences frequent fire responses and is next to Happy Hollow Park and Zoo. In those identified areas, the primary focus has been on public safety, protecting natural and cultural resources, and interpretive programming and trainings. When staffing allows, Park Rangers add Emma Prusch Farm Park and Lake Cunningham to their patrol route. As the Program's staffing vacancies continue to be filled, the Department also plans to deploy Park Rangers regularly to Guadalupe River Park and St. James Park.

The Department recognizes the importance of community safety in City parks and trails and has sought and expanded interagency partnerships to foster safety while more Park Rangers are hired and trained. These include:

¹ <https://sanjose.legistar.com/LegislationDetail.aspx?ID=3835743&GUID=BAA74597-A7D5-4AA9-A5A8-34F488E838F8&Options=&Search=>

- Coordination with the San José Police Department's Trail Safety Patrol along Coyote Creek and Guadalupe River Trails;
- Coordination with Police Division Captains to proactively discuss parks, trails and open spaces in their Division and identify concerns and action plans;
- Coordination with the San José Fire Department to prioritize key locations for vegetation management in City parks, trails and open spaces;
- Collaboration with the San José Fire Department for RT-130, Wildland Fire Safety Training Annual Refresher, along with day to day coordination to suppress fires in and around parks where Park Rangers are deployed;
- Coordination with the California Department of Fish and Wildlife regarding potential environmental crimes and wildlife interactions;
- Management of private security contractors who close select gated regional parks at night and support with monitoring and reporting suspicious activities;
- Coordination with San José Conservation Corps for its trail patrol that addresses blight and vegetation overgrowth and reports safety issues to Park Rangers or 911; and
- Collaboration between the Department's Special Park Use Unit and Park Rangers to conduct targeted outreach in neighborhood parks impacted by unsanctioned special events by providing resources on the permitting process to vendors in multiple languages and addressing violations appropriately.

The sections below describe the Program's efforts and accomplishments concerning staffing, interpretive programming, resource management and public safety in 2023-2024.

Recruitment and Staff Retention

In 2023-2024, staffing remained a primary focus for the Park Ranger Program. The Program was funded for 22.46 full-time equivalent (FTE) Park Rangers and Park Ranger Assistants in 2023-2024 as portrayed in Table 1. The Department has consistently prioritized Park Ranger recruitment efforts that are ongoing and becoming more effective at hiring Park Rangers. As of September 2024, the Program's vacancy rate for full-time and benefited positions was 42%, down 14% from the same time last year when it was 56%. In spring and summer 2024, the Program hired two Park Rangers that will attend Peace Officer Standard Training (POST) Academy starting in January 2025 and then enter the in-house Field Training Program in spring 2025 with the goal of being able to conduct solo patrol by fall 2025. The Program also hired one external Senior Park Ranger who was previously a Park Ranger, promoted one Park Ranger to Senior Park Ranger, and promoted one Senior Park Ranger to Supervising Park Ranger while one Supervising Park Ranger retired.

While the hiring numbers improved, the personnel changed dramatically as several tenured Park Rangers left the City in 2022-2023, several existing Park Rangers

promoted into new roles with greater authority and the new generation of Park Rangers embarked on their journey focusing on the generalist model to serve the community.

Looking ahead, the Program will also focus on the three remaining leadership vacancies for Senior Park Ranger, Supervising Park Ranger, and Chief Park Ranger over the next few months. The Chief Park Ranger position is in the process of being reclassified from the general Parks Manager classification to a Chief Park Ranger classification to better reflect the peace officer role and command structure.

Table 1 – 2023-2024 Budgeted Positions for Park Ranger Program with Filled/Vacancy Status as of September 2024

Classification	Budgeted FTE	Filled FTE	Vacant FTE	Vacancy Rate	Notes
Chief Park Ranger	1.00	0.00	1.00	100%	Posting in late fall after reclassification
Supervising Park Rangers	2.00	1.00	1.00	50%	Posting in late fall
Senior Park Rangers	3.00	2.00	1.00	33%	Conducting interviews
Park Rangers Full-Time	11.00	6.00	5.00	45%	Conducting interviews, screening candidates
Park Ranger Assistant Part-Time Benefited	2.25	2.25	0.00	0%	Filled
Benefited FTE	19.25	11.25	8.00	42%	14% improvement from last year
Classification	Budgeted FTE	Worked FTE	Unused FTE	Unused Rate	Notes
Park Ranger/ Assistant Part-Time Unbenefited	3.21 (6,677 hours)	2.80 (5,821 hours)	0.41 (856 hours)	13%	7 part-time unbenefited Park Ranger/Assistants worked these hours.
Budgeted FTE	22.46				

