



OAKLAND PARKS Coalition

A Community Report Card on the State of Oakland Parks

Submitted to

The City of Oakland City Council: Life Enrichment Committee

Submitted by

The Oakland Parks Coalition

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Introduction

With this report the Oakland Parks Coalition continues its practice of putting the care of our parks on the front burner. Oakland is blessed with an abundant amount of open space for a city of its size—over 300 acres have been added in the last 15 years—and maintaining and improving over 2000 acres of parks and open space is a serious challenge that must be met.

Yet, how can we meet the challenge of maintaining and improving our parks and open space when we continually cut back on park caretakers while adding acreage? From a high in 1969 of over 176 full-time maintenance employees we cascaded down to under 96 FTE's in the 2005-2006 fiscal year. We had 91 gardeners in 1969; we now have fewer than 60. Declining budgeting for park care has caused a gradual decline of the condition of our parks, a fact that must be reversed before it is too late.

In this report we will comment on the results of the most recent Oakland Parks Coalition city-wide survey of the parks, propose some ways to mitigate deterioration of our parks and speak to the issue of budgeting for park maintenance.

Well-Maintained Parks Benefit Neighborhoods

Paul Grogan, former president of Local Initiative Support Coalition, a community development group in New York City, places high value on the role of parks in low-income, inner-city neighborhoods. “The key to restoring their [low-income neighborhoods] economic vitality is restoring the residential vitality. The residents of such communities regard quality open space—parks, ball fields, and gardens—as vital to the health of their community.”*

- **Building Community:** A well cared for park becomes the heart of a neighborhood. It is the place for disparate and like-minded groups to come together in work and play.
- **Health:** Physically active youths and adults are healthier and cost-effective. For every \$1 invested in time and equipment for physical activity, \$3.20 in medical expenses can be saved.
- **Lower Crime:** Studies show that most violent juvenile crime in California occurs between the hours of 2-6 pm. When youths are off the street and engaged in after-school recreation programs crime takes a holiday.
- **Economic Benefits:** Good parks are a catalyst for economic development and neighborhood renewal and increase property values in already established neighborhoods.

Love Your Parks Day

Oakland Parks Coalition is mindful of the role that clean, well-equipped and well-maintained parks play in safeguarding the health and well-being of a city's populace. Our organization's primary mission, since its creation in 2001, has been to keep a watchful eye on the condition of our parks and assist in promoting viable and attractive parks by working with City staff through parks surveys and volunteer stewardship.

Since 2002, Oakland Parks Coalition (OPC) has conducted periodic surveys of Oakland parks in several Council districts and reported the results to various City agencies and to City Councilmembers. The surveys and stewardship have been successful in helping to improve conditions in the parks of these selected districts, but the need to include all districts in this process grew urgent when the new Landscaping & Lighting Assessment District proposal failed to pass last spring. As a result, OPC decided to conduct a city-wide survey this fall to obtain a broader picture of the state of our parks.

On Saturday, October 28, 2006, OPC held an event called *Love Your Parks Day*, whose purpose was to survey a large sample of Oakland parks, city-wide, to determine the current condition of the landscaping and the facilities. The event, which was co-sponsored by Keep Oakland Beautiful, began at the Garden Center at 9 am with refreshments and a training in park surveying.

With the help of over 50 volunteers who turned out for the event, OPC conducted a survey of 75 parks in all Council Districts. Volunteers included old and young (a group of more than 15 Oakland High School Honor Students participated), park stewards and park users. Surveyors were sent out in teams to survey a cluster of 3-5 parks within a district between 10:00 am and 1:00 pm. They used a version of a standard survey that OPC has found very practical over the years which allows for a rating in categories including litter, greenery, irrigation and building facilities (*see attached/LYPD Survey*). The survey also provides space for comments. Each team was instructed to come to a consensus for each category in their survey.

Park Selection

Selection of the 75 parks (*see attached/LYPD Park List*) was based on various factors: parks with recreation centers were almost always included; some parks were omitted because they were too expansive to survey in a few short hours; most sports areas without recreation centers were excluded from this survey; OPC hopes to conduct a special survey of those venues at a later date.

