



# OAKLAND PARKS Coalition

## **2011 Community Report Card on the State of Maintenance in Oakland Parks**

**Submitted by**  
**The Oakland Parks Coalition**  
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## INTRODUCTION

*“Oakland’s open spaces and natural resources have inspired generations of Oakland residents and continue to be among the most positive aspects of life in the city. Protecting these assets is essential.”<sup>1</sup>*

The 1996 Oakland OSCAR (Open Space Conservation And Resource) Element of the General Plan states that , “Park maintenance, rehabilitation and safety are established as top priority concerns for budgeting purposes.”<sup>2</sup> City officials were guided by this principle to the extent they were able and with pressure from parks activists through years of declining budget revenues but, the Great Recession intervened in 2008 and plummeting revenues by fiscal 2011 forced devastating staffing cutbacks for open space maintenance. This report, based on the Oakland Parks Coalition’s fall survey of our city’s open spaces (Love Your Parks Day or LYPD) will shed light on the consequences of diminished public resources for open space maintenance and will discuss the future viability of parks and public areas if current staffing levels prevail.

## ABOUT OAKLAND PARKS COALITION

Oakland Parks Coalition (OPC), a volunteer organization founded by Gillian Garro and Audree JonesTaylor with support from Trust for Public Land recognizes the importance of public parks to the health and well-being of urban dwellers and has worked since its founding in 2001 to promote stewardship as a means to improving the quality of Oakland parks. Since 2006 more than eighty OPC stewards have been instrumental in assessing park conditions through OPC’s Love Your Parks Day survey and stewards continue to organize with local residents to monitor conditions and work in their parks, public squares and medians throughout the year.

OPC produces this annual report to call attention to pervasive problems and to highlight maintenance improvements. Data in this report is based on surveys taken by the people who use them, not an outside agency that has no stake in our parks. We advocate at City budget hearings for sufficient maintenance resources and for additional funding for skilled gardeners and tree specialists to preserve our parkland for posterity.

OPC works closely with Oakland’s Public Works Agency to strengthen volunteerism in the City and once a year to coordinate an all city-cleanup of a designated area. For the last two years OPC has partnered with PWA to recruit over 100 local volunteers to help clean up a broad expanse of the Bancroft Median near 82<sup>nd</sup> Avenue.

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<sup>1</sup> 1996 Oakland OSCAR Overview1-1

<sup>2</sup> 1996 Oakland OSCAR xxiv-Executive Summary



The OPC Board of Directors of twelve volunteers holds an Annual Meeting each year in January to report on our activities and honor our park stewards and active volunteers. The program features selected stewards who share their stories of memorable experiences working in their parks and plazas. Public officials are invited to attend.

### **THE OSCAR ELEMENT AND ITS IMPORTANCE TO OPEN SPACE DEVELOPMENT**

Open space development and management is guided by the state required OSCAR (Open Space Conservation and Recreation) Element of each city's General Plan. Oakland's was approved in 1976. Its stated purpose was broad, calling for detailed plans and measures to preserve open-space for natural resources, outdoor recreation, public health and safety.

Sixteen years later, in preparation for the updating of the General Plan and with funding support from Measure K, the City formed a 26-member OSCAR committee to revise the 1976 plan based on current data on the state of the city. It called upon the committee to produce a document that would serve as a "blueprint for change" over the next two decades, with the premise that Oakland could be "a more attractive city and a better place to live by conserving and rediscovering its natural resources, growing in harmony with the environment, and meeting recreational needs in new and creative ways."<sup>3</sup>

The final document, approved by City Council in June, 1996, made recommendations for future growth of open space that included the creation of an Oakland Parks Master Plan along with Master Plans for individual parks. The document also stressed that underserved areas be given priority in developing new park space and that on-going maintenance costs should be seriously considered when giving the green light to new open space development. These OSCAR recommendations have guided open space development in the ensuing years:

1. New large capital projects have been developed in underserved neighborhoods to provide much-needed recreational opportunities. Ex: Raimondi sports field in West Oakland and East Oakland Regional Sports Center.

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<sup>3</sup> Oakland General Plan, OSCAR Element, Overview, What is the OSCAR, page 1-1

2. Saving on maintenance costs is a primary consideration for new capital projects: Two-three year contracts for vegetation management are routinely budgeted into new projects when they are part of a funded development; synthetic surfaces are being tested and substituted for high-maintenance grass when funds are available ; all new projects must include funding for new “smart” irrigation systems; and longer-lasting materials such as aluminum or plastic-wood composites have replaced wood in park furniture.
3. Master Plans have resulted from new projects such as the 2007 upgrade at Ernie-Raimondi park in West Oakland and two other parks have master plans—Peralta Hacienda and King Estates-- but other large pre-existing parks would benefit from master plans to guide them for future development. Joaquin Miller Park is a highly used regional serving City park without a master plan and only recently, in 2005, was a Friends group formed there. That group is actively addressing park issues as they arise but a master plan would help direct resources to prevent damages before they occur.

### **THE OSCAR AND OUR SURVEY**

This year, OPC has adapted the OSCAR open space classification system to its surveys in order to compare conditions across the spectrum of park uses. There are ten 10 classifications for open space based on characteristics, function and service area. They range from Resource Conservation Areas (basically wilderness areas and wetlands) to Active mini-parks.

#### **OSCAR ELEMENT OPEN SPACE CATEGORIES**

AF-Athletic Field	Size Range: 4-15 acres. Large open spaces whose primary purpose is to provide a place for high school and league ball games.
AMP-Active Mini-Park	Size Range: under one acre serving up to 1/8 <sup>th</sup> mile radius in flatland areas, 1/4 <sup>th</sup> mile radius in the hills, serving small children, essentially substitutes for private back yards, including play apparatus, swings, slides and climbing structures, small lawn or garden area.
CP-Community Park	Size Range: from five to 20 acres and serve a one-mile radius in hill areas and a 0.5-mile radius in flatlands. A community park is a large, natural landscaped area which provides both a refuge from the urban environment and a place for active recreation
LP-Linear Park	Size range varies. Provides linear access to a natural feature such as a creek or shoreline. Provides a connection between two points, sometimes through joint use of existing linear features like a BART line or transmission line right of way. Features may include a trail or benches, bike path, children’s play areas.

NP-Neighborhood Park	Size Range: from one to 10 acres and serve a 0.5-mile radius in the hills and a 0.25-mile radius in the flatlands. A neighborhood park is essentially a scaled-down version of a community park. The typical Oakland neighborhood park is located in a residential area within walking distance of its primary users. Many are located adjacent to elementary schools with facilities used by both the school and the neighborhood.
PMP-Passive Mini-Park	Size Range: Less than 1 acre. Small landscaped areas located adjacent to or in the center of streets. Their primary function is aesthetic with most of the specific areas set aside to enhance the beauty of urban residential neighborhoods. Such parks usually contain a lawn area complemented by ornamental landscaping and shade trees. A small tot lot or community garden may be appropriate.
RCA-Resource Conservation Area	Size Range—whatever is necessary to protect the resource. Primary purpose is to protect the natural environment. Recreational use is secondary and is usually limited to activities such as hiking, nature study and bird watching.
RSP-Regional Serving Park	Size Range: 25 acres or larger, service area is city-wide. Includes Lakeside, Joaquin Miller, and portions of Redwood-Roberts Parks.
SU-Special Use	Size Range: vary in size and service area (typically citywide), and generally are areas for specialized or single-purpose activities.
Schoolyards	Size Range: none. School playgrounds, located on school property, open to the public during daylight hours and fenced, locked at night.

