

## Memo

**To:** Palo Alto Parks & Recreation Commission

**From:** PRC Foothills Park Ad Hoc Committee

**Re:** Discussion of Foothills Park Admission Policy and Potential Pilot Program

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### **Overview**

The PRC's Foothills Park Ad Hoc Committee (the "Committee") has discussed and, with staff's assistance, studied several potential proposals to update the Foothills Park admission policy, which has largely remained the same since its implementation in 1969. This memo lays out several potential, non-exclusive options for the PRC's consideration and input. The Committee recommends that any changes to the current policy be studied through a pilot program to obtain direct observational feedback on implications from any policy change. Following PRC discussion and feedback, the Committee may further develop a proposal which the PRC could elect to forward on to the City Council for consideration.

### **Background**

The land comprising Foothills Park was acquired by the City in a favorably-priced acquisition from the Lee family in the late 1950s. Los Altos and Los Altos Hills were asked to contribute to the purchase but declined. Palo Alto residents voted to approve the purchase (5/12/59) shortly after the Palo Alto City Council voted to limit Park access to Palo Alto residents if purchased. The Park opened to Palo Alto residents in the 1965-66 fiscal year. Visitation when the Park opened was significantly higher than it has been in the past 30 years. In 1969, four years after opening, approximately 292,000 persons visited the Park.<sup>1</sup>

The current Palo Alto residency requirement was added to the Municipal Code in 1969. The Code makes it a misdemeanor for any non-resident to enter the Park unless they are a guest of a City resident or employee, or are traversing the Bay-to-Foothills Trail on foot. (PAMC § 22.04.150 (a)-(b).)

Visitation continued to increase after implementation of the residency requirement, with peak visitation of approximately 372,000 for two consecutive years in the early 1970s, before dropping considerably throughout the 1980s and 1990s. The steady decrease in visitation bottomed out at approximately 29,000 annual visits in 1998. This decline coincided, at least in part, with the implementation of a user fee to fund certain infrastructure work in and around the Park's Boronda Lake, which fee was removed in 2001.

Visitation crept back up after the low in 1998. In the past 17 years, visitation has been steady at approximately 152,000 persons visiting each year. One recent exception was 2011-2012

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<sup>1</sup> All visitation numbers are estimates drawn from the use of a vehicle "counter" during weekdays and actual in-person observation by ranger staff on summer weekends. The weekday and non-summer weekend estimates are derived from historic information that presumes 2.85 visitors per vehicle on weekends and 1.5 visitors per vehicle on weekdays. Historic visitation records from earlier than 2002 have been provided by former Palo Alto Councilwoman and Santa Clara County Superior Court Judge LaDoris Cordell. Judge Cordell worked with former Community Services Department Director Greg Betts to compile the historic information.

when the Park saw 202,000 visitors. Based on staff observation, the park was a bit busier in 2011-2012, but that number of visitors did not negatively impact the Park’s resources and infrastructure.

During most weekends and holidays, the single point of entry on Page Mill Road is staffed regularly and persons not able to demonstrate Palo Alto residency are turned away from the Park. The exception is that during winter weekends and holidays, when staff is constrained and park visitation rates are lower, entry gate enforcement of the residency requirement is done less frequently. In the last five years, approximately 2,800 non-residents have been turned away each year, which is an increase from the last decade. As written, the Municipal Code provides no discretion for the City Manager or staff to allow unaccompanied non-residents, including school or volunteer groups.

In addition to the residency restriction, the Municipal Code imposes a cap of 1,000 persons in the Park at any time. (P.A.M.C. § 22.04.150.) This limit, which has not been approached except in the case of special events, would remain in place.<sup>2</sup> This 1,000 person cap also corresponds to the number of available parking spaces within the park – approximately 380.

### **Guiding Principles:**

In considering changes to the Park’s admission policy, the Committee has been guided by several principles that we believe reflect key community values. These are set forth as goals in the Palo Alto Parks, Trails, Open Space and Recreation Master Plan and include “providing high-quality facilities and services that are *accessible* [and] *inclusive*,” “creating environments that encourage regular active and passive activities to support health, wellness, and social connections,” and “preserving and integrating nature, natural systems, and ecological principles” for the benefit of current and future park users.

### **Menu of Potential Options:**

The Committee has received input on a range of potential options for updating the Foothills Park admission policy, including from current and former staff members who have provided invaluable insight. The following is a list of *non-exclusive* options for updating the 1969 Municipal Code provisions concerning access to Foothills Park. All options anticipate maintaining the 1,000 person cap with access prioritized for Palo Alto residents. Potential impacts of each option are discussed very briefly for context, but these are not intended to suggest an exhaustive assessment:

1. *Update the Municipal Code to Match Current Practice:* access limited to residents on weekends and holidays, with the residency restriction lifted at other times.
  - This option would essentially formalize the status quo.
2. *Student-focused Program:* extend access for school-age children in communities neighboring Palo Alto (e.g., PAUSD students residing outside City limits and Ravenswood Elementary School District students).
  - This is designed to target both socioeconomically disadvantaged students that we particularly want to reach<sup>3</sup> and all Palo Alto public school students. Based on

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<sup>2</sup> Dates of highest visitation are typically summer weekends – particularly Mothers’ Day and Fathers’ Day – when overall daily visitation approaches 1,000 visitors (though not at one time).

