

Memorandum



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TO: PUBLIC SAFETY, FINANCE AND
STRATEGIC SUPPORT COMMITTEE

FROM: Jon Cicirelli

**SUBJECT: PARK RANGER PROGRAM
ANNUAL REPORT**

DATE: October 5, 2022

Approved

Date

10/11/2022

RECOMMENDATION

Accept the Annual Report on the Park Ranger Program for Fiscal Year 2021-2022.

OUTCOME

This report provides the Public Safety, Finance and Strategic Support Committee an update on the Park Ranger Program's 2021-2022 highlights and challenges, and the Park Ranger Program's 2022-2023 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 (the 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 accepted 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 50-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 parklands, restore native vegetation, maintain rustic hiking trails, and educate the public on the cultural and natural history of San José.

ANALYSIS

The Park Ranger Program has been a staple unit of the Department for the last five decades, through many changes that have influenced day-to-day operations. Today's program reflects the generalist service model that the City Council accepted on January 29, 2019 and produced important results and highlights in 2021-2022. The generalist service model includes and reinforces the importance of all aspects of the Park Ranger Program's mission. The following sections describe how, as generalists, Park Rangers served as stewards of the park system, providing public safety services (wildfire suppression, medical response, search and rescue, and rules enforcement), protecting and preserving natural and cultural resources, and inspiring future generations to love and nurture nature. Park Rangers provided crucial maintenance and restorative work on natural and historical elements within City parks and offered nature-based programming for individuals of all ages and abilities to inspire a love for the outdoors and encourage access to the City's parks system. They educated and enforced state and local laws and enforced park rules so that park visitors could enjoy their visit, aiming to resolve situations with the lowest appropriate level of enforcement. Park Rangers were often first on the scene for medical, fire and other emergencies in the parks they oversaw.

These accomplishments notwithstanding, the program's staffing situation remains the primary concern.

Recruitment and Staff Retention

The Park Ranger Program's staffing challenges have increased over the last year to levels last experienced during the Great Recession after layoffs, when the program experienced a low of six employees, causing the program to once again reduce the scope of services that can be provided and recalibrate planning for a multi-year rebuilding process. While recent recruitment efforts have the potential to bring a much-needed influx of new Park Rangers, the program continues to experience challenges with staffing, something that other jurisdictions in the region have also experienced but not to the same degree as the City's Park Ranger Program. The program was funded for 22.89 full-time equivalent (FTE) positions in 2021-2022 as portrayed in Table 1.

Table 1 – 2021-2022 Budgeted Positions for Park Ranger Program

Classification	Budgeted FTE	Filled FTE	Vacant FTE	Vacancy Rate	Notes
Supervising Park Rangers	2.00	1.00	1.00	50%	Preparing for recruitment
Senior Park Rangers	4.00	2.00	2.00	50%	Preparing for recruitment
Park Rangers Full-Time	11.00	3.00	8.00	73%	Active recruitment in progress detailed in Table 2.
Park Rangers Part-Time Benefited	2.25	2.25	0.0	0%	
All Benefited Rangers	19.25	8.25	11.0	57%	
Classification	Budgeted FTE	Worked FTE	Unused FTE	Unused Rate	Notes
Park Rangers Part-Time Unbenefited	3.64 (7,571.2 hours)	2.14 (4,453.5 hours)	1.50 (3,117.7 hours)	41%	8 part-time unbenefited Park Rangers worked these hours.
Total Budgeted FTE	22.89				

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. Park Rangers participated in five virtual and in-person job fairs and held tabling events at large events such as Viva CalleSJ, to seek qualified and diverse applicants. Park Rangers also worked with the Department’s Office of Communications to develop an in-depth recruitment page on the City of San José website. This page provides detailed information on the Park Ranger program and the hiring process to inform and assist potential applicants on the hiring and training process. Critically, Park Rangers also maintained regular contact with potential applicants to cultivate their interest.

The Department is actively recruiting qualified candidates. Staff has placed announcements nationwide targeting educational institutions, Park Ranger training programs, professional organizations, sites for returning Peace Corp and Americorp members, and military veterans job boards, in addition to the standard job placement sites. Each recruitment cycle lasts approximately 45 days, and includes job posting, rating applications and interviews. Once a cycle closes, applicants are screened and moved into the selection process involving a background check and a psychological and medical evaluation. The next cycle opens for new applications at 30-to-45-day intervals. Table 2 provides details on applicant and candidate statistics for two recruitment cycles in the spring and summer of 2022. Park Ranger is now posted open until filled.