### LOVE YOUR PARKS DAY SURVEY

During the principally dry months of September and early October, 2011, Oakland Parks Coalition stewards and other volunteers surveyed 120 open space areas. Some areas were omitted from our survey; we concentrate on the most highly-used or visited parks and a handful of medians or landscaped spaces for which we have stewards. Half of the 120 surveys were done in September by OPC stewards. Remaining surveys were completed by thirty-five volunteers who gathered at the Garden Center early on Saturday, October 1, were trained, assigned to survey teams and given 3-5 parks to survey. All surveys were input into an on-line survey program called Survey Monkey which generated the graphs and charts for this report.



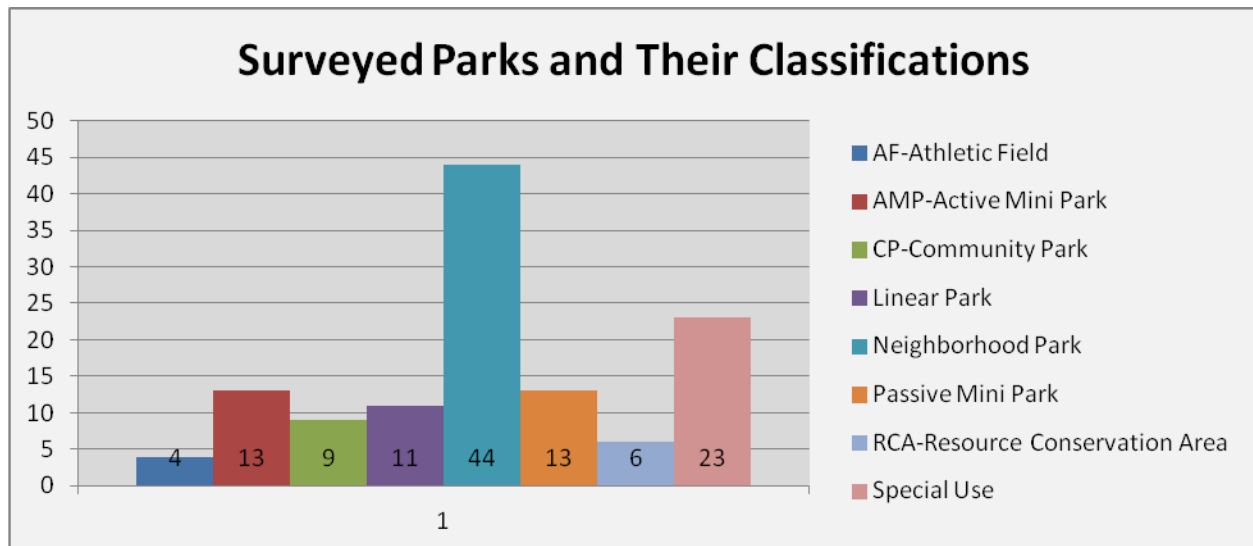
**Volunteer surveyors at Love Your Parks Day, October 2, 2011**

This year, we also assigned OSCAR classifications to each open space, enabling us to group parks into like open spaces and compare levels of management among the varying area types. Since new parks and public spaces have been added since the 1996 classifications, for purposes of this report and in consultation with Public Works officials we classified the new areas. Some liberties were taken with the classifications: 1) In a handful of instances two classifications have been applied to spaces that could not fit comfortably into a single designation. 2) Joaquin Miller and Lakeside Parks (Regional Serving Parks) are both too complex to survey as a whole using our standard survey so we mapped out areas within each park, classified them according to OSCAR guidelines, and surveyed them as though each section were a separate park.

**Parks by OSCAR Classifications and New Parks Since OSCAR**

Type	1998 Open Spaces	2011 Surveyed Areas	New Parks since 1998 Classified by OPC
Region-Serving Parks (RSP)	5	Parts of 2, reclassified below	
Community Parks (CP)	9	9	
Neighborhood Parks (NP)	44	44	South Prescott, Joaquin Miller (tot lot & Perry field), Union Point
Active Mini-Parks (AMP)	15	13	Redondo Park, Tomas Melero-Smith, Dolphin
Passive Mini-Parks (PMP)	5	13	Ayala, Dover, Driver, Racine, Cypress Freeway Memorial, Wood Street, Fruitvale Plaza, Carter Gilmore(Greenman Field),

Linear Parks (LP)	12	11	Rockridge/Temescal Greenbelt (FROG), Lakeside Park 3 sections, Estuary, Mandela Pkwy
Special-Use Parks (SU)	24	23	Firestorm Memorial, Frank Ogawa Firescape Garden, Gateway Gardens Pavilion, Helen MacGregor, Splashpad, Lakeside Park (3 sectors), Bishop Floyd Plaza, St. Andrews, Union Plaza/Fitzgerald
Resource Conservation Areas (RCA)	19	6	North Oakland Regional, Marj Saunders
Athletic Fields (AF)	14	4	
Total	147	123*	
* 3 parks were given double classifications (see explanation above). The actual total of parks surveyed was 120.			



Our survey does not purport to be a scientific assessment of conditions, rather a perspective of conditions by frequent park users. We aggregate the results each year, compare them year to year, and use them as a guidepost to continue efforts to provide attractive and safe environments for Oakland citizens to enjoy the outdoors.

### Survey Results by Classifications

In the following table we list comparative ratings by classifications (see above table) for three survey categories that are common to most parks: Litter, Hardscape and Greenery. Resource Conservation Areas (RCA) are omitted from this table because of their relatively low use and limited accommodations for users. In cases where there is minor difference between classifications more than one is listed.



