



County of San Mateo

Inter-Departmental Correspondence

Department: BOARD OF SUPERVISORS
DISTRICT 2
File #: 22-873

Board Meeting Date: 11/15/2022

Special Notice / Hearing: None
Vote Required: Majority

To: Honorable Board of Supervisors
From: Supervisor Carole Groom, District 2
Supervisor Don Horsley, District 3
Subject: Equitable Access to the San Mateo County Parks System

RECOMMENDATION:

Adopt a resolution:

- A) Adopting the San Mateo County Parks Department's Interpretive Program Strategic Plan; and
- B) Authorizing the Parks Department to implement the Mariposa Program, which will provide a no-cost Parks Annual Pass to eligible individuals/households, and further authorizing the Parks Director to expand the eligibility list to meet future needs of the residents of San Mateo County; and
- C) Authorizing amendments to the Parks Department's fee schedule to increase the cost of an annual pass and create separate resident and non-resident camping rates for campgrounds within the San Mateo County Parks system.

BACKGROUND:

In an effort to make access to County parks more equitable, in 2021, the San Mateo County Parks Department ("Department") was directed to present to the Board of Supervisors a proposal that would eliminate all vehicle entrance fees from the County park system. Upon analysis of available visitor data and revenue, the Department determined that elimination of vehicle entrance fees would not make access to County parks more equitable, and the loss of revenue would exacerbate known barriers to access. As an alternative, the Department presented the Mariposa Program - a program that would provide free vehicle access to all County parks for recipients of Medi-Cal, CalFresh, and San Mateo County Access and Care for Everyone (ACE) benefits. During the Board meeting in which the Mariposa Program was presented, many perspectives were shared; comments focused on making parks more accessible for everyone, increasing visitor numbers, and eliminating any barriers to access that may exist. To further explore these matters, the Board elected to create an ad hoc subcommittee.

The subcommittee convened three times during 2022 and examined two core issues: (1) how does the San Mateo County Parks system become more accessible to all residents of San Mateo County and (2) is the existing fee structure a barrier to access. To better understand these issues, the subcommittee directed the Department to complete the Interpretive Program Strategic Plan and prepare a Comparability Pricing Study - an analysis comparing the Department's fees to comparable agencies in the area to determine if fees are below or above market rate.

The subcommittee's recommendations were crafted to expand access to County parks by those most impacted by financial hardship while also preserving the Department's budget so it can provide high quality services to the public and satisfy the County's goal of creating a remarkable experience for all.

DISCUSSION:

1) Interpretive Program Strategic Plan

The Department's 2015/16 Visitor use/Non-use Study recommended that the Department "[c]onsult with community groups to create authentic activities that match the desires of the audience as determined by engagement best practices." Consequently, the Department commenced a public planning process - which included interviews with 29 partner groups, community-based organizations, and stakeholders; 1,178 survey responses; and a series of workshops - to develop an Interpretive Program Strategic Plan that would guide the Department in providing services that better reflect the desires of the public, especially members of disadvantaged communities. The Interpretive Program Strategic Plan is included as Attachment 1. As used in the Plan, the term "disadvantaged communities" is defined to include, but is not limited to, geographic communities that have been underserved, communities of color that have suffered greatest from inequities, and members of the disabled community.

Through this robust public planning process, seven goals for the Interpretive Program were identified. These goals include increasing knowledge of the County's natural, cultural, and recreational resources; expanding the public's understanding of climate change and the impact humans have on the environment; building support for active stewardship and preservation of parkland; and promoting equity by uplifting the voices of underrepresented populations, especially local Native American tribes. To meet these goals, the Department identified a series of recommendations organized into the following categories:

