



# Memorandum

**TO:** NEIGHBORHOOD SERVICES AND  
EDUCATION COMMITTEE

**FROM:** Jon Cicirelli  
Director

**SUBJECT:** PARK RANGER PROGRAM  
ANNUAL REPORT

**DATE:** October 12, 2023

Approved

Date

10/5/23

## **RECOMMENDATION**

Accept the Annual Report on the Park Ranger Program for Fiscal Year 2022-2023.

## **SUMMARY AND OUTCOME**

This report provides the Neighborhood Services and Education Committee with an update on the Park Ranger Program's 2022-2023 highlights and challenges and 2023-2024 Work Plan.

## **BACKGROUND**

The City of San José's Park Ranger Program is an integral part of the Department of Parks, Recreation and Neighborhood Services (the 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 ActivateSJ, the Department's 20-year strategic plan accepted by the City Council 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 resource and visitor protection. 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](#), and produced important results and highlights in 2022-2023. 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 teach 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**

### *Recruitment and Staff Retention*

In 2022-2023, staffing remained a primary focus for the Park Ranger Program. The program was funded for 22.93 full-time equivalent (FTE) positions in 2022-2023 shown in Table 1. As of September 2023, the program had a 56% vacancy rate in benefited positions, which was almost identical to the 57% vacancy rate reported in October 2022. While the rate barely changed, the personnel changed dramatically as several tenured Park Rangers left and several new Park Rangers were hired and began their training. Recent recruitment efforts have the potential to bring another influx of Park Rangers and Senior Park Rangers and the City continues to prioritize Park Ranger recruitment in what will be a multi-year rebuilding process.

***Table 1 – 2022-2023 Budgeted Positions for Park Ranger Program with Filled/Vacancy Status as of September 2023***

<b>Classification</b>	<b>Budgeted FTE</b>	<b>Filled FTE</b>	<b>Vacant FTE</b>	<b>Vacancy Rate</b>	<b>Notes</b>
Supervising Park Rangers	2.00	1.00	1.00	50%	Preparing for recruitment
Senior Park Rangers*	4.00	1.00	3.00	75%	Candidates in background
Park Rangers Full-Time	11.00	5.00	6.00	55%	Recruitment in progress detailed in Table 2.
Park Rangers Part-Time Benefited	2.25	1.50	0.75	33%	Offer accepted
<b>All Benefited Rangers</b>	<b>19.25</b>	<b>8.50</b>	<b>10.75</b>	<b>56%</b>	
<b>Classification</b>	<b>Budgeted FTE</b>	<b>Worked FTE</b>	<b>Unused FTE</b>	<b>Unused Rate</b>	<b>Notes</b>
Park Rangers Part-Time Unbenefited	3.68 (7,654.40 hours)	2.89 (6,003.25 hours)	0.79 (1,651.15 hours)	21%	8 part-time unbenefited Park Rangers worked these hours.
<b>Total Budgeted FTE</b>	<b>22.93</b>				

\* One vacant Senior Park Ranger was deleted in the 2023-2024 Adopted Operating Budget, along with 0.48 part-time Park Ranger FTE, to create a new Parks Manager position (working title “Chief Ranger”) in charge of the Park Ranger Program. Hence, as of July 1, 2023, there were two vacancies for Senior Park Ranger, which the table does not reflect as it portrays 2022-2023 staffing levels.

To support 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 has also promoted the \$3,000 Hiring Incentive and \$3,750 Referral Bonus Pilot Program, as well as a \$10,000 Lateral Park Ranger Hiring Incentive Pilot Program agreed to by the City and Peace Officer Park Ranger Association (POPRA) in June 2023.

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. The current recruitment seeks both Park Ranger and Senior Park Ranger candidates. Applicants are screened and moved into the selection process involving a background check, polygraph as well as psychological and medical evaluations. As one group of applicants enters the background investigation phase, the next

group moves forward into the interview and selection process. Table 2 provides details on the current applicant and candidate status.

***Table 2 – 2023 Park Ranger Recruitment Activity***

<b>Application Batch</b>	<b>Batch 1</b>	<b>Batch 2</b>
<b>Number of Applicants</b>	41	57
<b>Number Interviewed</b>	6	5
<b>Number to Background</b>	3	pending
<b>Number to Conditional Job Offer</b>	pending	pending
<b>Number to Medical and Psychological Evaluation</b>	pending	pending
<b>Number to Final Offer</b>	pending	pending
<b>Number Hired</b>	pending	pending
<b>Expected Start of Academy</b>	January 2024	
<b>Expected Solo Patrol</b>	Starting fall 2024	
<b>Number Offered Park Ranger Assistant</b>	1	pending

*Park Ranger Training Model*

Once candidates complete the hiring process to become Park Rangers, the impetus shifts to training. Starting with training for Park Rangers hired in late 2022, the Department shifted away from utilizing a police academy model to a new Park Ranger-specific academy. This academy, developed 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. Following the academy, candidates are placed into the Field Training Program. Their assigned training officers then carefully coach and supervise them through this 12-week program to help them transition from the classroom to the field. The field training officers are experienced Park Rangers or Senior Park Rangers who have completed the Peace Officer Standards and Training (POST) Field Training Officer course.