LITTER	WORST	BEST
Are the grounds free of litter?	CP, AMP	PMP
Are trash receptacles available?	AF	AMP
Are trash receptacles emptied?	AF, AMP	PMP, SU
LITTER OVERALL	CP	PMP
HARDSCAPE	WORST	BEST
Is there a sign with the park name at an entrance?	PMP, LP	CP
Is there a sign with park rules at an entrance or nearby?	AF, LP, PMP	CP
Are signs graffiti-free?	LP, AMP	SU
Are fences in good condition?	PMP	AF
Are gates working properly & open (during posted hours)?	AMP	LP, PMP
Are benches/seating areas in good condition?	AF, CP, LP	PMP, AMP, NP
Are walkways in good condition?	CP	PMP
HARDSCAPE OVERALL	CP	NP
GREENERY	WORST	BEST
Is the grass mowed?	AMP	CP
Is the grass edged?	AMP	PMP
Is the grass or ground cover free of dog/bird poop?	NP	AMP
Is the grass or ground cover free of bare spots?	AMP	LP
Are trees in good condition (free of dead branches)?	AF, CP	NP
Do planted areas appear to be watered?	AMP	AF
Are planted areas weeded?	AMP	PMP
Are shrubs weeded & pruned?	AMP	PMP
Is the community garden in good condition?	AMP	CP
GREENERY OVERALL	AMP	LP

One can make certain assumptions from these survey data:

- LITTER: Athletic Fields (AF) and Active Mini Parks (AMP) appear to have the most litter, due, perhaps, to too few containers in the case of Athletic Fields and to frequent use in both cases. Passive Mini-Parks are less trafficked and appear to be the cleanest. Week-end park use tends to fill containers to overflowing, resulting in spilled contents by Mondays. The cardboard containers may be easy for maintenance to empty but they do not stand up to the weather or heavy use.
- HARDSCAPE: Community Parks appear to have the best signage but their walkways and benches are in the worst shape and broken furniture is a pervasive problem for all classifications of parks. Warped and broken benches and tables have splintered edges that can easily tear the flesh and should be repaired as quickly as they appear but replacement of degraded park furniture alone would likely consume the entire hardscape budget for the city.

- **GREENERY:** Active Mini-Parks (AMP), many of which are high impact spaces, exhibit, hands-down, the worst conditions of grassy and planted areas. The preponderance of Active Mini-Parks are in The Elmhurst, Fruitvale and West Oakland neighborhoods and may be the only accessible venue for recreation for the higher concentrations of low-income families. These same families, whose bread winners are often struggling to make ends meet, are less likely to be engaged in neighborhood groups that adopt and care for parks.

### Survey Results by Categories

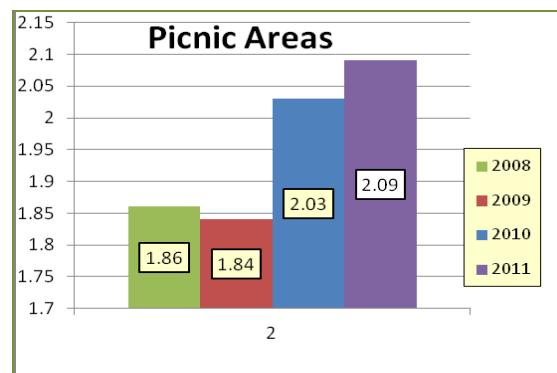
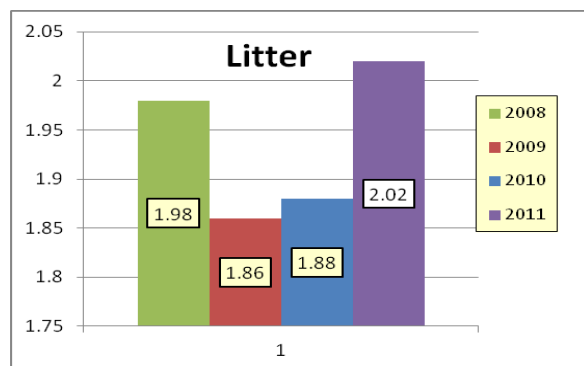
The Love Your Parks Day Survey presents 10 categories to assess. Each category has a set of questions relating to conditions that require a rating or N/A. Each category also requires an Overall Rating. Here is the Litter category as an example:

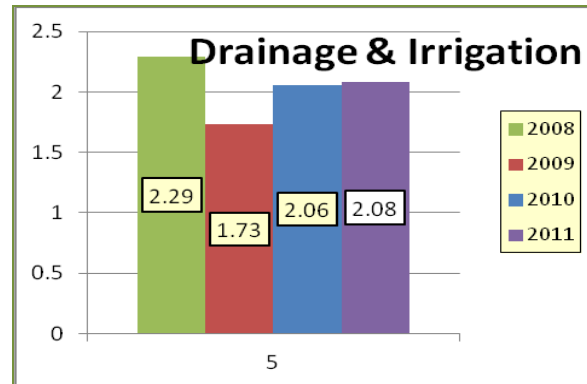
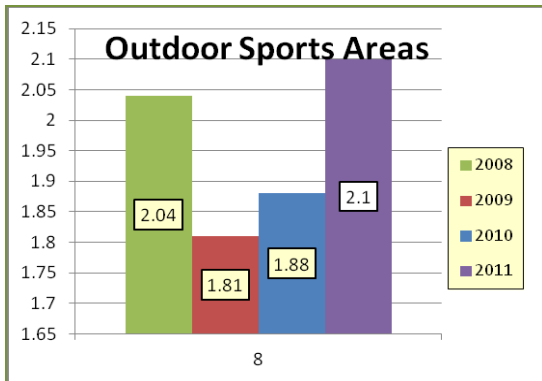
a. Are the grounds generally free of litter?	<input type="checkbox"/> yes	<input type="checkbox"/> mostly	<input type="checkbox"/> partly	<input type="checkbox"/> no	<input type="checkbox"/> N/A
b. Are trash receptacles available?	<input type="checkbox"/> yes	<input type="checkbox"/> mostly	<input type="checkbox"/> partly	<input type="checkbox"/> no	<input type="checkbox"/> N/A
c. Are trash receptacles emptied?	<input type="checkbox"/> yes	<input type="checkbox"/> mostly	<input type="checkbox"/> partly	<input type="checkbox"/> no	<input type="checkbox"/> N/A
<b>LITTER</b> <u>Rate this section overall</u>	<input type="checkbox"/> 1 Good	<input type="checkbox"/> 2	<input type="checkbox"/> 3	<input type="checkbox"/> 4 Poor	<input type="checkbox"/> N/A

The answer to each question is weighted from 1-4, 1 being the best rating. N/A is not weighted.

Rating	Yes/Good =1	Mostly/Satisfactory =2	Partly/Needs Improvement =3	No/Poor =4
Chart Range	1→1.75	1.76→2.50	2.51→3.25	3.26→4.0

These graphs depict 4 category ratings for all surveyed spaces for the years 2008-2011. The best ratings are the shortest columns.





In 2011 **Litter** ratings were considerably poorer than in past years and **Picnic and Outdoor Sports Areas** have also seen a marked decline in conditions. On the other hand, **Drainage & Irrigation** ratings (and **Greenery**, not pictured) were only slightly worse than in 2010.

Other categories--**Restrooms, Hardscape, Rec Centers, Children's Play Areas** and the **Overall Rating**--fared better in 2011 than in prior years. These initial results were surprising. One would expect, given the deep reductions in maintenance staffing, that conditions in all categories would have deteriorated. Assistant Director of Public Works, Brooke Levin points out that these staffing cuts did not occur until July, 2011, perhaps still too soon to see the full effects of reduced maintenance.

