



Memorandum

TO: PUBLIC SAFETY, FINANCE
AND STRATEGIC SUPPORT
COMMITTEE

FROM: Jon Cicirelli

SUBJECT: PARK RANGER PROGRAM
ANNUAL REPORT

DATE: October 4, 2021

Approved

Date 10/14/2021

RECOMMENDATION

Accept the Annual Report on the Park Ranger Program for 2020-2021.

OUTCOME

This report provides the Public Safety, Finance and Strategic Support Committee with an update on the Park Ranger Program's 2020-2021 highlights and challenges, and the Park Ranger Program's 2021-2022 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 (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 adopted 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 49-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 educate 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 park lands, restore native vegetation, maintain rustic hiking trails, and educate the public on the cultural and natural history of San José.

ANALYSIS

Program Service Delivery Changes and Highlights

The Park Ranger Program has been a staple unit of the Department for almost five decades. Over that time, there have been many changes that have influenced day-to-day operations. This past year, despite vacancies, the program took intentional steps to transition to the generalist service model that the City Council accepted on January 29, 2019 and produced important results and highlights in the midst of adapting its service model to the COVID-19 pandemic.

- *Resource Management:* The first two guiding principles of ActivateSJ are stewardship and nature. As part of an intentional generalist service model, Park Rangers conduct resource management projects to protect and improve parks for future generations. Projects completed this year included:
 - *Invasive Species Removal:* Invasive species contribute to the risk of wildfires, harm local ecosystems, and can outcompete native species that promote biodiversity and resilience. Park Rangers have begun locating and removing a highly invasive tree species, Tree of Heaven, from the Coyote Creek watershed at Kelley Park. Park Rangers remove the trees and reduce the material's bulk so it can be picked up as green waste for composting and reuse. Park Rangers also coordinate with park maintenance staff to schedule stump treatment to prevent re-sprouting.
 - *Wildlife Management:* The community has gained heightened awareness of coyote-human encounters in recent years. With coyotes having a presence in San José, the Park Rangers developed a Department Coyote Co-existence and Management Plan to establish a standardized response to wildlife-human conflict on properties maintained and managed by the Department. This plan, prepared in coordination with Public Works' Animal Care and Services division, guides Park

Rangers on humane techniques and best practices to interact with and control coyote populations in parks.

- *Interpretive Programming:* Park Rangers have traditionally included interpretive programming as a part of their duties. Staffing challenges and COVID-19 restrictions significantly constrained the team last year, which was limited to two community programs with twenty people in attendance. In the last few months, Park Rangers have undertaken more frequent interpretive activities, such as guided hikes and displays at Alum Rock Park.

As an intentional step towards reinforcing a generalist service model, and in preparation for Park Rangers to resume a more active role in public programming, the Department has hired a temporary Interpretive Specialist. This Interpretive Specialist is in the process of developing a program-wide interpretive plan and will assist all Park Rangers in completing the 40-hour Certified Interpretive Guide (CIG) training program. The Interpretive Plan will support ActivateSJ's benchmark to create and implement a nature-focused, interpretive education program. The Interpretive Plan also ensures that Park Rangers have the proper procedures and techniques to create an equity-driven interpretive program for all San José youth and families by ensuring access for underserved and special needs communities.

- *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. As of October 2021, the draft manual has been reviewed by the City Attorney's Office, completed the copy/edit process and is now in final review. The Administration's goal is to release, by Spring 2022, a modern, up-to-date manual.

On a parallel and faster track, the Department has taken steps towards implementing a Body Worn Camera program, including contracting with a vendor for hardware, software and video storage, to protect both residents and Park Rangers, and promote transparency and trust within the community. The Administration met with the Peace Officer Park Ranger Association to review the draft Body Worn Camera Policy, and the Department aims to roll out the cameras to peace officer Park Rangers this fall.