*Park Ranger Assistant Classification and Sworn/Non-Sworn Differentiation*

With the approval of an agreement between the City and POPRA in June 2023, the City retitled the classification for part-time Park Ranger to part-time Park Ranger Assistant to differentiate the sworn (Park Ranger) and non-sworn (Park Ranger Assistant) roles with different titles. The City and POPRA also agreed there should be an appropriate pay differential between sworn and non-sworn roles, and the pay ranges for Park Ranger and Senior Park Ranger were increased by five percent (not including general wage increases in the agreement). The retitled classification and differentiated pay ranges took effect with fiscal year 2023-2024.

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 the generalist park ranger. Park Ranger Assistants do not have a law enforcement function but can attend trainings and participate in interpretation, 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 move to full-time Park Ranger positions, should they so desire, as they complete their college education.

### *Park Ranger Apprenticeship Development*

The Department is continuing its efforts to develop a Park Ranger Apprenticeship Program, in cooperation with West Valley College. The Department is currently working with staff from the Bay Area Community College Consortium (BACCC) to assist in preparing and submitting for approval a formal apprenticeship program to the State of California's Division of Apprenticeship Standards. 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.

### *Current Operation Status*

With persistent short staffing, the program continues to focus on daily staffing patterns for full-time Park Rangers in Alum Rock Park and Kelley Park. Staff identified these locations based on Alum Rock Park's unique geography and isolation and Kelley Park's frequency of fire response and the proximity to Happy Hollow Park and Zoo, one of the Department's most popular destinations. On Wednesdays, when the program's two districts (full-time staff working Sunday to Wednesday or Wednesday to Saturday) are on duty, Park Rangers have more capacity to work on resource projects, interpretive programming and training. The Department is using the services of private security contractors to backfill the role of Park Rangers in some cases, as in the need for staff to close gated regional parks at night. At present staffing levels, these are the practical limits of the Park Ranger Program.

The Mayor's March 2021 Budget Message, as approved by the City Council, directed the City Manager to prioritize and fill the remaining vacant Park Ranger line-level positions and dedicate two of those newly filled positions to Guadalupe River Park. As noted above, if current candidates successfully complete the background process, the Department anticipates they would start in a Park Ranger academy in January 2024, then go through field training to prepare for solo patrols starting in the Fall 2024. Service priorities remain Alum Rock Park, Kelley Park, Lake Cunningham and Emma Prusch Farm Park. Prior to the Great Recession and staff layoffs in 2008, the Guadalupe River Park was staffed with 3 full-time Park Rangers and a part-time benefited Park Ranger and was supported by the San José Police Department's Parks Enforcement Unit and the Horse Mounted Unit that were disbanded as budget balancing measures over the past two decades. Combined, these resources had a regular presence in the

Guadalupe River Park from Woz Way to Highway 880. Today, the Guadalupe River Park Trail extends from Virginia St. to Gold Street in Alviso, more than doubling the land to cover, and there are no dedicated Park Rangers in light of the staffing situation and operational priorities.

### *Program Service Delivery Changes and Highlights*

Despite short staffing, the Park Ranger Program had notable accomplishments in 2022-2023 including:

- *Park Ranger Policies:* ActivateSJ's foundational guiding principle of Stewardship includes a benchmark for the completion and implementation of the Park Ranger Duty Manual as part of a focus on the safety of parks and facilities. This up-to-date manual addresses the needs of the Department and will assure the program complies with the most recent legal updates. The Department is reviewing a comprehensive draft with the Office of Employee Relations.
- *Body Worn Cameras:* Recognizing the importance of promoting transparency and trust within the community, the City and POPRA agreed to the San José Park Ranger Body Worn Camera Policy prior to completing a full duty manual. Staff has contracted with a vendor for hardware, software and video storage and training for Park Rangers in the use of the cameras. The Department expects to complete training and have cameras in service by October 2023.
- *Public Safety:* During December 2022 and January 2023, Park Rangers responded with parks maintenance staff to flooding activities from the atmospheric river events at Alum Rock Park. The flooding caused serious infrastructure damage resulting in a closure of the park for a prolonged period of time. Park Rangers provided numerous guided media tours of the damaged areas to help the public understand the severity of the damage.