Survey Information

The information gathered from the 75 surveys was transferred to an Excel spreadsheet and grouped by districts. (See attached/*LYPD 2006 Survey Data*) Each park was rated in the following categories when relevant:

- litter
- picnic areas
- restrooms
- outdoor recreation
- hardscape and signage
- greenery, irrigation
- recreation centers

The ratings for each park category were then averaged for the entire district along with a final overall rating for the park. Note that the overall ratings declined more or less commensurate with the chronological listing of Districts, Districts 1 & 2 receiving the best ratings and Districts 5 & 7 the worst.

The rating system was a scale from 1-4, a 1 being the best:

- *1/excellent*
- *2/good*
- *3/needs attention*
- *4/poor*

A final average, by category, was reached for all 75 parks. In all categories the city-wide average hovered between 2.0 and 3.0, i.e. between *good* and *needs attention*; the overall rating for all the parks was 2.45. In the final analysis the labels given to the ratings matter less than the scale itself. Rating averages between 2 and 3 indicate parks that are not up standards.

Survey Results

The photos below show the best and worst parks in each Council District based on our surveyors' numerical ratings and comments. The comments in quotes were made by the surveyors.

Best and Worst Parks by Council Districts

Council District 1

Best: Martin Luther King Plaza/Dover Street
5707 Dover Street



"This park has improved in the last year."

Council District 1:

Worst: Driver
5650 Adeline Street



Bare spots, unsightly tree trunks and many empty drug packages on the ground.

Council District 2

Best: Bella Vista
1025 East 28th Street



Some litter but generally well-maintained and used by neighborhood.

Council District 2

Worst: Garfield
2260 Foothill Boulevard



"There was a lot of litter along the fences. I am not sure why this is called a park. It did not have an entrance from the street."

Council District 3
Best: Poplar
3130 Union Street



"Secure feel to park and Rec center.."

Council District 3
Worst: Chester Park
319 Chester Street



"Sign painted over. All patchy asphalt, concrete, weeds. Totally neglected and sad."

Council District 4
Best: Redwood Heights
3883 Aliso Avenue



"A very well-used park and recreation center. Only concerns were about the BBQ area."

Council District 4
Worst: William Wood
2920 McKillop Road



Uneven, broken walkway. Lower walkway hardly usable.

Council District 5
Best: Josie de la Cruz
1637 Fruitvale Avenue



Some litter and bare spots but grounds appear to be well cared for and equipment and facility in good condition.

Council District 5
Worst: Nicol
Coolidge Avenue & Nicol Street



"Gate bent & broken. Benches have graffiti."

Council District 6
Best: Rainbow Park
5800 International Boulevard



"Inside rec center is pristine."
New ceiling lights!



Graffiti and dumping is persistent problem according to Rec Center Director.

Council District 6
Worst: Concordia
2901 64th Avenue



"Play structure is beat up and fenced off. Lots of broken glass. Not safe."

Council District 7
Best: Verdese Carter
9600 Sunnyside Street



Council District 7
Worst: Holly
9830 Holly Street



Equipment is relatively new and in good condition. Homeless have staked out the back of the park.

Persistent Problems

➤ *Litter & Graffiti*

Park litter and graffiti are pervasive problems. Trash containers can add to the litter problem: the standard City of Oakland cardboard garbage containers are easily tipped over and on weekends they often overflow; in the rainy season they tear apart. Benches, picnic tables and play structures are more often than not covered with graffiti.

➤ *Greenery & Irrigation*

Park grounds appear to be mowed on a regular schedule but clippings and leaves were often left on lawns and paths. Edging and brush removal are less frequent. Pruning appears to be very far down on the list of regularly scheduled tasks. Bare spots and drainage problems abound, evidence of faulty irrigation.

➤ *Hardscape & Signage*

Missing and defaced signage were concerns in many parks. Uneven, broken, hazardous walkways abound. Broken fencing was mentioned in several surveys.

➤ *Outdoor Recreation*

Children's play areas are in need of more constant care: equipment is often marred with graffiti; sand boxes are strewn with leaves and glass; composite surfaces under play equipment are often littered or damaged.