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 1, in 2020-2021, fire responses continued to challenge the Department, largely due to fires along Coyote Creek and in and around Kelley Park. The increase in fires and fire responses near Kelley Park has led the program to consider upgrading one of its Type 7 wildland fire engines, nearing the end of its useful life, to a Type 6 to enhance the ability of Park Rangers to provide initial attack wildland fire suppression in and around Kelley Park. Medical events responses decreased with lower than normal visitation in

some regional parks due to temporary closure of Happy Hollow Park & Zoo and the Lake Cunningham Action Sports Park for some or all of 2020-2021 as a result of COVID-19.

Table 1 – Public Safety Responses

Type of Response	2016-2017	2017-2018	2018-2019	2019-2020	2020-2021
Fire Responses	50	30	33	78	156
Medical Events	139	104	84	71	55
Search and Rescue/Missing Person	14	22	12	5	11
Total	203	156	129	154	222

In addition to responding to wildfires, the Department actively works to reduce the risk through its annual weed abatement program. In the past year, the Department has added focus on Alum Rock Park with significant support from local and State partners. Alum Rock Park, California's oldest municipal park established in 1872, sits in a Very High Fire Hazard Severity Zone in the wildland-urban interface along the Diablo Range. Starting in the spring of 2021, Park Rangers and park maintenance collaborated with the San José Fire Department, the California Department of Forestry and Fire Protection (CAL FIRE), the California National Guard, and the San José Conservation Corps to conduct a coordinated wildland fire fuels reduction project at Alum Rock Park. Park Rangers and park maintenance shared their experience and knowledge of this deep box canyon with the San José Fire Department to select work locations. National Guard hand crews, trained and led by CAL FIRE, have served alongside crews from the San José Conservation Corps supported by a California Conservation Corps grant to: reduce ladder fuels, thin highly flammable vegetation, remove exotic invasive plant species, and remove flashy fine fuels in high-risk areas along the park boundary to reduce the risk to nearby properties. The San José Conservation Corps, with daily support from Park Rangers, has continued these efforts into 2021-2022 as part of the recently launched Resilience Corps. Together, Park Rangers, park maintenance, and partners have collaborated to make the community safer and the park more resilient as it approaches its 150th anniversary next spring.

Park Rangers also prepared, in coordination with the San José Fire Department, a \$200,000 grant application to CAL FIRE for funding to hire a consultant to develop a park-wide wildfire fuel reduction and vegetative management plan for Alum Rock Park. Such a plan would guide the Department's near- and long-term efforts in reducing the risk of wildfire in Alum Rock Park, creating a defensible space between the park and nearby properties, and ensuring that vegetation is controlled so that it does not allow a fire to grow at an uncontrollable rate. Unfortunately, the Department recently learned that this application was not selected for funding. The Department will consider alternate approaches to fund this critical planning.

Search and rescue and missing person responses increased in 2020-2021, in part due to Alum Rock Park remaining open the full year. While infrequent, search and rescue events draw on the whole Park Ranger Program, as well as partners. Two events over the last year are described below:

- Park Rangers and the Santa Clara County Sheriff's Search and Rescue Unit conducted a major search for a missing hiker at Alum Rock Park on July 4, 2020. A woman hiking on the South Rim became lost in the park. The missing person was able to send a brief phone message to family indicating she was lost before communications were lost. The victim's car was located near the park's South Rim access. Under a unified command, Park Rangers and Search and Rescue volunteer search teams began searching the South Rim. The San José Police Department assisted with implementing a park closure to allow search dogs to work and establish check points along the park boundaries in the event the victim was able to exit. The East Bay Regional Park District provided helicopter air support for the search. After more than seven hours of searching in remote and rugged off trail terrain in 100-degree heat, the victim was located about 150-200 feet over a steep embankment. Search teams coordinated with CAL FIRE Copter 106 to implement a short-haul rescue, bringing the victim to a waiting ambulance for transport to a local hospital.
- Almost exactly one year later, on July 14, 2021, Park Rangers conducted another significant rescue operation with CAL FIRE Copter 106 and the San José Fire Department in the closed north falls area of Alum Rock Park. Visitors, following the sound of someone calling for help, located an injured adult male in a closed section of the park. The visitors notified on-duty Park Rangers and a search of the area was immediately initiated. Park Rangers located the downed hiker in the creek bed about one-quarter mile from the nearest trail and requested a rescue response from the San José Fire Department. Due to the extreme terrain and with darkness rapidly approaching, a request was made to CAL FIRE for a helicopter extraction. Copter 106 was able to perform an extraction and transported the victim to a waiting ambulance in the main parking lot where he was transported to a nearby trauma center for care.