### *Interpretative Programming*

The first two guiding principles of ActivateSJ are Stewardship and Nature. The Park Ranger 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 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 and Kelley Park as part of the JUNTOS Initiative (Santa Clara County Public Health Department's prescription parks program, in which the Department is a key partner). The program has also partnered with the National Alliance for Mental Illness (NAMI) for a series of guided hikes and organized a First Responder Community Day with police, fire and search and rescue units for PRAGNYA (Preparing Resources and Alliances Galvanizing Neurodiversity Acculturation) at Kelley Park. Park

Rangers also staffed a booth highlighting ranger programming and information at two Viva CalleSJ events and presented programs and led guided hikes for schools and summer camps. Across the year, Park Rangers held 26 interpretive programs with 2,789 participants, in addition to the two tabling events at Viva CalleSJ which contacted an estimated 4,200 people. In total, Park Rangers provided 28 interpretive events with an estimated 6,789 participants. Non-sworn part-time Park Rangers (now Park Ranger Assistants) and full-time Park Rangers volunteering for overtime were key contributors to staffing these community programs.

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. Of note, Park Rangers continued to work along the Mineral Springs Loop Trail at Alum Rock Park removing obstructions, overgrown vegetation, and hillside erosion, fallen rock, soil and debris obstructing pathways and stonework. The team continues to work on clearing and cleaning the mineral spring grottos and clearing the drains to allow flow. The Park Ranger Program also recently revised and updated the Department's Mountain Lion Management and Coexistence Plan.

Public Safety

San José Park Rangers often provide the initial public safety response to emergencies in their assigned area of responsibility. As shown in Table 3, in 2022-2023, fire responses continued to challenge the Department, largely due to fires along Coyote Creek and in and around Kelley Park. In 2021, a type 7 Fire Engine was vandalized beyond repair. Funding to replace this vehicle was approved during the 2023-2024 budget process, which will aid in the program's response to fire incidents. Park Ranger-involved medical event responses remained consistent with prior years and search and rescue/missing person events declined, likely in part due to Alum Rock Park's extended closure after winter storms and car-free reopening since then.

**Table 3 – Public Safety Responses**

Type of Response	2018-2019	2019-2020	2020-2021	2021- 2022	2022-2023
Fire Responses	33	78	156	76	70
Medical Events	84	71	55	82	74
Search and Rescue/Missing Person	12	5	11	5	2
<b>Total</b>	<b>129</b>	<b>154</b>	<b>222</b>	<b>163</b>	<b>146</b>

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 level of enforcement for violations when appropriate, 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 4 show the different enforcement activities the Park Ranger Program undertook in 2022-2023. Overall, nearly 99 percent of all law enforcement contacts were closed out with warnings and/or education on park rules. The number of enforcement activities was lower in 2022-2023 than in prior years as staffing fell due to attrition and as tenured Park Rangers who left were replaced by new Park Rangers not authorized to conduct law enforcement until fully trained.

***Table 4 – Enforcement Activities***

<b>Enforcement Activity</b>	<b>2018-2019</b>	<b>2019-2020</b>	<b>2020-2021</b>	<b>2021-2022</b>	<b>2022-2023</b>
Warnings	4,265	7,744	11,271*	4,879	2,550
Criminal Citations	110	109	41	24	1
Crime Reports	80	120	89	33	42
Arrests	48	14	4	2	3
<b>Total</b>	<b>4,503</b>	<b>7,987</b>	<b>11,405</b>	<b>4,938</b>	<b>2,596</b>

\* 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 2023-2024 Work Plan (Next Steps)*

In 2023-2024, the Department’s vision, mission and guiding principles in ActivateSJ will continue to shape the Park Ranger Program. The program’s staffing levels, which remain near their lowest since the Great Recession, drive the Department to continue to prioritize Park Ranger recruitment and training, in the context of what will be a multi-year rebuilding process to reclaim the Park Ranger presence in City parks that the community, City Council and Department desire.

A key step in the rebuilding process will be filling supervisory and senior positions to supervise, lead and mentor less experienced employees who now make up a majority of the program. Candidates for Senior Park Ranger are currently in the background process, and the Department is preparing a recruitment for Supervising Park Ranger. Additionally, in the 2023-2024 Adopted Operating Budget, the Department added a Parks Manager position that will serve as its first ever “Chief Ranger” by deleting a vacant Senior Park Ranger and 0.48 part-time Park Ranger FTE. This position will report directly to a Division Manager for Parks and oversee the two Supervising Park Ranger positions that currently independently manage a district (full-time staff working Sunday to Wednesday or Wednesday to Saturday are in separate districts) and provide uniformity and consistency across the week and an appropriate command structure for incident response. The Chief Ranger will provide procedural decision-making and protocol, coordinate with external agencies, ensure training and certificates are current, and provide expertise in laws and regulations that affect the Park Ranger Program. The Department will utilize a third-party consultant to proactively recruit potential candidates for this critical role.

October 12, 2023

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## **COORDINATION**

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

/s/

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Director of Parks, Recreation  
and Neighborhood Services

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