Table 2 - Park Ranger Recruitment Activity

Recruitment Cycle	Spring 2022	Summer 2022
Number of Applicants	49	91
Number Interviewed	10	11 so far
Number to Background	3	4 so far
Number to Conditional Job Offer	pending	pending
Number to Medical and Psychological Evaluation	pending	pending
Number to Final Offer	pending	pending
Number Hired	pending	pending
Expected Start of Academy	January 2023	
Expected Solo Patrol	Starting fall 2023	

Once candidates complete this hiring process to become Park Rangers, the impetus shifts to training; the Department currently plans to enroll hires into a local Santa Clara County Park Ranger academy and then carefully coach and supervise them through field training. With two Senior Park Rangers at the writing of the memorandum, the program can have two Park Rangers in field training at any time.

To create a consistent pipeline for future Park Rangers, the Department is continuing its efforts to develop a Park Ranger Apprenticeship Program, in cooperation with West Valley College. The Department is currently working with a qualified consultant to assist the City in submitting a formal apprenticeship program to the State of California, Division of Apprenticeship Standards for approval.

The Department has not recently recruited for part-time Park Rangers, which explains the unused budgeted hours shown in Table 1. Existing part-time Park Rangers are scheduled to the greatest extent possible considering their other commitments such as other primary jobs. The Department intends to resume recruitment 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, the program has begun to focus on daily staffing patterns for full-time Park Rangers on Alum Rock Park and Kelley Park. Staff identified these locations based on Alum Rock Park's unique geography and isolation and Kelley Park's frequency of fire response and the proximity to Happy Hollow Park and Zoo, one of the Department's most popular destinations. On Wednesdays, when the program's two districts (full-time staff working Sunday to Wednesday or Wednesday to Saturday) are on duty, Park Rangers have more capacity to work on resource projects, interpretive programming and training. The Department is seeking the services of private security contractors to backfill the role of Park Rangers in some cases, as in the need for staff to close gated regional parks at night. 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 line-level positions (at that time) 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 start in a Park Ranger academy in January 2023, then go through field training to prepare for solo patrols starting in Fall 2023. Service priorities remain Alum Rock Park, Kelley Park, Lake Cunningham and Emma Prusch Farm Park. 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 was 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.

Program Service Delivery Changes and Highlights

Despite short staffing, the Park Ranger Program had notable accomplishments in 2021-2022 including:

- *50th Anniversary:* In April 2022, the Department celebrated the 50th anniversary of the Park Ranger Program. In celebration of this milestone, peace officer Park Rangers were presented anniversary badges and non-sworn part-time Park Rangers and retired program members were presented commemorative pins to wear on their uniforms during the year.
- *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. This comprehensive, up-to-date manual addresses the needs of the Department and will assure the program complies with the most recent legal updates. The Department has begun reviewing the draft with the Office of Employee Relations.
- *Body Worn Cameras:* Recognizing the importance of promoting transparency and trust within the community, the Department is moving forward with finalizing and implementing a Body Worn Camera program prior to completing a full duty manual. This has included contracting with a vendor for hardware, software and video storage and training Park Rangers in the use of the cameras. The Administration has been working with the Office of Employee Relations in developing a Body Worn Camera Policy and plans to meet with the Peace Officer Park Ranger Association soon to discuss the implementation of that policy.
- *Public Safety:* On July 14, 2021, Park Rangers responded to a report of an injured person in a non-public area of Alum Rock Park along a rugged section of creek. Park Rangers located the victim and rendered medical care. In cooperation with the San José Fire

Department and the California Department of Forestry and Fire Protection (CAL FIRE), the victim was extricated from the creek by helicopter short-haul rescue and taken to a waiting ambulance in the parking lot for transport to the hospital for advanced medical care. The Department continues to discourage visitors from exploring Alum Rock Park's non-public areas, which are dangerous.

- *Daily Reporting Modernization:* Historically, Park Ranger daily reports were collected on paper and hard copies in writing were stored in the central Park Ranger office. With this system, data collection and tracking were laborious activities and required resources that the Park Ranger office did not have for managing paperwork. In March 2022, the Park Rangers implemented a new system of daily reporting using Microsoft Forms that each Park Ranger completes at the end of their shift. With this new system, data are downloaded at the end of each month and compiled into a Microsoft Excel spreadsheet. This spreadsheet allows for data to be easily accessed and analyzed. This system will remain as the Park Ranger Program works with the Information Technology Department to explore options for a better information management system.

Interpretative Programming

The first two guiding principles of ActivateSJ are Stewardship and Nature. The Park Ranger Program continues to support ActivateSJ's Nature benchmark to "enhance opportunities to connect people to nature through programs, scenic facilities and open spaces" by creating and implementing a nature-focused, interpretive education program. The priority is to ensure that Park Rangers have the proper training and materials to create equity-driven interpretive programs for all San José youth and families by ensuring access for underserved and special needs communities.