To support with recruitment, the Program has worked with the Department’s Office of Communications to develop an in-depth recruitment page on the City of San José website. This page provides detailed information on the Program and the hiring process to inform and assist potential applicants on the hiring and training process. Critically,

Park Rangers maintained regular contact with potential applicants to cultivate their interest, including offering ride-alongs.

The Department is actively recruiting for qualified candidates. Staff has placed announcements nationwide targeting educational institutions, Park Ranger training programs, professional organizations, sites for returning Peace Corp and AmeriCorps members, and military veterans job boards, in addition to the standard job placement sites. Park Rangers are also attending community events and outreaching to community colleges to recruit more candidates. Once the applicants successfully pass the application and interview process, they are moved into the selection process that involves a POST background investigation, a polygraph test, a psychological evaluation and a medical evaluation. This process can take anywhere from four to six months to complete. The Department has multiple batches of applicants being processed at any given time. As one batch of applicants enters the background investigation phase, the next batch moves forward into the interview and selection process.

Table 2 provides details on recruitment activity in 2024. At the time of writing, five candidates were fulfilling conditions for employment or undergoing or being sent to background investigations, potentially filling all current Park Ranger vacancies.

Table 2 – 2024 Park Ranger Recruitment Activity

Park Ranger				
Application Batch	Batch 1*	Batch 2	Batch 3*	Batch 4*
Number of Applicants	116	75	108	55
Number Invited to Interview	9	9	16	7
Number to Background**	7	1	3	1
Number to Conditional Job Offer (Medical/Psychological Evaluation)***	4	0	N/A	N/A
Number to Final Offer	2	0	N/A	N/A
Number Hired	2	0	N/A	N/A

* Five candidates from Batches 1, 3 and 4 were fulfilling conditions for employment or undergoing or being sent to background investigations at the time of writing.

** If a candidate does not pass the background investigation or withdraws from the hiring process at that point, they will not receive a conditional job offer. From Batch 3, one of the three candidates sent for a background investigation withdrew and the other two are now being screened.

*** If a candidate does not pass the medical or psychological examination or withdraws from the hiring process at that point, they will not receive a final offer. There are two candidates from Batch 1 currently at this stage in the process.

Senior Park Ranger			
Application Batch	Batch 1	Batch 2	Batch 3*
Number of Applicants	14	51	67
Number Invited to Interview	4	5	6
Number to Background	1	1	N/A
Number to Conditional Job Offer (Medical/Psychological Evaluation)	1	1	N/A
Number to Final Offer	1	1	N/A
Number Hired	1	1	N/A

* Interviews for Batch 3 were being conducted at the time of writing.

Park Ranger Training Model

Once candidates complete the hiring process to become a Park Ranger, the focus shifts to training. New recruits will spend their first few months shadowing experienced Park Rangers to learn park operations, resource management, and interpretation before transitioning over to the Park Ranger Academy.

The Park Ranger Academy, which was developed in 2022 by the South Bay Regional Public Safety Training Consortium and Santa Clara County Parks and Recreation, focuses on the knowledge, skills, and abilities required of the generalist park ranger. The academy includes required law enforcement training as well as certifications for inland boating and rescue, wildland fire suppression, emergency medical response, crisis intervention training, and certified interpretive guide. The academy provides a solid foundation for San José Rangers and staff has coordinated with the academy instructors to add additional scenario-based training that is specific to the common situations San José Park Rangers address on a daily basis. Once the recruits complete the Park Ranger Academy, they will spend approximately 16 hours undertaking more in-depth safety scenario training with their defensive tools alongside experienced Park Rangers, as well as receive training on the Body Worn Cameras with which they are equipped. This will also serve as part of the ongoing in-service training for Park Rangers annually.