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, 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 2 show the different enforcement activities the Park Ranger Program undertook in 2020-2021, which included COVID-19 education and compliance efforts. Overall, nearly 99 percent of all law enforcement contacts were closed out with warnings and/or education on park rules.

Table 2 – Enforcement Activities

Enforcement Activity	2016-2017	2017-2018	2018-2019	2019-2020	2020-2021
Warnings	6,169	9,057	4,265	7,744	11,271*
Criminal Citations	601	211	110	109	41
Crime Reports	276	230	80	120	89
Arrests	65	33	48	14	4
Total	7,111	9,531	4,503	7,987	11,405

* 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.

As reported in the City of San José Stormwater Management Annual Report 2020-2021, the Park Ranger Program and San José Police Department conducted six joint patrols along Coyote Creek and Guadalupe River to address abandoned or stolen vehicles. A total of 49 vehicles were towed from Coyote Creek and 6 vehicles were towed from Guadalupe River. Locations included Coyote Creek near Corie Ct., Coyote Creek between Umbarger Rd. and La Ragione Ave., and Guadalupe River between I-880 and Coleman Ave. The low number of joint patrols, as well as the focus on vehicles, are attributed to the Park Ranger Program’s continued staffing challenges, competing service priorities, and COVID-19 service modifications including the pause of encampment abatement. It is important to note that, due to low usage, the program’s one-time funding for police support was not rebudgeted into the 2021-2022 Adopted Operating Budget and the savings were repurposed to partially provide for police patrol along the Coyote Creek Trail. The number of joint patrols that the program can schedule as funding for police support through the Secondary Employment Unit will be dependent on the program’s vacancy savings.¹

Recruitment and Staff Retention

The Park Ranger Program’s accomplishments notwithstanding, continues to experience challenges with recruiting and hiring staff, something that other jurisdictions in the region have also experienced. Currently, the program is funded for 22.89 full-time equivalent (FTE) positions as portrayed in Table 3. Since the last annual report in October 2020, a Park Ranger was promoted to Senior Park Ranger, and one full-time Park Ranger was hired, completed the academy and is currently in field training. As of October 2021, the Department had an open recruitment for Park Rangers with two candidates entering the background process and additional interviews being scheduled. If current candidates successfully complete the background process, including medical exam and psychological assessment, the Department anticipates they would be in academy in winter 2022, in field training in spring 2022, and on solo patrol in late summer 2022. The Department, in conjunction with Human Resources, is also recruiting for the vacant Supervising Park Ranger position.

¹ The Police Department’s Street Crimes Unit and Stream Stewardship Law Enforcement pilot program targeted criminal activity at Coyote Creek and Guadalupe River ranging from felonies and misdemeanors to warrants, and had 317 total activities. After a pause in services due to COVID-19, the Stream Stewardship Law Enforcement pilot program’s efforts along waterways resumed in August 2020, with a brief pause in September to amend the agreement.

Table 3 – Budgeted Positions for Park Ranger Program

Benefited Park Ranger Positions				
Classification	Budgeted FTE	Filled FTE	Vacant FTE	Notes
Supervising Park Rangers	2.00	1.00	1.00	In recruitment
Senior Park Rangers	4.00	4.00	0.00	
Park Rangers Full-Time*	11.00	7.00	4.00	Two candidates are in background as of September 2021, and additional interviews are scheduled, who would be expected to be on solo patrol by late summer 2022.
Park Rangers Part-Time Benefited	2.25	1.50	0.75	
All Benefited Rangers	19.25	13.50	5.75	
Unbenefited Park Ranger Positions				
Classification	Budgeted Hours	Worked Hours		Notes
Park Rangers Part-Time Unbenefited	7,571 (3.64 FTE)	4,580		9 part-time unbenefited Park Rangers worked in 2020-2021.
Total Budgeted FTE	22.89			

* The 2021-2022 Adopted Operating Budget deleted one vacant full-time Park Ranger position for watershed protection.