While ratings are subjective, comments, which were requested for each category, often provide useful information concerning existing problems. The following is a list of the common themes we identified from surveyors' comments. A compendium of category comments can be found as an addendum to this report.

#### LITTER

- 1) Cardboard boxes are easily toppled, leaving litter scattered all over the ground.
- 2) Not enough litter containers
- 3) Cardboard containers become soaked by irrigation and rains and they disintegrate.
- 4) Litter accumulates over weekends.

#### PICNIC AREAS

- 1) Picnic tables covered with graffiti and broken
- 2) Barbecues dirty and rusty

#### RESTROOMS

- 1) Restrooms are often locked.
- 2) Restrooms are beyond repair and port-a-potty has been installed.
- 3) Homeless use restrooms and block them from outside use.

#### HARDSCAPE

- 1) Graffiti on benches and signs
- 2) Walkways crumbling
- 3) Grass encroaching on walkway

#### DRAINAGE & IRRIGATION

- 1) Leaking or non-functioning irrigation systems
- 2) Sprinklers are set wrong—too much water or misdirected

#### GREENERY

- 1) Dead grass
- 2) Grass is mowed but clippings are left behind.
- 3) Dead branches
- 4) Too many weeds
- 5) Dog poop on grass
- 6) Invasive species and ivy encroachment

#### RECREATION CENTER EXTERIORS

- 1) Needs painting

#### OUTDOOR SPORTS AREAS

- 1) Basketball, tennis courts need resurfacing
- 2) No/broken nets on basketball hoops
- 3) Broken bleachers

#### CHILDREN'S OUTDOOR PLAY AREAS

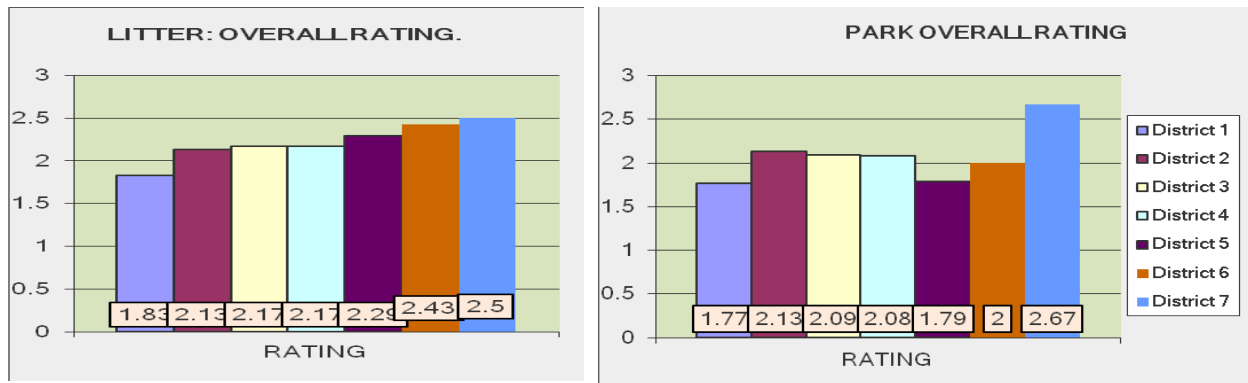
- 1) Play surface has holes
- 2) Sandbox sand is encroached by grass
- 3) Graffiti on play equipment
- 4) Missing swings

### Survey Results by Districts

In the **Park Overall Rating** the chart (below) shows that District 1 parks received the best rating by a small margin over District 5, that Districts 2, 3 and 4 were in a virtual tie and that District 7 was, by a strong margin, the loser in this category, falling into the “Needs Improvement” category.

In three categories District 7 was rated the poorest: **Litter, Restrooms** and **Greenery**.

In five other categories District 7 was rated next to the poorest: **Picnic, Hardscape, Drainage & Irrigation, Outdoor Sports** and **Water Elements**. Since maintenance hubs cover all of Oakland parks equitably OPC believes that the poorer conditions in this district are due to a dearth of volunteers groups.



### PARK MAINTENANCE CHALLENGES

As American cities prospered through the '50s, '60s, and '70s they acquired open space and built new parks and Oakland was no exception. With new parks came the need for increased outlays for services, and, for a while, revenues kept pace with increasing expenditures but cities were caught in the headlights when gas and electricity costs soared in the '80s. In 1989 in Oakland, when costs began to outpace park maintenance funding, voters approved the Landscaping and Lighting District [LLAD] which provided the additional funds needed to finance a steady level of maintenance for about a decade.

But costs--personnel, fuel, water, electricity rates-- continued to rise and revenues from the LLAD remained fixed. In addition, thousands of new trees were planted and state bonds and measures added over 300 acres of open space. Maintenance for parks was once more in jeopardy. The LLAD shortfall for the 2007/08 budget cycle was projected to be \$12.5 million and the General Fund could no longer make up the entire difference. Officials proposed an add-on tax in the form of LLAD II in 2006 and it was approved by voters but, by the summer, the new district assessment had to be rescinded for legal complications. Soon, creative solutions would have to be found to keep the system viable.

Public Works tackled the problem head-on by reorganizing the maintenance department for more efficiency. They created the Hub System where 32 maintenance teams, each comprised of a Crew Leader and a Gardener II, were assigned a geographical area to call their own. For two years this system proved particularly productive and gratifying for the teams themselves who took pride in their work.

In fiscal 2008-09 park maintenance was pummeled by budget cuts. Ten gardeners and 10 tree specialist positions were eliminated, requiring ingenuity to cope with staffing shortages. All landscaped areas were given a designation as "priority (the more highly used) or non-priority" and maintenance was apportioned accordingly. Essential services such as mowing continued for

all open space but, with fewer staff, pruning, landscaping, replanting and tree care were all reduced. PWA removed litter containers from non-priority areas, hoping that the studies which showed that less litter accumulates in areas without containers would prove correct. User complaints via the Call Center drove emergency maintenance and repairs to all areas.

Total maintenance staffing remained constant for another three years until July, 2011, when the full impact of the Great Recession hit. With revenues 25% down from prior years City Council passed a bone-lean budget that shaved 10 more gardeners and one more tree specialist from the maintenance roster. Today, maintenance gardeners number 26, park attendants 25 and tree specialists, 15. One bad storm in November, which blew down scores of trees, was enough to put the tree specialists years behind on their pruning and tree-removal schedule. Occupy Oakland at Frank Ogawa Plaza and Snow Park has caused a maintenance backlog that will be hard to make up in the foreseeable future.

## **PUBLIC WORKS: PERSPECTIVES**

### **Interview with Park Supervisor and Irrigation Specialist Martin Matarrese**

Survey ratings for Irrigation & Drainage have not changed significantly since last year and staffing for irrigation has remained constant for nearly 20 years. But with only three full-time employees we wondered how they manage the vast network of irrigation systems. Supervisor Matarrese filled us in.

