

**To:** Palo Alto Parks & Recreation Commission  
**From:** