



Memorandum

TO: NEIGHBORHOOD SERVICES AND
EDUCATION COMMITTEE

FROM: Jon Cicirelli

**SUBJECT: COMMUNITY GARDEN PROGRAM
STATUS REPORT**

DATE: October 24, 2022

Approved

Date

11/1/22

RECOMMENDATION

Accept a status report on the Community Garden Program including an overview of the program and opportunities for future growth.

OUTCOME

This report provides the Neighborhood Services and Education Committee with an overview of the City of San José Community Garden Program and informs Committee members on potential areas of growth.

BACKGROUND

Community gardens are places where individuals come together to grow a variety of fruits, vegetables, and herbs. They do this by renting plots of land within the garden to cultivate and harvest crops. Food is taken home to become part of household diet or shared with others in the community. The presence of a community garden in a neighborhood may help to reduce the impact of food deserts in low-income areas and allow residents greater access to nutritious food that is necessary to live a healthy life.¹

Community gardens have many benefits to the public and the environment in the communities they serve. In a society that is becoming increasingly disconnected from one another, community gardens create a sense of belonging and shared values among neighbors by providing opportunities for bonding, problem solving, and creativity through the use of their garden plots. Tending to gardens can teach participants new skillsets and enable inter-generational connections through the sharing of traditions. They reduce stress by creating an interactive space to be in

¹ Characteristics and Influential Factors of Food Deserts / ERR-140 Economic Research Service/USDA

nature and engage in physical activity. Interest in urban gardening and agriculture has grown in recent years, including in the City's program.²

The City of San José established a Community Garden Program in 1977 with the opening of its first garden, Nuestra Tierra Community Garden which opened with 235 plots and soon had a waiting list with 100 signatures. As of 2022, the program has grown to 21 community garden locations with 1,112 community garden plots and 997 active gardeners. Participants bring their knowledge and skills from many cultures and backgrounds. At least 14 different languages are spoken by San José community garden participants, and the City's community gardens reflect the diversity of the communities in which they are located. For example, as seen in Figure 1 at the Mayfair Community Garden, one can walk the pathways and see herbs and vegetables unique to individual cultures like epazote or ampalaya and those that are shared across cultures like amaranth, long beans, chayote, and nearly a hundred varieties of chili peppers.

Figure 1 - The Mayfair Community Garden Features Crops That Reflect the Local Community



The City of San José Community Garden Program is welcoming to all adult residents. The only eligibility requirements are that each gardener be a resident of San José and at least 18 years of age. At many of the gardens, plot space is in high demand. The program has a current cumulative

² Urban agriculture is "[c]ity and suburban agriculture [that] takes the form of backyard, roof-top and balcony gardening, community gardening in vacant lots and parks, roadside urban fringe agriculture and livestock grazing in open space." [\[EPA epa.gov\]](https://www.epa.gov/urban-agriculture)

citywide waitlist of 330 people. Plots are renewed on a year-to-year basis and available plots are issued as soon as they become vacant. Plots are priced on an annual basis, from January 1 to December 31 with an average registration cost of \$150.00 (\$12.50 per month) that is calculated based on an average of 43 cents per year per square foot of gardening space. The gardeners pay a percentage of their garden's water bill, in addition to their registration fee, based on the square footage they maintain. Plot sizes vary tremendously between gardens depending on layout, but the most common plot size for the program is about 200 square feet, which can typically produce food to accommodate a family of four.

Like all Department programs, the Community Garden Program is grounded in the Guiding Principles of the Department's strategic plan, ActivateSJ. Program staff emphasize the principle of "Stewardship" as caretakers of the land, and the Department ensures the sustainability of garden spaces for future use by strictly adhering to organic gardening principles, concepts, and practices that promote long-term healthy and viable soil conditions. The program promotes a connection with "Nature," another Guiding Principle, for many residents who may not have access to other green spaces and gardeners actively plant and grow according to weather conditions and the seasons, learning about nature's rhythm and cycles; the knowledge gardeners gain fosters appreciation for open spaces and the outdoors. With few requirements, the program strives to be welcoming to all, in the spirit of the principle of "Equity & Access," yet—as discussed below—staff recognizes that cost and limited garden space are barriers to participation for many in the community. "Identity", another guiding principle, is demonstrated by the uniqueness of each garden: A garden's identity is a combination of individual backgrounds and experiences that gardeners have and bring to the San José community. Finally, the program also supports the guiding principle of "Public Life" by creating gathering places for gardeners to come together and share meals and stories.

ANALYSIS

Program Overview

The City of San José hosts one of the largest community garden programs in the state of California. The Community Garden Program presently has a total of 1,112 garden plots at 21 locations across the City, with four locations opened in the past five years.³ A well-maintained garden in the program can yield an estimated one to two pounds of produce per square foot of plot space over the course of the growing season. The program has approximately 440,000 square feet of gardening space, meaning that the entire program might yield 440,000 pounds to 880,000 pounds of produce over one growing season. Some of the gardens, such as Wallenberg and Coyote Creek, have established a donation program that provides excess fresh produce to local organizations. The chart below lists each garden within the City, by Council District.

³ The 21st community garden, Alviso, is expected to open to the public in November 2022. There are no City community gardens in Council Districts 8 or 9.

Garden Name	Garden Location	Total Plots	Council District
Calabazas	Blaney Ave. and Danridge Dr	33	1
Pueblo de Dios	3257 Payne Ave.	27	1
Rainbow	Johnson Ave. and Rainbow Dr.	4	1
Discovery	Branham Lane E. and Discovery Ave.	40	2
Rusty Areias	5283 Snell Ave. (Martial Cottle Park)	46	2
Bestor	S. 6th St. and Bestor St.	10	3
Alviso	Tony P. Santos and Wilson Way	30	4
Berryessa	Cape Colony and Commodore Dr.	79	4
Cornucopia	S. King Rd. and Story Rd. (Emma Prusch Farm and Park)	48	5
El Jardin	S. King Rd. and Story Rd. (Emma Prusch Farm and Park)	80	5
Esther Medina	S. 31st St. and E. San Antonio St.	19	5
Mayfair	Kammerer Ave. and Sunset Ave.	116	5
Guadalupe	Walnut St. and Asbury St.	79	6
Hamline	Hamline St. and Sherwood Ave.	31	6
Jesse Frey	W. Alma Ave. and Belmont Way	35	6
Wallenberg	Curtner Ave. and Cottle Ave.	82	6
Coyote Creek	Tully Rd. and Galveston Ave.	76	7
Nuestra Tierra	Tully Rd. and La Ragione Ave.	105	7
Vietnamese Heritage	Roberts Ave. & Roberts Place	51	7
La Colina	Allegan Circle near Lean Ave.	91	10
Laguna Seca	Manresa Ct. and Bayliss Dr.	30	10

San José boasts a diverse population, and according to a recent survey of gardeners the community garden program reflects that diversity, as shown in Figure 2.⁴ Over time, each garden forms a tight knit community based on similarities in background and life experience. This is particularly true of the 68 percent of gardeners who are 55 and older, as shown in Figure 3, many of whom enjoy the opportunities for socialization the garden provides. This may be why over 75 percent of surveyed participants reported visiting their plot multiple times per week, making the City's community gardens busy places.

⁴ <https://data.census.gov/cedsci/profile?g=1600000US0668000>

Figure 2- Racial Demographics of Community Gardeners

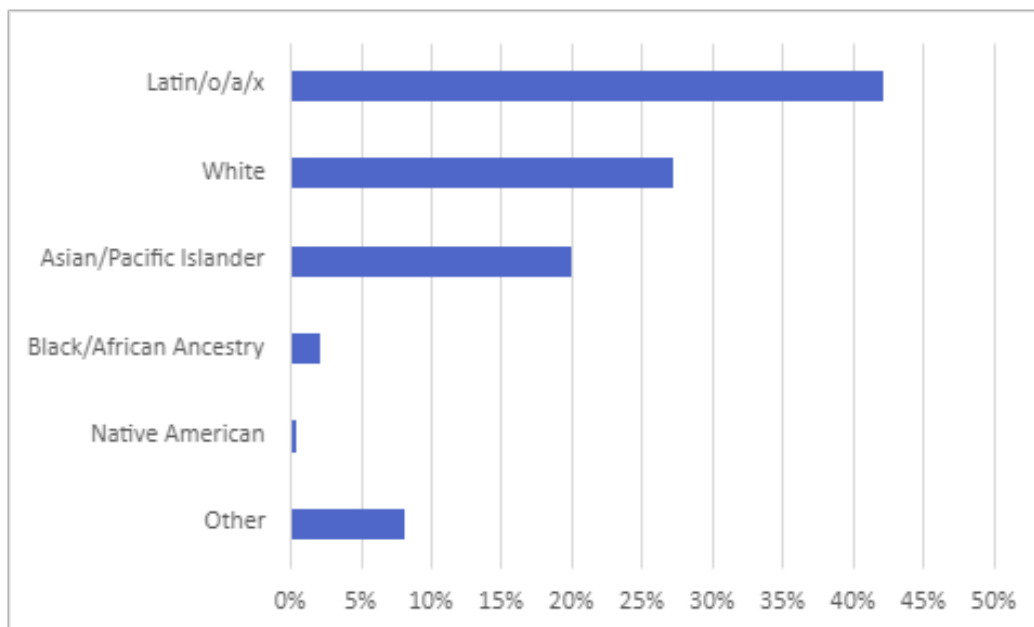
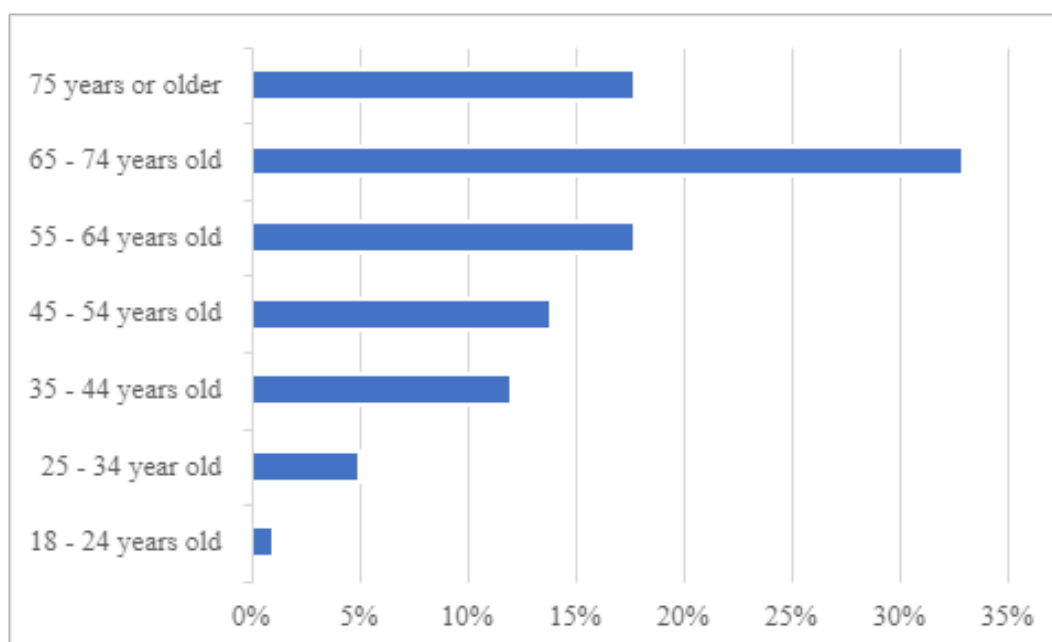


Figure 3- Age of Community Gardeners



According to the recent survey, gardeners participate in the program for a variety of reasons. Among 235 respondents, the top-ranking reason is to supplement their household with healthy food choices. Also important to gardeners, in rank order, are relaxation and mental health care,

physical activity and finally community engagement and socialization opportunities the program provides. All these factors are important and seamlessly work together to create a unique culture in each garden, where gardeners often help each other.

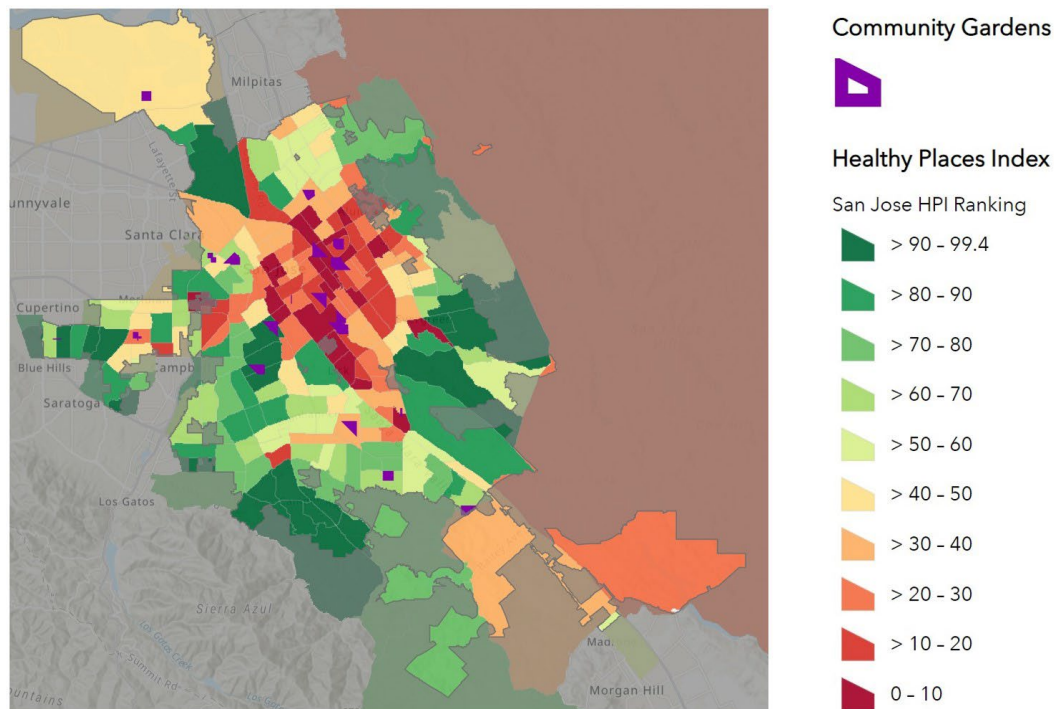
Unmet Needs and a Need for Growth

The need for the Community Garden Program in San José was never more evident than during the pandemic, as the community saw many families struggle to make ends meet. Particularly affected were members of the community and areas of the City already struggling with inequities. While many programs were nonoperational due to the shelter in place order, community gardens stayed open. Understanding that the program may be a main source of fresh food for many participants, the City determined it was necessary and allowable under public health orders to allow participants to continue utilizing their plots during the unprecedented time.

A recent analysis of garden locations found that 56 percent of City community gardens are in areas with a Healthy Places Index (HPI) score of less than 50, with 620 plots in areas with an HPI lower than 50 percent and 491 plots in areas with an HPI percentile higher than 50 percent.⁵ A low HPI score in a community can be an indicator that residents may not have easy access to nutritious foods or may lack the income to purchase these items on a regular basis. In the communities described, it is even more important for community members to have access to a community garden to provide the household with a low-cost source of fresh fruits and vegetables. Figure 4 maps the City's community gardens on a heat map of HPI scores for Census tracts.

⁵ The HPI tool evaluates the relationship between 23 identified key drivers of health and life expectancy at birth — which can vary dramatically by neighborhood. Based on that analysis, it produces a score ranking from 1 to 99 that shows the relative impact of conditions in a selected area compared to all other such places in the state. <https://www.healthyplacesindex.org/>.

Figure 4 – Community Gardens Overlaid with HPI Rankings for Census Tracts



Community gardens were essential during the pandemic and continue to be essential to communities which lack the ability to acquire fresh produce in other ways. However, the cost associated with renting a plot in a community garden can be a barrier to many in the community as even the low cost of the garden plot can be difficult to afford or out of reach. Currently, the program does not offer a scholarship for registration or plot fees, including water costs. Among the 235 respondents to staff's recent survey, 75 percent reported they would qualify for a scholarship based on the current Department eligibility criteria and would apply for a scholarship if it became available. Separately, the Mayfair Community Garden Manager, in partnership with the Mayfair Community Center, surveyed over 100 community members who indicated they wish to participate in the Community Garden Program but do not because of the cost. Additionally, many gardeners who did not renew for the current year (2022) stated that not renewing was because they could not pay the associated fees, which are expected to increase again in 2023 with rising water costs and water surcharges.

The cost barrier helps explain an apparent contradiction in the program: there are currently 330 people on waiting lists to join the program yet 115 plots remain vacant. Many residents on the waitlists prefer to garden in their local neighborhood and choose to stay on the waitlist rather than accept a plot elsewhere. Most residents on waiting lists are waiting for plots in gardens in communities with a HPI score above 50 (better than average social conditions that drive health among City neighborhoods), while the majority of vacant plots are in gardens where the HPI

score is less than 50. This strongly suggests that program may be inaccessible, due to cost-prohibitive fees, for residents who may be most at risk of food insecurity.

As noted above, many potential gardeners prefer to garden in their neighborhoods rather than elsewhere, but some areas currently lack a community garden. There is currently a community garden in eight of the ten City Council Districts; community members in Council District 8 and 9 need to go out of their district to participate in the City's program.

Moving Forward

With the rise in urban agriculture as communities see the economic, environmental, health and social benefits it provides, and unmet need seen in many communities in the City, the Department envisions an expanded role for the Community Garden Program. In 2016, recognizing a growing interest in and need for community gardens, the Department commissioned a Community Garden Program to examine opportunities to promote urban agriculture, health, community interaction, and neighborhood identity through an innovative expansion and improvement of the existing Community Garden Program.⁶

The study reviewed the program's administration, garden development, and operations. It included a summary report that provided information about the status of community gardens in 2016, best practices and trends from three successful and innovative community garden programs (Chicago Park District's Community Gardens in the Park Program; Seattle's Department of Neighborhoods, P-Patch Community Gardens Program; and Philadelphia's Department of Recreation program, Farm Philly), and recommendations for growing the program, identifying new sites, increasing the number of gardeners and improving operations.

The study concluded that "[w]hen compared to well-recognized programs in the cities of Philadelphia, Chicago, and Seattle, San Jose's Community Garden Program is confirmed to be a strong, well-organized program that provides a good inventory of gardens. However, the Program does not yet share the diversity of programs that are central to these other programs, nor does the Program have adequate staffing and budget to support strategic program expansion, development, and proper monitoring and administration." The study found that significant demand for garden plots suggests that increasing access to community garden plots in San José would better serve residents, and that, in addition to developing new gardens and garden plots, other opportunities to serve this need include improving the program's operations and modifying policies to provide more service and capacity to existing gardens, as well as implementing best practices and innovations that have been successful in similar programs. Recommendations for staff to consider were:

⁶ <https://www.sanjoseca.gov/home/showpublisheddocument/90551/638013584856000000>

- Growing the Program
 - Develop Measurable Goals for Level of Service;
 - Increase Level of Service Provided by Existing City Gardens through Changes in Programming;
 - Consider Collaboration and Information Sharing with Community Gardens that are provided by Private or Nonprofit Organizations;
- Identify New Sites
 - Formalize Site Selection Process;
 - Identify Criteria for Identifying New Sites;
 - Inventory Opportunity Sites;
- Increasing Number of Gardeners
 - Use Information Distribution as a Tool for Creating Access to Gardens;
 - Manage Waiting Period;
 - Reduce Economic Barriers to Participation;
 - Provide a Range of Opportunities for Participation;
 - Reconsider Criteria for Garden Assignments;
 - Continue to Require Active Participation;
- Updating Operations:
 - Increase Capacity for Centralized Management;
 - Invest in Program Development;
 - Develop Framework for Partnerships and Collaborative Efforts.

If implemented, the 2016 recommendations could lead to opportunities to include more interested residents in the program and better reach underserved residents. While staff implemented some small changes following the 2016 study, most recommendations, and especially the most impactful, remain unimplemented due to program constraints. Additional staff time and funding would be needed to provide additional program oversight, plan for growth and increase accessibility, as existing Community Garden Program staff is already challenged by the growth the program has experienced in recent years. Additionally, program expansion requires additional capital funding; the current cost for construction of a new site on existing Department property is approximately \$100,000.

Staff and Volunteer Coordination

The Department is responsible for facilitating and providing infrastructure maintenance to the City's community gardens. In 2022-2023, the funding for the program is \$166,054, which provides 1.54 FTE of staff support and basic supplies and materials.⁷ Current program staffing

⁷ This amount does not include \$180,696 of water budget, which is recouped the following year through program fees charged to gardeners.

includes one (1) full-time Community Activity Worker and one (1) part-time unbenefited Recreation Leader (0.54 FTE) who supports the Community Activity Worker. This two-person team works under the guidance of the Volunteer Management Unit Program Manager. Duties for the Community Garden Program staff include:

- Management of yearly registration process, including collecting fees and monitoring waitlists;
- Coordinating volunteers (described in detail below);
- Coordinating educational workshops and the Department's Integrated Pest Management Program at gardens;
- Promoting cohesiveness through meetings, group interactions and mediation;
- Coordinating with local and government agencies including other City departments;
- Onboarding new community garden participants;
- Coordinating development of program materials including policies and procedures;
- Marketing the program;
- Fixing or coordinating the repair of major issues, such as water breaks;
- Acting as temporary garden manager when necessary; and
- Addressing issues as they arise.