Bonus Points (Highlights)

➤ *Recreation Centers*

While many of the recreation centers--especially those that are newer--appeared to surveyors to be in satisfactory condition, under the surface of some of the older structures lurk problems that are not evident at first glance, problems such as unsafe wiring and leaky roofs. In spite of structural problems a center that is well-staffed and with an active advisory board provides the best opportunities for good care of the park and its facilities. They offer excellent venues for play, crafts and community meetings. Good Recreation Center Directors see themselves as caretakers and they are the first and best liaison to the user community.

➤ *Public Private Partnerships*

A number of Oakland parks benefit from neighborhood group or individual care. Shepherd Canyon in District 4 is a good example of volunteer groups, businesses and the City working together

Shepherd Canyon Eco-planters -founded three or four years ago as the Shepherd Canyon Eco-pullers, this hardy group of neighbors in the Shepherd Canyon Homeowners Association meet every other week in Shepherd Canyon Park to pull broom and other invasives and plant native plants along Shepherd Creek. They participate in the Shepherd Canyon Park Task Force, a group of residents/park users and city staff organized by Councilmember Jean Quan, and have provided guidance in the development of the new Escher trail as well as the clean-up and restoration of the Escher Meadow. They are now working with the City's Watershed Program to plan the restoration of upper Shepherd Creek under Measure DD.

Council Districts 1-4 have the greater share of volunteer caretakers, which in great part explains their higher ratings.

Survey Conclusions

Oakland is among the top twelve high-density cities in the United States and it ranks third in parkland per resident weighing in at 9.6 acres/1000 residents, just below Minneapolis and Washington D.C. Most Oaklanders do not have to venture too far from home to find green space but recreation centers and sports fields are less accessible. Can our city truly commit itself to maintenance of the parkland it already has?

Park use varies and largely hinges on whether the neighborhood consider their parks safe; the perception of safety hangs on whether the parks are clean and in good repair. Although the *Love Your Parks Survey* found a number of parks in satisfactory to good condition, on average, park conditions leave much room for improvement, especially parks in Districts 5, 6 and 7. There are too many parks that receive only minimal continual care of mowing and litter pick-up and litter still abounds in many of them. Outdoor recreation areas are too often in disrepair: surveys mentioned broken and missing equipment, fields with drainage problems, sandboxes filled with litter and glass. Irrigation systems are often old and broken. The big question is how can these problems be remedied with limited budgeting for maintenance and gardening staffing?

Leveraging our Resources

Mindful of current limited City resources for parks, OPC sees volunteerism as a first-line defense in the battle to prevent our parks from decline. For volunteerism to work we must build a coordinated and integrated system of partnership with groups and individuals. But this could only be done with a serious commitment by the City. With the leadership of an Office of Park Volunteerism current and potential volunteers could be organized into a force that could fill the gaps between what our parks need and what we are currently able to provide.

OPC suggests some steps that need to be taken to create and sustain a truly functional system of volunteerism:

- *Organizing Volunteers:* PWA and OPR have various lists of groups and individuals who have volunteered in parks over the decades. These lists should be consolidated and updated and used in an all-out effort to recruit and unify volunteers under an umbrella program that would provide ongoing training and practice in good park stewardship and acknowledgement of the contributions made by these volunteers.
- *Encouraging Creative Volunteer Initiatives:* Volunteer programs should be revisited; creative ideas about how park stewards can be of service should be encouraged. A program such as a sister park initiative would be one example, where current park steward groups partner with other park groups in need of support.
- *Partnering Volunteers with Staff:* The City could also conduct a yearly volunteer workshop where volunteers could come together with park staff and share ideas on how to collaborate on park care and volunteer recruitment.
- *Public Education:* Litter and graffiti are systemic user and management issues that need to be addressed in a comprehensive way that incorporates public education (especially of school-age children), use of graffiti-resistant building materials, and a creative, economical system of trash storage and collection. Some volunteer groups have conducted successful anti-litter art contests in schools and this type of initiative should be encouraged throughout the City.

Maintenance vs. Beautification

OPC recognizes the great challenges facing our City to care for its extensive park system and is cognizant and appreciative of efforts being made within the PWA to use existing resources more efficiently. We have seen definite improvement in the consistency of park maintenance and we look forward to increased performance improvements as new practices are tried in the Public Works Agency. However, we understand that there is a limit to the kind of care we can expect with the current level of staffing and training in PWA.