#### *Irrigation Problems*

While most of the irrigation systems in the city are functional at any given time—about 90% according to Oakland Parkland Resources Supervisor and irrigation specialist Martin Matarrese—and replacement parts are readily available, the obstacle to a more perfectly functioning citywide irrigation system is short-staffing. With only three positions allocated to irrigation it's not easy keeping up repairs to a system which can boast of irrigation for practically every landscaped open space in the city. While much of the day-to-day irrigation concerns are executed by gardeners—system spot checks, turning systems on and off—the broken and malfunctioning systems are attended to by a staff of only three.

The earlier systems, installed primarily in the 1970s, are completing their life spans. The conduit material used in those systems was metal; the galvanized pipes corrode as debris gets into the valves, causing the system to stay open or break down. Up and down the median strip under the BART tracks on MLK the irrigation has been shut down because of this corrosion. It will be replaced when BART completes its retrofitting but, in the meantime, the median is an ugly stretch of dirt and weeds. The turf area in front of the recreation center at Golden Gate Park in North Oakland has the same metal pipes and is also due for a replacement system.

The newer systems have a greater lifespan but they have their problems, too, and some of them surface soon after installation. Instead of metal, they use plastic which can't corrode but it can crack under pressure or shifts of the earth caused by earthquakes. This is apparently what happened early-on to the system at Splashpad Park at Hwy580/Grand Avenue. Repairs can be done by cutting out the sections of cracked pipe and replacing them, doable but time-consuming.

Sprinkler head breakage is a common problem which can result from incursion of tree roots into the system or by lawn mowers and user impact. Missing or malfunctioning sprinkler heads can be detected when the systems are checked during the day which is a task assigned to gardeners. Of course, with fewer gardeners it takes longer to make the rounds to check the systems. The only evidence of leaking pipes or malfunctioning sprinkler heads may be pools of water in the morning after a night watering. The Measure DD landscaping on the Lakeshore side of Lake Merritt has proved especially susceptible to sprinkler head breakage. The heads are numerous in this linear strip along the lake and because of the design of ornamental spot landscaping they are smaller, less visible and inadvertently cracked by mowers and by passers-by. Park neighbors or other passers-by often report irrigation system problems to the PWA Call Center that they see at night when the irrigation systems are actually running on schedule.

Vandals contribute to the problems. Driven by high prices for metal, last year they stole the brass back-flow preventers, sometimes by tying chains around them and connecting them to a vehicle to pull them off their fittings. This particular crime has been mitigated in Oakland by painting the backflow preventers green, which decreases their value in the black market. Kids, or vandals, have also been known to get into the control boxes and turn the sprinklers on so they can have a romp in the spray. Sometimes they pull wires from the boxes as they have done at Lions Creek and Carter-Gilmore.

#### *Addressing Irrigation Problems*

It's expensive to run a city-wide irrigation system. Yet, just like water saving appliance, modern technology has improved irrigation by making 'smart' systems and Oakland has been installing those systems in its new capital projects. East Oakland Regional Sports Center, Cypress Memorial Park, Jefferson Square, Union Point Park, Chinese Garden and Peralta Hacienda all sport the Calsense Irrigation System which enables remote control of watering and an alert system when something goes wrong. Antennas have been installed at high points of Joaquin Miller Park to permit the relay of signals from the irrigation systems to the control center at the Ranger Station in Joaquin Miller. The flow and timing of the watering in those parks can now be controlled by one person at one computer and the system sends alerts to the computer if watering exceeds or under provides for the needs of the area which could indicate broken

heads or a break in the line. In time, adjustments can be made to the same system to sensitize it to changes in weather and to adjust its watering accordingly. This will protect plants and grass from oversaturation which occurs especially in late summer. Not only is this new system saving greenery and precious water, it is also saving worker hours normally spent testing systems. All of the park supervisors will eventually be able to monitor the Calsense controllers from their desktop computers.

Mr. Matarrese stresses that staff training can add to efficiency and cost-cutting. With fewer and fewer trained gardeners it becomes imperative to train our part-timers to do some of the jobs gardeners do. Currently they do mostly drudge work—using weed-eaters, walking behind mowers, trimming hedges. *Additional training for part-timers can not only free up gardeners to perform the tasks they are skilled in but it can also motivate part-timers to pursue jobs as gardeners.*

#### **Public Works Assistant Director Brooke Levin**

Overall, Ms. Levin was not particularly surprised by the results of the 2011 Love Your Parks Day Survey. However, she advises caution because significant budget cuts from last year were not implemented until July of 2011, and the effects of these cuts may not have been apparent during the survey. The survey indicates very little change in rating for **Restrooms** and **Drainage & Irrigation**, and Ms. Levin indicated that staff levels for these two items have not changed since last year.

The ratings for **Litter** and **Outdoor Sports Areas** indicate a measurable decline in conditions. Ms. Levin opined that these were predictably closely aligned because they are affected by sport leagues activities which occupy the sports fields on a continual basis throughout the year. Improvements are needed in how sports leagues cooperate in maintaining the fields. Ms. Levin agreed that, in the future, there may be the opportunity to work with established sports leagues to better optimize their resources, use of the fields, field permit fees, and commitment to removing litter, etc.

Overall there has been a reduction of the number of experienced, full time park and tree maintenance workers. Ms. Levin pointed out that so far, the survey shows that service levels have not dropped significantly. However, with a number of significant new capital projects being completed with corresponding increases in maintenance needs, the funding challenges will increase. (These capital projects include the Measure DD improvements around Lake Merritt, Caltrans retrofits, and the BART extension to the airport.) Fortunately, there has been an increase in volunteer work to maintain the parks and PWA now has a dedicated volunteer coordinator—Jocelyn Combs—a position that was strongly recommended by OPC in its 2010 report.



**Park Supervisor Brian Carthan**

**Q:** *How are the 26 gardeners organized, assigned?*

**A:** We now have 18 hubs, down from 32. Eighteen of our gardeners are crew leaders for those hubs and the remaining gardeners are assigned to work with them or to fill in as crew leaders when needed. We have three gardeners out on long-term sick leave so we usually have only 22 gardeners each work day. Our park attendants are part-timers and, until this year could work up to 960 hours annually. With the 10% across the board cuts in this year's budget their ceiling is now 864 hours annually so they are rotated in and out of the system and number only about 12-13 at any given time. This allows for teams of two workers for each of the 18 hubs but, of course, these hubs cover a much broader area than when there were 32 hubs.

**Q:** *How are you managing litter pickup with reduced staffing?*

**A:** We have different levels of service. Our A level is the major community parks which happen to be the focal points of the 18 hubs we now have. We are hoping to get funding for three compacter trucks known as mini-packers. This would enable us to pick up a lot more litter before making a trip to the dump. This might enable us to assign a special crew to just pick up litter at all the parks which would free up the crews which have to do that task to do more true gardening tasks.

**Q:** *Have there been any innovations in litter containment? The cardboard boxes are not very durable and they tip over constantly.*

**A:** We now have in-ground waste containers at all our dog parks. They are basically a 5-foot deep lined hole in the ground with a metal waste container over them—they look like a regular container. So far they have not leaked and we can extend the pickup periods by a great margin. We are looking at King Estates as the next area to install this in-ground container. Right now our crews have to travel 20 minutes into King Estates (resource conservation area) to collect the garbage from the cardboard containers.

**Q:** *How has the mowing schedule been affected by the cutbacks?*

**A:** It hasn't changed because we haven't cut back on staffing for mowing. We mow every 14-18 days and sport fields are given priority.

**Q:** *What opportunities are given to maintenance personal to improve their skills? Do part-timers have a chance to move up in the ranks?*

**A:** We are giving all our gardeners training in Bay-friendly horticulture which is offered by StopWaste. Almost all of them have received the training to date. We encourage our part-timers to get the same training but they have to do it on their own. They do get practical training working side by side with our gardeners and over the years two or three attendants

have been promoted to gardener status. Supervisor Rocha is working with Merritt College to provide some second-level training for our gardeners.

**Q:** *What feedback have you heard from gardeners and attendants about the work load?*

**A:** They all say that there is more work than they can do.

**Q:** *What's your answer to that?*

**A:** We need to provide the best tools, more training and more park attendants. One tool we now have is a new dumping trailer which can hold a lot of debris, which means fewer trips to the dump. If we could get the mini-packers we would also save a lot of traveling hours.

**Q:** *Have technical improvements provided more efficiencies?*

**A:** City Works is helping. We now have desk-top computers in the three major areas—East, West and North Oakland. Crews do not have to go all the way to headquarters to input their work data for the day. Not all of them are up to speed on the system yet but, when they are we will be able to make that data available to the public through our website. GPS tracking enables us to locate and expedite the crews nearest to emergencies to attend to repairs.

**Q:** *What impact has Occupy Oakland had on maintenance?*

**A:** It has taken a lot of our time but I don't have the numbers yet.

### **Park Volunteer Coordinator Jocelyn Combs**

**Q:** *What areas does Adopt-a-Park include?*

**A:** Parks and landscaped medians. Kelly Pschirrer is in charge of the landscaped medians, I concentrate on the parks.

**Q:** *How is the Adopt-a-Park program progressing? Number of new adopters?*

**A:** Our performance year began May 1. We've signed about 10 brand-new adopters and we are continually trying to contact people who signed on years ago to get them into the new Adopt-a-Park program and provide assistance. Every day or two we get requests from volunteers who are not officially signed up so we work with them to enlist. Some neighborhoods have many more volunteers than others. East Oakland, for example, does not. There is no real community around some of the parks such as 85<sup>th</sup> mini-park or Carter-Gilmore so people aren't involved enough with their parks to volunteer.

**Q:** *What kind of assistance do you/PWA offer to adopters?*

**A:** We start off by asking what they want to do in their parks and how we can help. That includes plantings they might have in mind. We need to be practical about those. We give them bags and will pick them up when full. They can get pickup sticks for litter and we even have

small pickup sticks for children! We also give them brooms, rakes, gloves and they can keep these tools and pass them on to the next adopters if they wish. We want to make it easy for them to do their volunteer work.

**Q:** *Is there any ongoing contact with the members?*

**A:** The easiest way is by email. We also have a facebook page—[www.facebook.com/adoptaspot](http://www.facebook.com/adoptaspot)—for people to post comments and photos of their volunteer projects.

**Q:** *Do you feel you have reached the goals you set for yourself this first year?*

**A:** I set many goals for this job and am working hard to achieve them

- Achieve adoption of 20% of Oakland's parks/landscaped medians
- Support 12 new large-group projects. We're about halfway there with projects such as the 24<sup>th</sup> Avenue median cleanup by the contractors of the new Highland Hospital build, or the Lake Merritt Deadheaders who work semi-monthly on the new landscaping around the lake, and the OPC Bancroft Median cleanup in August.
- Clocking hours on OurVolts. This is the handy online site that was created for Morcom Rose Garden and we hope to get our adopters to use it so we can get an accurate accounting of the hours they work. We're working on it and should have it ready for use early next year.
- Achieve 500 friends on Facebook
- Purchase and install [www.Oaklandadoptaspot.org](http://www.Oaklandadoptaspot.org) --Done
- Install and manage an online volunteer project calendar on the Adopt-s-Spot website.

**Q:** *What goals will you be striving for in 2012?*

**A:** Now we need to work on more collaborations with other park organizations to leverage volunteer power. We have to learn to do more with less.

**Q:** *Do you feel this program makes a real difference for park maintenance?*

**A:** I hope so. I've worked for the City for 12 years and I am known as an optimist. I want to make this job sustainable so someone else can step in. Volunteers will always be out there whether we are here or not but the challenge is to grow a community of volunteers in areas where a real sense of community is lacking.

## **STEWARDSHIP, THE STORY OF TWO WEST-OAKLAND PARKS**

OPC surveys provide a public portal on park conditions at a given period in time and this year's survey probably came too soon after the July maintenance cuts to reflect the true impact of those cuts. In the two short months since the survey, however, maintenance crews have had to

make radical adjustments, first to the doubling of their areas of responsibility, then to damage from extreme storms and, finally to the labor required to refurbish Frank Ogawa Square and Snow Park after Occupy Oakland vacated these areas. Playing catch-up in the best of circumstances is difficult but these are not the best of circumstances: Authorized staffing is at record lows and actual daily staffing even lower due to worker illnesses. 130 parks, scores of public buildings with landscaping and landscaped medians cannot be properly cared for by twenty-two gardeners and their attendants.

### **St. Andrews Plaza**

Thanks to park stewardship many Oakland parks, plazas and medians benefit enormously from the loving labors of local groups and individuals. But there are fewer support groups in the neighborhoods that need them the most. One exception is a small plaza on San Pablo and 32<sup>nd</sup> Street called St. Andrews Plaza. Formerly a concrete eyesore along a busy street, littered with the refuse left behind by recyclers it was adopted by the San Pablo Corridor group in 2010, and the restoration work has been spear-headed by local resident Alex Miller-Cole. His group has held semi-monthly cleanups; they have primed, sanded, painted and planted the area and have procured grants for tree-planting on the side streets while reaching out to neighborhood property owners to participate in sprucing up their stores and residences. This was and continues to be a challenging task but the outcome is its own reward—a new sense of pride for the locals and positive changes of attitude on the part of the transients who hang out in the park. This is the kind of stewardship that will help Oakland weather this difficult time of diminished resources but it is not sustainable in the long-run without the ongoing support from city sources that it has heretofore received.