<sup>3</sup> Access to nature preserves like Foothills Park is particularly important for students from socioeconomically disadvantaged communities. Longstanding research has chronicled both (1) the importance of outdoor opportunities for

average visitation rates, this option is estimated to generate approximately 8,000-10,000 additional persons visiting the Park over the course of a year. In light of visitation trends, staff does not expect this level of additional visitation to significantly impact the Park.

- In addition to a potential student-access program, the Committee has discussed formalizing a policy for weekday school field trips.
3. *Dynamic Advance Reservation Program:* extend access to a variable number of non-residents each weekend who obtain a pass to visit the Park using the City’s existing online reservation system and/or by allowing passes to be checked out from local libraries.
- Provides very effective control on total visitation. The number of available passes would be driven by extensive data on visitation trends. For example, to prioritize resident access, peak weekends would have fewer passes available than off-peak weekends.
  - Presents ability to collect user fees to support Park programs without creating delay at entry gate related to handling of transactions.
  - Feedback from retired and current staff is that this model would be easiest to implement.
4. *A Combination of the Concepts Above, or Others Not Listed Above:* the Committee recognizes that there are additional ideas that they may not be captured above and is interested to hear from the PRC and the public on other concepts. In addition, the Committee has discussed two concepts and has determined that they should not be pursued at this time based on logistical considerations:
- Shuttle Program: extend access for persons who ride a shuttle to the Park during peak weekends. For example, a shuttle would stop at several local libraries (and

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young people as formative experiences that they carry throughout their lives, and (2) how access to outdoor recreational and educational opportunities are significantly limited for students from impoverished families. One recent analysis concluded that “[t]he reality is that poorer Americans face formidable barriers and constraints” to accessing public recreation opportunities. (Scott, *infra.*) Two keys to addressing this problem are (a) “improving access” and (b) “creating formative experiences” in early childhood. (See David Scott, “Economic Inequality, Poverty, and Park and Recreation Delivery,” JOURNAL OF PARK AND RECREATION ADMINISTRATION, Vol. 31, No. 4, at 2-3, 5-7 (Winter 2013) (“Economic well-being likewise shapes Americans’ access to a wide range of [recreational opportunities] . . . Studies have since documented that poorer Americans are less likely than others to . . . participate in outdoor recreation activities, and exercise during leisure time. Poorer Americans are also less likely to use publicly funded park and recreation resources. A recent study reported that affluent Americans are three times more likely to visit national parks compared to poor Americans. Other studies have documented similar patterns for state, regional, and local parks.” (internal citations omitted)). This research is confirmed in numerous studies. A 2005 analysis by California State Parks notes the significant benefits from outdoor recreation programs in “develop[ing] youth,” “enhanc[ing] education” and “deter[ring] negative behaviors,” including decreased drug and alcohol use and crime prevention. (See “The Health and Social Benefits of Recreation,” at 30-35, Cal. State Parks (2005); see also Ardoin, Nicole, *et al.*, Environmental Education Research Bulletin, Iss. 10 at 12-13, 23, 35-36 (2017), available at <https://naaee.org/eepro/resources>.)

This type of pilot, while focused on improved access, also reinforces the creation of formative childhood experiences. CSD and its longstanding partners would have the ability to work with student populations targeted by this pilot program, including Ravenswood students. According to California Department of Education figures, more than 94% of students in the neighboring Ravenswood City Elementary School District come from “socioeconomically disadvantaged” backgrounds.

potentially Stanford's campus as part of a collaboration with Stanford) in order to facilitate broader community access to the Park while also reducing vehicle trips. Like some other options, this one has a direct means of limiting the number of additional visitors (i.e., there are a limited number of seats on the shuttle vans) and has the benefit that it may decrease vehicle trips and would not impact parking within the Park. However, identifying funding and/or partners to support such a program are major hurdles that need to be overcome.

- Conservation-focused Park Orientation Program: extend access for non-residents who go through an "orientation" to the Park with a docent or ranger. The driving principle behind this option is to focus on educating park visitors to be conservation-minded. Such a program could be capped, but would provide less ability to regulate visitation during busy summer weekends. Resources to staff docent program and curriculum have not been identified.

With all potential options, a one-year pilot is suggested to provide feedback that will directly inform an impact assessment. As noted above, the 1,000 person visitation cap would remain in place in all events. Current restrictions on reservation of group spaces would remain in place (*i.e.*, restricted to residents).

### **Potential Risks**

The principal risk is that additional visitation will negatively impact Foothills Park's natural resources and improvements, or otherwise tax park resources. Preliminarily, this risk is viewed as a limited one in light of past experience with significantly higher visitation than is anticipated in connection with a pilot program. For a pilot program, no capital expenditure is immediately anticipated. Incremental costs are likely to be incurred, including CSD and Foothills Park staff time which may result in reduced staff attention to other projects. There are certain existing infrastructure needs within the Park (e.g., restrooms that need to be replaced in the next five years), but staff views those as pre-existing needs regardless of a visitation pilot program.

For any pilot program, staff would monitor both overall visitation and pilot-specific visitation to Foothills Park and prepare a report and recommendation concerning the pilot program and associated impacts after one year.

### **Next Steps**

Based on the PRC's feedback, the Committee will further analyze this issue and return in the next several months with a recommendation to be presented to the PRC, and if approved, to be forwarded to the City Council for consideration.

**ATTACHMENT A: Parks of Palo Alto Excerpt – Foothills Park**