In the spring of 2022, along with the program's 50th anniversary, the City of San José celebrated the 150th anniversary of Alum Rock Park, the oldest municipal park in California. In celebration of these milestones, Park Rangers organized interpretive programs and tabled at various community events. These included four Park Ranger-led hikes at Alum Rock and Kelley Park as part of the JUNTOS Initiative (Santa Clara County Public Health Department's prescription parks program, in which the Department is a key partner), nine drop-in interpretive table days at Alum Rock Park and Emma Prusch Farm Park, and a program booth highlighting programming and information at two Viva CalleSJ events. Park Rangers also presented programs and led guided hikes for school and scout groups and Bay Area Older Adults. Across the year, Park Rangers held 38 interpretive programs with 2,008 participants, in addition to the two tabling events at Viva CalleSJ which contacted an estimated 2,850 people alone. In total, Park Rangers provided 40 interpretive events with an estimated 4,858 participants. Non-sworn part-time Park Rangers were key contributors to these community programs.

Resource Management

As part of an intentional generalist service model, Park Rangers also conducted resource management projects to protect and improve parks for future generations. Specifically, Park Rangers conducted projects at Alum Rock Park focused on fire fuel reduction and renovation of the historic Mineral Springs, as well as resource management projects at Kelley Park.

Park Rangers, working cooperatively with the CAL FIRE, the San José Fire Department and the Resilience Corps completed a wildland fuels reduction project along the boundary of Alum Rock Park adjacent to densely populated residential neighborhoods. Crews worked cooperatively to create fuel reduction zones, removing fine fuels at ground level, clearing dead material, and raising larger fuels to reduce the risk of uncontrolled wildfire spreading from the park into the community. Alum Rock Park, which sits in the City's highest severity fire hazard zone, was funded for a comprehensive fuel reduction and vegetation management plan in the 2022-2023 Adopted Operating Budget, thanks in large part to the efforts of Park Rangers.

The Mineral Springs Loop Trail at Alum Rock Park also needed renovations due to various obstructions, overgrown vegetation, and hillside erosion. Working again with the Resilience Corps, Park Rangers removed fallen rock, soil and debris that had covered, and in some areas blocked, the original pathways and stonework. The team removed debris from the clogged drains in the springs, allowing the springs to flow unobstructed and preventing stagnant pools from immediately reforming. Trail edges were brushed back of overgrown vegetation and the spoils from the clean-up work were removed from the area. Much of this work required the use of hand tools, shovels and wheelbarrows, due to the narrow trail and historic structures.

Lastly, Park Rangers continued to work on removing exotic plant species from the regional parks, especially Alum Rock Park and Kelley Park where staff had the greatest presence in the last year. Highly invasive species such as tree of heaven, cape ivy and dittrichia (stinkwort) have been removed from Alum Rock Park and Kelley Park. Park Rangers also located a population of Michael's Rein Orchid, a species with limited distribution and considered threatened by the California Native Plant Society and California Natural Diversity Database. Park Rangers have worked to locate and place protective cages around these plants until a long-term protection plan can be implemented. In total, Park Rangers logged 336 hours on resource management projects.

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 3, in 2021-2022, fire responses continued to challenge the Department, largely due to fires along Coyote Creek and in and around Kelley Park. The number of fire responses near Kelley Park, compared to five years ago, has led the program to consider upgrading one of its Type 7 wildland fire engines, which was taken out of service at the end of its useful life, to a Type 6 to enhance the ability of Park Rangers to provide initial attack wildland fire suppression. Park Ranger-involved medical event responses increased as Happy Hollow Park & Zoo and Lake Cunningham Action Sports Park continued their recovery from Covid pandemic-induced closures.

Table 3 – Public Safety Responses

Type of Response	2017-2018	2018-2019	2019-2020	2020-2021	2021-2022
Fire Responses	30	33	78	156	76
Medical Events	104	84	71	55	82
Search and Rescue/Missing Person	22	12	5	11	5
Total	156	129	154	222	163

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 when appropriate, 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 4 show the different enforcement activities the Park Ranger Program undertook in 2021-2022. Overall, nearly 99 percent of all law enforcement contacts were closed out with warnings and/or education on park rules.

Table 4 – Enforcement Activities

Enforcement Activity	2017-2018	2018-2019	2019-2020	2020-2021	2021-2022
Warnings	9,057	4,265	7,744	11,271*	4,879
Criminal Citations	211	110	109	41	24
Crime Reports	230	80	120	89	33
Arrests	33	48	14	4	2
Total	9,531	4,503	7,987	11,405	4,938

* 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.

Park Ranger 2022-2023 Work Plan (Next Steps)

In 2022-2023, the Department's vision, mission and guiding principles in ActivateSJ will continue to shape the Park Ranger Program. The program's staffing levels, which are the lowest since the Great Recession, drive the Department to continue to prioritize Park Ranger recruitment and training, in the context of what will be a multi-year rebuilding process to reclaim the Park Ranger presence in City parks that the community, City Council and Department desire. When time allows, 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.

CONCLUSION

For 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 needs of the community. Recruitment and retention continue to be the greatest challenge facing the program, 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, the City Manager's Budget Office, Human Resources Department and Office of Employee Relations.

/s/
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