#### ***St. Andrews Plaza Cleanup***



*Leonardo from Market St.  
powerwashing the entire park*



*The debris we collected added up to a truckful of bags  
Bags & hauling courtesy of Oakland Public Works*

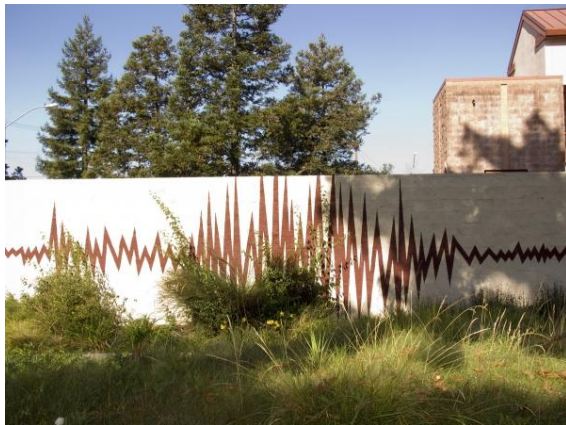
### **Cypress Freeway Memorial Park**

This is the story of a park whose purpose was noble but whose design we believe was ill-conceived. It should serve as an example of what not to do when building a new park.

Cypress Freeway Memorial Park at 14<sup>th</sup> and Mandela Parkway is more than a park; it is a commemoration of the West Oakland communities severed by the freeway's construction in 1957 and reunited by its collapse when the Loma Prieta earthquake struck on Oct. 17, 1989. The park is dotted with plaques and engravings of residents' memories of the quake. Waves are evident throughout the park in the form of plantings and structures to replicate the feeling of the earthquake. When this park was dedicated on October 17, 2005, 16 years to the day after the earthquake, it was a tribute to the resilience of a West Oakland Neighborhood. But some residents objected to the design of this park at the community meeting. They wanted recreational components for the neighborhood children and, it is all too apparent that the final design did not succeed in bringing local people to this park.

Today, the park's luster is gone, its honorable purpose tainted; it is quickly becoming an eyesore. The undulating Buffalo grasses that carpeted the rolling breams and needed no mowing are now choked with weeds and the homeless have made camps here. We asked Public Works if anything could be done about the weed-choked grasses. They do plan to overseed with Ecolawn, a type of hardier grass, but the weeds will continue to thrive (herbicide use is prohibited in parks) unless they are dug out by hand. The park stands in stark contrast to the \*Mandela Parkway Median which is still attractive and well-maintained thanks to the maintenance contract that was built into the project.

*Cypress Freeway Memorial Park (October, 2005)*



*Oaktown Photo*



*Oaktown Photo*



*Cypress Freeway Memorial Park (December, 2011)*



**Weed-choked Grass**



**Homeless Encampment**



**The Silva Family volunteers at Cypress.**



**A Family Commitment**

This park requires the care of a dedicated group of volunteers to restore it and one family has taken up the challenge and signed on as OPC stewards and Adopt-a-Park members but the task is daunting and the presence of homeless is a deterrent to volunteerism. And even then, it is doubtful that the park would attract the kind of use that would help to protect it. It does not beckon neighborhood users who might buy into volunteering to care for this park.

\*A cautionary note: Maintenance of the Mandela Parkway will revert to PWA in 2012. It may suffer the same fate as the San Pablo Median which is today in a ruinous state.

## **OPC RECOMMENDATIONS**

### **NEW PARKS: PLAN WISELY FOR THE SHORT AND LONG TERM**

The future economic picture for Oakland looks bleak. New parks should not even be a consideration when maintenance levels will not likely increase any time soon. But, even in lean times, it is inevitable that open space will be developed so we hope that it will be done wisely. When developing new parks the design must reflect the communities' needs above all. If a community has no use for a park it is doomed to decay. A neighborhood steward group should be a

prerequisite before final approval. Durable materials should be chosen whenever possible but attention must be paid to their longevity. For instance, the artificial turf at Raimondi has a life expectancy of 10 years. Disposal costs of Astroturf are significant and bad for the environment and replacement costs are not factored into the total capital costs.

### **UPDATE THE OSCAR & CREATE A MASTER PLAN FOR PARKS**

We listed over fifteen parks earlier in this document that were not included in the 1996 OSCAR Element catalogue. That list should be updated and each one should be crosschecked to see that it is zoned as a park or another classification of open space that is appropriate. In some instances these areas may still be zoned as private property or streets and any improvements that are made to improperly zoned open space can be challenged in court.

Large parks such as Joaquin Miller and Lakeside Park should have master plans. Recently, a plan for a dog park (whose design had earlier been approved by the PRAC) at the Eastshore section of Lakeside Park met with strong public opposition at the final approval stage. If Lakeside and other large parks had master plans, this kind of last-minute public upheaval would probably be avoided. Dog parks and community gardens should not be an afterthought in park planning. Rather, they should be incorporated into a park design and strategically placed to serve the constituency that would benefit most from them. We are happy to see that an area plan that is being developed for the China-Town/Lake Merritt area has a strong focus on improving existing parks and open space and we would like to see other area plans do the same.

### **ADDRESS LONG-TERM LAYOFFS**

We were informed that three of the four gardeners have been on sick leave for a year or more and that there is no current option for replacing them and we find it hard to understand how a maintenance agency can operate with 15% of its force absent at any given time. This should not continue. We urge City officials to address the matter of long-term layoffs.

### **ENGAGE SPORTS LEAGUES IN SPORTS FIELD MAINTENANCE**

The City is encouraged to continue to increase the use of organized sports leagues as an integral component of sports field maintenance and rehabilitation. Organized sports leagues do have considerable financial resources, a largely untapped volunteer pool and a strong incentive to improve sports fields in Oakland. (Traditionally, sports leagues, as the largest user of sports fields, are also associated with the largest impact in terms of litter and turf damage – they need to do more.) Sports leagues may desire a higher level of long term commitment of use of the fields, in “trade” for a higher level of commitment towards maintenance and rehabilitation on their part. However, this relationship must be balanced with the imperative that access to facilities by non-sports league users is well-protected.

This straightforward “win-win” relationship between the City and organized sports leagues has been very successful, although not without occasional challenges, in many cities in northern California. For example, the cities of Berkeley and Albany use a non-profit, third-party provider to maintain many soccer fields and schedule field use. As a result, the maintenance of the fields has improved, the field use has been optimized and costs to those cities have decreased

The City should revisit its fees for field use, which are relatively low. Perhaps a multi-tier schedule should be created in which organized sports leagues pay a higher rate and individual users pay a lower rate. We are confident that a balance can be achieved resulting in improved maintenance of sports fields, higher commitment to use by sports leagues, and plentiful access by occasional users.

### **HOLD THE LINE ON MAINTENANCE CUTBACKS**

Maintenance staffing has been cut to the bone. Field workers are already discouraged by the work that they cannot accomplish. With a heavier workload injuries will increase and morale will plummet. We urge City Council to identify funds for the three mini-packers that could streamline litter pickup and we caution that any more cutbacks to maintenance staffing would create an untenable situation.

## **CONCLUSION**

OPC commends the Public Works Agency administrators and workers for their heroic efforts and their sacrifices to maintain our open space. We know this is a daunting task and that our standards have to adjust to our diminished resources. We applaud and encourage the department’s ongoing efforts to identify new technology and explore new approaches to park maintenance so that a smaller work force can conceivably manage to care for our parks in the short term but we caution that, in the long-term, this smaller force cannot meet the challenges our aging park system presents.