As the new recruits complete these required trainings, they are assigned a Field Training Officer and placed into the Field Training Program. Their Field Training Officer will carefully coach and supervise them through a 12-week program to help them transition from the classroom to the field. Field Training Officers are experienced Park Rangers or Senior Park Rangers who have completed the POST Field Training Officer course. When the Department finishes updating the Park Ranger Duty Manual, a comprehensive draft of which is nearly complete, the Field Training Manual used by Field Training Officers will be revised accordingly to reflect updated Program policies and comply with the most recent legal updates.

Park Ranger Assistant Classification and Sworn/Non-Sworn Differentiation

Sworn Park Rangers have law enforcement powers that non-sworn Park Rangers do not. To clarify the distinction between sworn and non-sworn Park Rangers, the City retitled the part-time Park Ranger classification to part-time Park Ranger Assistant in June 2023. With the change in classification, the Park Ranger Assistants now have a different set of uniforms and different markings on their patrol vehicles. While they do not have the same authority as a Park Ranger, they are still expected to provide visitor services, rules education, and perform other public safety functions, if they have undertaken the proper training, similar to the core generalist Park Ranger duties while working alongside the Park Rangers.

The Park Ranger Assistant is an entry-level position that allows candidates who have completed their first year of college to gain exposure to the role of a generalist Park Ranger. It is also a position that attracts retirees with previous Public Safety sector experience, which is a benefit to the Park Ranger Program. Park Ranger Assistants do not have law enforcement duties, but they can attend trainings for interpretive programming, park maintenance and resource management, search and rescue, emergency medical response, and wildland fire prevention and suppression. It is the Department's expectation that Park Ranger Assistants will gain the experience and skills needed to successfully promote to a full-time Park Ranger position, should they so desire and qualify.

Park Ranger Apprenticeship Development

The Department is continuing its efforts to develop a Park Ranger Apprenticeship Program, in cooperation with West Valley College. This will be the first of its kind for Park Rangers in the State of California. The Department is collaborating with staff from the Bay Area Community College Consortium (BACCC) to determine the coursework necessary to meet educational requirements in the classroom and onsite in City parks. West Valley College is supporting this effort by preparing the State application for approval of a formal apprenticeship program and is expecting to submit it to the State of California's Division of Apprenticeship Standards by early 2026. Because the development of an apprenticeship that serves community college students aligns with their mission, the BACCC staff are providing this support at no cost to the City. The vision is a multi-step apprenticeship program that supports candidates through college coursework and paid work experience as they become Park Ranger Assistants and then Park Rangers, should they so desire and qualify.

Interpretive Programming

The first two guiding principles of ActivateSJ are Stewardship and Nature. The Program continues to support ActivateSJ’s Nature benchmark to “enhance opportunities to connect people to nature through programs, scenic facilities and open spaces” by creating and implementing a nature-focused, interpretive education program. The priority is to ensure that Park Rangers have the proper training and materials needed to create equity-driven interpretive programs for all San José youth and families by ensuring access for underserved and special needs communities.

Park Rangers continued to support and lead hikes at Alum Rock Park and Kelley Park as part of the JUNTOS² Initiative (Santa Clara County Public Health Department’s prescription parks program, in which the Department is a key partner). In addition to those guided hikes, the Park Rangers also led hikes at other locations for schools, community centers, and summer camp programs. The Park Rangers staffed information tables at various events across the city, including the past three Viva CalleSJ, to educate the public about the Program and to support outreach efforts. To further expand opportunities for people to connect with nature through programming, the Park Rangers organized interpretive events such as “Touch a Truck” and “Many Hats of the Ranger” at community centers throughout the city. Table 3 outlines the number of events and estimated participants for 2023-2024. The Park Rangers also held 23 events in Council Districts outside of their main patrol area (Alum Rock Park and Kelley Park). The program aims to expand its interpretive programming to ensure equitable community access by holding events in lower HPI areas and throughout all Council Districts.