In the 1970's parks were the jewel in Oakland's crown and gardeners were expertly trained to care for them. A gardener entering at the Gardener I position (this position was eliminated in the early 90's) could aspire to move up the ladder to Gardener II if he/she worked competently. Gardeners received frequent training by the department in all aspects of plant care and were encouraged to further their education by attending Merritt College classes in horticulture; if they received good grades their course fees were partially reimbursed.

Since the early 1990s, when budget constraints fell hardest on the parks, staff has become less knowledgeable, less expert in gardening. Training sessions today are irregularly held and are focused narrowly. Greenhouse skills—plant propagation and expert pruning—are a luxury of the past. Our old-timers with those much-needed skills—about 8 gardeners--are looking toward retirement and when they leave there will be a gaping hole in the expertise of the staff.

The quality of life of Oakland citizens is directly linked to the quality of our parks and open space and park conditions are in the balance. But you get what you pay for. Park care that is limited primarily to mowing, trash pick-ups and emergency repairs give us mediocre parks. To flourish, our parks need professional care by trained gardeners.

Recommendations

OPC urges the legislative and policy-making entities in our City to avoid making further budget cuts to park maintenance; any cuts would jeopardize the tenuous stability that we have reached.

In the short run, we must maintain current funding levels while we actively explore supplemental avenues of funding:

- *Grants:* We mustn't be short-sighted. Grant writers should partner with non-profits and be open to opportunities for grants **now**. A full-time position of grant writer for park funding would pay for itself many times over.
- *Volunteerism:* Volunteers make a crucial difference in Oakland parks; their association with a park often brings it to a level of comfortable and enjoyable usability. But, people need to be encouraged to volunteer and supported in that role. OPC feels that the City needs to commit to the creation and promotion of a truly integrated volunteer system, one that will take advantage of the many people in Oakland who would like to contribute to the betterment of their city. OPC would willingly partner with the City to see this come to fruition.
- *A Moratorium on Acquisition of Open Space:* No new parks should come on line without financial commitments: developers must sign maintenance contracts for open space in their projects; redevelopment zones should be required to support maintenance in their parks.
- *Worker Flexibility:* PWA employees have narrow skill sets. Their over-specialization prevents them from working on multiple repairs at a given site, a highly uneconomical use of labor.
- *Worker Accountability:* It is important to ensure that PWA park employees are working to their capacity. Slackers are in the public eye, an eye whose fingers are on the purse string.
- *Worker Training:* We look back with nostalgia to the days when gardeners were trained in gardening. Skilled retirees should be brought back as consultants to train new employees. At the very least, a professional horticulturalist should be employed to give guidance to the gardening crews.
- *Litter Pick-up:* Why should we be paying gardeners' salaries to pick up trash? High school students could be offered after-school jobs at minimum wage to clean up their neighborhood parks. What better way to create a new generation of park users, not abusers?
- *A New LLAD:* Obviously, there is a limit to a piecemeal approach to park maintenance funding. A new version of the Landscaping & Lighting Assessment District must be pursued. Poll property owners carefully to find out what they would be willing to sign on to.

Planning for the Future

Our surveys and this report focused on park maintenance in various categories--litter, greenery, hardscape, etc. We asked surveyors to look at conditions on the ground, literally, to assess the condition of each aspect of the park as they saw it. From these surveys OPC has found our parks to be in a precarious balance and we have made recommendations to keep them from further deterioration.

Park planning, however, must go beyond mere maintenance. Our parks could be the key to restoring the economic vitality that Oakland lost after the 1970's and 80's but, for that to happen, OPC believes that a long-term plan must evolve to enhance our parks. Even modest improvements would bring our parks to the next level: pruning bushes and trees with health and esthetic balance as the goals; replacing broken irrigation systems; replacing dying or failed plants with drought-tolerant plants that complement the landscape and provide esthetically pleasing--as well as practical--solutions to decaying growth.

Realistically, we know that securing funding to enhance and beautify our parks will take creative thinking, much work and time. In the meanwhile, we cannot afford to short-change our parks with less than the current level of funding or we face dire consequences.

Report Attachments:

- 1. LYPD Survey***
- 2. LYPD Park List with Survey Teams***
- 3. LYPD 2006 Survey Data***