OPC is pleased with the creation this year of a Park Steward Coordinator position and encouraged by the progress that has been made to recruit new stewards and reach out to volunteers who have not heretofore been recognized. Stewardship is the primary focus of our organization and we feel that it will play an important part in the sustainability of our park systems through these hard times. OPC also appreciates the effort of any citizen who has taken the time to pick up a piece of litter and dispose of it properly. We know the importance of one small act and the accumulative effect of the many acts of all park stewards and park groups to preserve and improve their parks. In times like these good citizens step up and we all benefit.



Volunteers and park groups can help parks weather difficult economic times but the bottom line is that our expansive park system cannot endure over the long run with the current levels of maintenance staffing. We have gone from 175 park maintenance positions in 1968 to seventy-one in 2011. Even after factoring in improvements in management and equipment it would be folly to think that a maintenance staff of 40% of its original size could keep an ever-expanding system up to the standards we would require for the safety and enjoyment of our citizens. We must find a way to get back on track.

## ADDENDUM: A SAMPLING OF SURVEYORS' COMMENTS

## 2011 LOVE YOUR PARKS DAY SURVEY

LITTER		
CD-1	Dover	<i>Neighbors who use the park often pick up the litter.</i>
CD-5	Josie de la Cruz	<i>Today is Sunday and there is a lot of litter on the ground and on the grass.</i>
CD-6	Arroyo Viejo	<i>Not enough boxes; soccer players take boxes to use as goal posts and leave them in fields; early morning boxes are knocked over by crows or dogs and trash is scattered; lots of picnic party debris. I asked Joe Moore, on staff at the rec center, about it the other day. He said it's been getting worse for some time now. Kind of hard to ask kids not to litter when they see big piles of debris left by grownups. An anti-litter and dumping campaign should be organized.</i>
PICNIC AREAS		
CD-3	DeFremery	<i>It's hard to have a Bar-B-Q with no pits and we need a Hot Box for hot charcoal when patrons bring their own grills. EP: Paper &amp; trash in picnic area. BBQ pits need to be cleaned. Tables &amp; benches need painting, repairing or replacement.</i>
CD-7	88 <sup>th</sup> Avenue, Eula Brinson Mini Park	<i>two tables all covered by graffiti- very ugly</i>
RESTROOMS		
CD-3	Pine Knoll	<i>Restroom is locked but easy to see through bars to both women's and men's sections which are both strewn with litter. A park user says the restrooms have been locked for over a year. There is a port-a-potty that was clean.</i>
CD-4	Montclair	<i>This is one of those that is hard to manage. Sometimes vandals come in and create all the issues mentioned above. The bathrooms in the park are locked over the weekend because of vandalism.</i>
CD-5	Central Reservoir	<i>Restrooms are cleaned regularly but often have wet floors and paper debris inside. Fortunately there are gated doors which can be closed for safety/ privacy.</i>
SURVEYORS' COMMENTS ABOUT HARDSCAPE		
CD-2	Madison Square	<i>Sidewalks are in bad condition. The benches along the concrete wall fronting Jackson must be removed because homeless folk congregate, urinate, and defecate in that area. Quite often there is an intolerable stench that is unhealthy for all!</i>
CD-3	St. Andrews Plaza	<i>Tree roots have lifted most all floor areas of the plaza. There are a number of places to trip over and fall.</i>
CD-4	Allendale	<i>Hardscape is sorely in need of repair and has been so for years. The path to Allendale school is hazardous and has not been resurfaced for at least 15 years. The 5 benches are in bad shape as are the bleachers.</i>
DRAINAGE & IRRIGATION		
CD-1	North Oakland Regional Sports Center	<i>Drip irrigation watering times might be expanded and need to be regularly run, as they were off for part of the year.</i>

CD-6	Arroyo Viejo Park	<i>Sprinklers are incorrectly set; some areas receive too much water, and specimen trees are damaged by direct hits of heavy pressure.</i>
CD-7	Holly Mini-Park	<i>A resident told us the sprinklers haven't been turned on for at least 5 years. It should fixed it could be a nice little park.</i>
CD-7	Officer Willie Wilkins	<i>A local said some of the sprinklers are watering the sidewalks and need to be redirected.</i>
GREENERY		
CD-3	Golden Gate	<i>Ground cover at Golden Gate end used to be grassy &amp; mowed. Now, grass is dead. Too many stumps--need to be ground out.</i>
CD-3	Clinton Square	<i>trees are nice, grass needs mowing, parts of lawn are dead and all different kinds of weeds cover it. Grass is almost only weeds.</i>
CD-4	McCrea Casting Pool	<i>This park has significant portions which are "urban wilderness." The park needs a comprehensive management plan to include removing invasive tree species and replacing them with natives. Many trees are endangered by ivy. If the local community had not initiated work days in the park 5 years ago, several additional trees would have been lost.</i>
RECREATION CENTER EXTERIOR		
CD-3	Lakeside park	<i>The Garden Center needs painting and the overhang has wood that needs to be replaced.</i>
CD-3	DeFremery	<i>For the past 5 years we have been waiting to get a real paint job to the outside of the center. Who is supposed to wash the windows? We have our own cobwebs year round, not just at Halloween.</i>
CD-7	Verdese Carter	<i>The windows are covered by security screens we could not see them. Roof looks old and in need of replacement.</i>
OUTDOOR SPORTS AREAS		
CD-2	Franklin Park	<i>Field used heavily, but in awful condition. Too small for amount of kids. Bad field. Field uneven, in desperate need of mowing and care. Weeds in grass. Litter also on field. Very sad to see. These kids want to play soccer/other sports, but only have an awful field to play on.</i>
CD-4	Joaquin Miller	<i>Perry field is too shallow for baseball so it must be used for softball but it's in very poor condition. Many mole holes in grass field. Grass has grown into the infield. No mounds or bases. The asphalt area has a basketball hoop with a dangling net but the asphalt is rutted and weeds are growing in cracks--not really usable. This field is an embarrassment to JM Park!</i>
CD-4	Brookdale	<i>Tennis courts are in horrible condition, may need to be re-vamped heavily to get people to use them once again.</i>
CD-6	Rainbow	<i>Skate board area locked up. Tennis courts abandoned- an eyesore.</i>
OUTDOOR CHILDREN'S PLAY AREAS		
CD-2	Mandana	<i>Swings are missing. "Slide, dented &amp; with graffiti."</i>
CD-3	McClymonds	<i>Weedy, sand filled with small litter. Holes in the rubber mat under swing &amp; near slide.</i>
CD-3	Wade Johnson	<i>New &amp; looking good! Rubber mat is already deteriorating where water puddles next to seesaw.</i>
CD-5	Josie de la Cruz	<i>Play surface is not in good condition. It has many holes</i>