Table 3 – 2023-2024 Park Ranger Interpretive Programming

Type of Program	Number of Events	Estimated Participants
Tabling	14	2,463
Guided Hikes	10	152
Touch a Truck	16	430
Many Hats of the Ranger	5	79
Other Community Events	9	501
Total	54	3,625

Resource Management

As part of an intentional generalist service model, Park Rangers also conducted resource management projects to protect and improve parks for future generations. The Program focused on removing invasive plants and replacing them with native

² <https://scvmc.scvh.org/health-care-services/pediatrics/juntos-park>

species and also focused on vegetation management to reduce the fire fuel loads in Alum Rock Park and Kelley Park. This also provided fire breaks and defensible spaces between park property and private property. In 2023-2024, Park Rangers completed 1,152 hours of projects including removing storm damage debris, planting native plants, removing invasives plants, relocating wildlife (rattle snakes), and managing wildlife by closing trails/sections of the park to protect mountain lions and other wildlife (371.5 hours in resource projects and 780.5 in maintenance). The Program also worked on keeping approximately 13 miles of dirt trails safe and open to the public at Alum Rock Park where Park Rangers repaired the trails, removed fallen trees and removed debris caused by the landslides after winter storms.

Public Safety

As first responders, the San José Park Rangers often provide the initial public safety response to emergencies in their assigned area of responsibility. As shown in Table 4, the Program continued to respond to fires, largely along Coyote Creek and in and around Kelley Park. Two of the Program’s four type 7 wildland engine pumper trucks were decommissioned due to vandalism and age, reducing the Program’s capacity to provide an initial attack for wildland fires. The Department is working with Public Works to purchase new wildland engines. The total number of public safety responses has generally tracked with Program staffing levels over the past five years.

Table 4 – Public Safety Responses

Response	2019-2020	2020-2021	2021-2022	2022-2023	2023-2024
Fire Responses	78	156	76	70	35
Medical Events	71	55	82	74	69
Search and Rescue/Missing Person	5	11	5	2	4
Total	154	222	163	146	108

Park Rangers are also responsible for the protection of park resources and visitors. As peace officers, Park Rangers patrol park facilities and enforce applicable state and local laws. While it is the Department’s philosophy to use the lowest appropriate level of enforcement for violations, Park Rangers can issue citations, conduct investigations, collect and process evidence, and make arrests. Park Rangers work closely with the San José Police Department, the City Attorney’s Office, and the Santa Clara County District Attorney’s Office to prosecute serious or chronic violators. Park Rangers also work cooperatively with the San José Police Department on felony or violent crimes.

The statistics in Table 5 show the different enforcement activities the Park Ranger Program undertook in 2023-2024. Overall, nearly 97 percent of all law enforcement contacts resulted in warnings and/or education on park rules. The number of enforcement activities was lower in 2023-2024 than in prior years because, while

staffing levels improved, tenured staff who left in 2022-2023 were replaced by new Park Rangers who were not authorized to conduct law enforcement until fully trained.

Table 5 – Enforcement Activities

Activity	2019-2020	2020-2021*	2021-2022	2022-2023	2023-2024
Warnings	7,744	11,271	4,879	2,550	1,174
Criminal Citations	109	41	24	1	4
Crime Reports	120	89	33	42	30
Arrests	14	4	2	3	4
Total	7,987	11,405	4,938	2,596	1,212

* Includes an estimated 2,000 COVID-19 related warnings from early 2020-2021. The remainder of the increase in warnings is attributed to four Park Rangers completing academy and field training and transitioning to solo patrol as 2019-2020 ended.

Park Ranger 2024-2025 Work Plan (Next Steps)

In 2024-2025, the Department’s vision, mission and guiding principles in ActivateSJ will continue to shape the Park Ranger Program. The Department will continue to prioritize and focus on the Program’s staffing this next year along with training and investing in the next generation of Park Rangers. This is part of a multi-year rebuilding process to reclaim the Park Ranger presence in the City’s parks that the community, City Council and Department desire.

COORDINATION

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

/s/
 JON CICIRELLI
 Director of Parks, Recreation
 and Neighborhood Services

The principal authors of this memorandum are Shannon Heimer, Division Manager, PRNS and Huy Mac, Supervising Park Ranger, PRNS. For questions, please contact Shannon Heimer, Division Manager, PRNS, at Shannon.heimer@sanjoseca.gov.