To address the challenges with recruitment, the Department has promoted the \$3,000 Hiring Incentive and \$3,750 Referral Bonus Pilot Program agreed to by the City and Peace Officer Park Ranger Association in local, State and national park ranger and peace officer job boards and associations, recruited consistently at local colleges, and amplified the job openings through Department communications channels. The Department is also continuing its efforts to develop a Park Ranger Apprenticeship Program, in cooperation with West Valley College, which may be modeled on the “Environmental Services Department’s Operator In Training” program. This collaborative program will provide opportunities for candidates, who have little or no experience, to develop into qualified candidates at the Park Ranger level through the college’s training program. An apprenticeship program may create a pipeline of future Park Rangers, as the part-time Park Ranger classification has proven to be in past years. The Department has not recently recruited for part-time Park Rangers and intends to resume that once the part-time class specification has been updated to reflect the differentiated role of part-time Park Rangers who do not engage in enforcement activities for the Department. The Department is coordinating with the Human Resources Department and Office of Employee Relations on this update.

With persistent short staffing, due to vacancies, the program has begun to focus daily staffing patterns for full-time Park Rangers on Alum Rock Park, Kelley Park and Lake Cunningham. Staff identified these locations based on Alum Rock Park’s unique geography and isolation, the frequency of fire response in and near Kelley Park and of medical response in the park, and the

frequency of medical response in Lake Cunningham. Part-time staff are regularly assigned to these parks, as well as Emma Prusch Farm Park. On Wednesdays, when the program's two districts (full-time staff working Sunday to Wednesday or Wednesday to Saturday) are all on duty, Park Rangers have more bandwidth to address park concerns or issues in neighborhood parks. In recent months, they have also addressed a number of unpermitted special events in parks when the event dates and times are known well in advance. At present staffing levels, these are the practical limits of the Park Ranger Program.

By adopting the Mayor's March 2021 Budget Message, the City Council directed the City Manager to prioritize and fill the four remaining vacant Park Ranger 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 be on solo patrol in late summer 2022. 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 and 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.

Park Ranger 2021-2022 Work Plan (Next Steps)

In 2021-2022, the Department's vision, mission and guiding principles in ActivateSJ will continue to shape the Park Ranger Program. The Department will continue intentionally assigning Park Rangers to resource management projects and interpretive programs, in the spirit of environmental stewardship, education and resilience, and as part of a generalist service model. The Department, in coordination with the City Manager's Office and Human Resources, will continue to prioritize recruitment and retention of Park Rangers and work towards implementation of a Body Worn Camera program and a new Park Ranger Duty Manual.

The 2021-2022 year also brings new parks and recreation facilities and Department milestones. In partnership with the San José Conservation Corps and San José Police Department, Park Rangers will steward the Coyote Creek Trail that is nearing completion on the east side of Kelley Park and will also be involved in the Resilience Corps. In 2022, Park Rangers will celebrate their program's 50th anniversary and have a key role in a series of events for the 150th anniversary of Alum Rock Park's establishment as California's first municipal park.

CONCLUSION

For almost 50 years, the Park Ranger Program has provided a wide range of services to the community. From public safety responses and outdoor education programming to resource management and protection, the Park Ranger Program has been adaptable and responsive to the

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needs of the community. As the program moves forward, foundational building blocks are being set in place, such as the Park Ranger Duty Manual and Interpretive Plan, to provide direction and up-to-date standards for staff. Recruitment and retention continue to be a challenge, and the Department remains committed to hiring and retaining the highest quality workforce representing the diverse community the program serves.

COORDINATION

This memorandum was coordinated with the City Attorney's Office, San José Police Department, the City Manager's Budget Office and Office of Employee Relations.

/s/

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