1. *Equitable Access, Expanded Uses, and Public Outreach* - the Department will foster authentic relationships with community-based organizations and disadvantaged communities to develop and host desired programming and events. Recommendations include a series of events that commemorate and acknowledge diverse cultural customs and traditions and that get people outdoors.
2. *Partnerships* - the Department can better structure and formalize partnerships with other government agencies/departments and service providers, Friends groups, and non-profit organizations. Considerations include service contracts or MOUs that detail roles and responsibilities and allow for the Department to compensate people/organizations for services provided.
3. *Interpretive Media* - According to the National Association for Interpretation, interpretation is a purposeful approach to communication that facilitates meaningful, relevant, and inclusive experiences that deepen understanding, broaden perspectives, and inspire engagement with

the world around us. Some recommendations from this category include updating interpretive signs and kiosks to better reflect the themes in which the public is interested, creating an informational video about each park that would play at each park and online, updating wayfinding signage, and better utilizing social media.

4. *Organizational Capacity* - the Interpretive Program is a team of two full-time employees and seasonal help, and to provide an appropriate level of service, the Department will develop a cadre of rangers to provide interpretive services and leverage partnerships to provide joint programming.
5. *Professional Standards and Training* - the Department will develop interpretive trainings and standards for all interested staff and volunteers who have direct visitor contact. This will ensure staff and volunteers are formally trained in how to provide interpretive services to visitors.
6. *Education* - ensuring kids understand the natural world and the impacts of climate change is critical to the preservation and conservation of parklands and the environment. The Interpretive Program will collaborate with local school districts to create and deliver relevant environmental education curriculum in the classroom and on field trips.

The Department developed all recommendations through an equity lens to better serve members of disadvantaged communities. To assist with the implementation of programs and delivery of services derived from the Interpretive Program Strategic Plan, the Department has converted an administrative position to a Parks Interpretive Specialist.

2) *New Uses, New Users*

The survey administered by the Department during the Interpretive Program Strategic Plan's public planning process demonstrated that a primary barrier to access is "No time to visit," which the Department interprets to mean, at least in part, that County parks may not offer the amenities these individuals are looking for in their free time. In other words, although the Department offers world-class trail systems and campgrounds, not everyone is interested in hiking and camping. Moreover, people do not want to go to a park that has outdated/non-functioning restrooms, play structures that lack creative and fun features, water fountains with little or no water pressure, and/or dead grass.

If the County wants to be the park system of choice for those who do not currently use County parks, it needs to consider upgrading existing facilities, replacing antiquated facilities, and providing new amenities reflective of the public's wants and desires. Examples of projects that reflect this effort include Realize Flood Park, the Huckleberry Flat dog-friendly campground, the Quarry Park Pump Track, and renovation of the Memorial Park facilities and San Bruno Mountain Day Use area.

3) *Mariposa Program*

With a better understanding of how barriers to access impact both current and potential park visitors, the subcommittee directed the Department to refine the Mariposa Program. Under the refined proposal, all individuals/households eligible for Economic Self Sufficiency programs (i.e. cash programs, CalFresh, Medi-Cal) are eligible for a free Parks Annual Pass. The Department and Human Services Agency ("HSA") will partner to administer the Mariposa Program. HSA has regular communication with individuals/households eligible for and enrolled in Economic Self Sufficiency programs. Through these communications, HSA staff will inform individuals/households of the Mariposa Program and offer to enroll them if desired. Enrolled individuals/households will then receive a no-cost Parks Annual Pass which is identical to those that may be purchased.

Approximately 94,000 households, or approximately 166,000 individuals will be eligible for a free Parks Annual Pass; this is over 20% of all County residents. The Department will fully absorb the cost incurred by administering the Program.

Enrolling eligible individuals/households into the program in the manner proposed will better allow the Department to monitor the number of individuals/households being served by the program and conduct surveying to determine how the program can be improved. The Department proposes to pilot this system for two years before expanding eligibility to recipients of other County-supported programs. This will enable the Department to refine the process and ensure the act of securing the pass does not become a barrier to access in and of itself.

4) Vehicle Entry

In preparing the Comparability Pricing Study as directed by the subcommittee, the Department determined that the San Mateo County Parks system (1) has the lowest annual pass fee of comparable agencies in the Bay Area, and (2) charges market rate for vehicle entry. Below is a summary of annual pass and vehicle entry fees by comparable park and open space agencies.

