

Yes on Parks!

February 11, 2025

Chairman Ortiz and Vice Chair Doan
Councilmembers Cohen, Candelas and Campos

RE: NSE 2/13/25 Item 1

Councilmembers,

San Jose Parks Advocates is an alliance of park passionate people who live throughout the city. The mission of our park alliance is to champion the public's interest in outstanding parks, recreation, and open spaces - key to making San Jose a healthy, vibrant and sustainable city for all. Our vision of a great San Jose is one with both great parks and great community and recreation centers.

The Business Intelligence (BI) serves staff well in managing limited resources. Frontline maintenance staff is to be commended for their heroic efforts. The Park Condition Score is a limited point-in-time measurement tool that serves for council accountability. **However, the new lower 2021 scoring standards masks a fundamental problem—San Jose's parks are inadequately funded.**

Key points:

- **Lower Standards with Higher Scores Mask Problems.** The park maintenance standards were lowered in 2021 to match current funding levels. Maintenance staff was unable to reach acceptable levels on the prior standards, so standards were reduced. When old-timers say "Parks were better maintained in the past" it is not just the rosy glow of memory.
- **Funding Calculation Includes Historic Inequity.** Since about 2010, new parks came into the system with a budget calculation based on amenities and acreage. This budgeted amount is significantly higher than the amount allocated to older park acreage—which is the same no matter the amenities or usage levels. When this new method was implemented, the Budget Director promised to raise the city-wide "old" park funding level in phases over and above cost of living through several budget years to a level comparable to the new parks' allocation. This did not happen—institutionalizing underfunding.
- **More intense maintenance is needed in heavily used parks.** The funding formulas do not take into account that some parks are used so heavily that landscaping, playground and picnic equipment degrade rapidly requiring near constant inspection and intervention to maintain safety. Funding was established based on "typical" use, not the use that is seen where parks are the only outlet for those living in an apartment or with two or more families in a single housing unit.

- **Funding formulas don't address increased vandalism or camping or drug use.** Neither the new park calculation nor the old park calculations include the cost of steam-cleaning after campers live under the playground slide or the environmental remediation required to clean up human waste trenches dug by campers. Staff is forced to check for drug paraphernalia in some parks to make sure youth do not get a needle stick. Vandalism is more frequent: bathroom doors are torn off; toilets are stuffed with debris. When a playground is torched, specialized crews take away the debris but many regular workers are diverted to make the rest of the park presentable after the blaze—reducing the ordinary maintenance available to other parts of the system.
- **Increasing fire risks on undeveloped land are not funded.** Creek fires and brush fires are no longer rare. The change in climate has shortened the time frame before wild grasses are dry and ready to burn. To meet this critical unfunded need to address fire risk, landscape staff must be shifted to the urban/wildland boundary parks such as Alum Rock, Montgomery Hill, Guadalupe Oaks, Cathedral Oaks, Foothill, Basking Ridge, and Evergreen Parks, as well as all of the parks along the creeks. Meanwhile, their regular duties are not addressed timely and council offices receive calls about unmet needs in other parks.
- **Other unfunded costs—art.** The city's public art comes without supporting repair budget and many designs are incompatible with the fingers of children. This cost is not in the budget allocation.
- **Unanalyzed—Comparison to Competitors.** The PCA score gives an internal measure but does not compare San Jose to its economic competitors—the high growth, high-tech cities that are competing for workers. Staff should provide some indicators to the Council.

Summary

San Jose's park maintenance system is extremely fragile and is forced into a constant reactive mode. The current funding levels are inadequate in light of multiple societal and environmental factors combined with historic budgeting choices. **The current budget deficit does not change the reality that San Jose Parks need more maintenance dollars in order to**

- provide safe and welcoming parks and accompanying health benefits
- maintain the usability of the properties
- ensure that parks add economic value to their surrounding neighborhoods
- prevent the infrastructure backlog from growing.

Sincerely,

Jean Dresden
San Jose Park Advocate