The Department relies heavily on volunteers from the community gardens to act as a garden management team for day-to-day operations at each garden location. This team includes a volunteer Garden Manager, Assistant Manager, Treasurer, and Secretary for each site. In cases where a garden management team cannot be filled through volunteers, the Department's Community Garden Program staff steps in to assist. The volunteer garden management teams work closely with staff to report and address issues that arise in the gardens and assist in coordinating a program-wide annual registration meeting and at least two other garden meetings per year. The management team from each garden meet quarterly with staff to share best practices and to troubleshoot common problems.

The reliance on volunteers has changed over time, with some responsibilities shifting back to staff. A 2016 audit of the City's use and coordination of volunteers found that volunteer handling of Community Garden Program fees did not comply with City cash handling policies. As a result of the audit, staff revised fee collection practices to introduce online payment through the Department's registration website, and to have staff go to community gardens on a scheduled basis to assist those gardeners who do not have internet access or the ability to travel to a community center or City Hall to make payments. The revised fee collection process requires a substantial amount of staff time as many gardeners lack internet access or transportation to Department locations where they can make payment.

Staff and the garden management teams work closely together to ensure a safe and meaningful experience. There are currently 40 volunteers as part of the Garden Management team, and several gardens currently lack volunteer management. The lack of a volunteer management team

at a garden contributes to a greater demand on City staff who must then handle daily administrative tasks in the gardens. Depending on issues that arise at the garden, this support amounts to five to ten hours some weeks.

The Garden Management teams rely on the program's Community Activity Worker and part-time Recreation Leader for communication, problem solving, registration and marketing. This coordination leaves little time for the Community Activity Worker to pursue projects that would enhance the program's outcomes, such as classes on food preservation or resources on fresh food programs. A result of these limitations, staff and garden management teams often have to triage issues, resulting in gardeners who become frustrated at slow response times to questions or concerns. According to one Garden Manager, "The staffing for the community gardens program needs to increase/improve. The response time to our questions, concerns, issues, and requests are very slow. There is not enough staffing to provide a better level of service to all the community gardens."

Lastly, garden managers and staff spend a great deal of time addressing safety concerns. As part of the recent survey, gardeners were asked of their biggest concerns, and respondents shared the top two are theft (water, tools, and produce) and safety, with multiple gardeners replying that they are harassed by non-participants on a regular basis while at their garden. Many gardeners have expressed safety concerns and shared they are not comfortable being alone in the garden. Four to six safety concerns are reported to program staff each month. When safety concerns arise, staff prioritizes responding to them.

CONCLUSION

The City's Community Garden Program provides essential services to the nearly 1,000 resident gardeners, including fresh and healthy fruit and vegetables, physical and mental health and wellness, and community building and social opportunities. Ongoing demand for garden plots, as evidenced by long waiting lists, and registration fees proving cost prohibitive for residents who may be at greatest risk of food insecurity demonstrate unmet need in the community and a need for growth and change for the Community Garden Program. The Department recognizes these factors and outstanding recommendations from a 2016 program study, but resource limitations require the program to focus on triaging day to day concerns at the community gardens.

EVALUATION AND FOLLOW-UP

The Department is evaluating how to improve the Community Garden Program including creating greater access in light of existing resources and will consider pursuing funding sources such as grants to support further program development.

CLIMATE SMART SAN JOSÉ

The recommendation in this memorandum aligns with one or more Climate Smart San José energy, water, or mobility goals.

PUBLIC OUTREACH

This memorandum will be posted on the City's website for the November 10, 2022 Neighborhood Services and Education Committee meeting.

COORDINATION

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

COMMISSION RECOMMENDATION

This memorandum will be heard at the Parks and Recreation Commission meeting on November 2, 2022, and Commission feedback will be provided to the Committee.

CEQA

Not a Project, File No. PP17-009, Staff Reports, Assessments, Annual Reports, and Informational Memos that involve no approvals of any City action.

/s/

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Recreation and Neighborhood Services

For questions, please contact Avi Yotam, Deputy Director, at avi.yotam@sanjoseca.gov.