Agency	Annual Pass	Vehicle Entry
East Bay Regional Park	\$105 (family rate)	\$3-\$6 (location dependent)
Santa Clara County Parks	\$95	\$6
Marin County Parks	\$90	\$5
Sonoma County Parks	\$69	\$7
San Mateo County Parks	\$60	\$6

At a rate of \$60 per pass, a Parks Annual Pass holder will recoup their purchase cost after 10 visits to County parks that charge a vehicle entrance fee (\$6 vehicle entrance fee x 10 visits = \$60). The subcommittee proposes to increase the annual pass rate to \$72. The increase of \$12 dollars - the equivalence of two additional visits per year - is not anticipated to significantly impact overall annual pass sales.

The revenue generated by the price increase will offset the cost of administering the Mariposa Program as well as providing new interpretive programs for youth. To ensure annual pass purchasers understand why the pass rate has increased, a notice will be posted on the Department's webpage, and when annual passes are mailed out, a short message will be provided regarding how the additional revenue increased will directly serve the most vulnerable and youth in the County.

The subcommittee proposes no change to the vehicle entry fee schedule. Elimination of the vehicle entry fee would reduce the Department's operating budget by approximately \$1.1 million a year, and there is no guarantee the County can backfill that amount in perpetuity - especially with a recession likely to occur in the near future. Moreover, County parks that charge a vehicle entrance fee have seen steady increases in attendance in recent years indicating that for many, the vehicle entrance fee is not a barrier to access but instead a good value (for those who it is a barrier for, the Mariposa Program will eliminate the barrier). Lastly, it is clear that poor conditioned facilities are also a barrier to access and reducing the Department's ability to adequately maintain its facilities would reduce the quality of County parks and create new barriers to access. For these reasons, the subcommittee finds elimination of vehicle entrance fees potentially harmful to the County park system and its visitors.

5) *Camping Fees*

The Department charges \$30 per night for a family campsite (tent) at Memorial Park which is approximately 20% below market rate. Included in the campsite reservation fee is access for one vehicle. As camping is often a group activity, most reservation holders arrive with more than one vehicle, requiring every additional vehicle to pay a \$10 additional-vehicle fee. Because digital payment is not accepted at Memorial Park, all payments must be in cash. To make matters more convoluted, the Department charges \$30 for a tent site, \$35 for a small trailer site, and \$40 for a large trailer site.

The subcommittee thus directed the Department to streamline its camping fee schedule and develop separate resident and non-resident rates.

Activity	Current	Proposed - Resident	Proposed - Non-Resident
Tent Camping	\$30	\$40	\$45
Small Trailer	\$35	\$45	\$50
Large Trailer	\$40	\$45	\$50

Although the proposal appears to increase fees for everyone, the effect is actually a simplified fee schedule. By increasing the camping fee for a tent site from \$30 per night to \$40 per night, every campsite will automatically include two vehicles with the reservation, which will reduce the inconvenience many experience when arriving with two vehicles. Non-residents would pay an additional \$5 per night. The difference in amenities for small trailer and large trailer sites is not significant, and therefore, the same rate should apply for both. Residents would pay \$45 per night for a trailer site (reservation would include entry for two vehicles). Non-residents with trailers would pay an additional \$5 per night.

The Department does not anticipate that this increase in fees will lead to a reduction in camping at Memorial Park. However, over the next two years, the Department will closely monitor reservation data to assess if we are seeing a negative impact associated with the fee increase. The Department will also develop a comprehensive communication strategy to ensure all campers are aware of the change in fees and how the new fee schedule benefits each camper (i.e., one additional vehicle per reservation).

FISCAL IMPACT:

There is no Net County Cost associated with the recommendation. Anticipated costs associated with the Mariposa Program will be paid for by increasing the Parks Annual Pass fee. The cost of organizing and hosting interpretive events are included in the Department's Adopted Fiscal Year 2022-23 budget and will be included in future budgets.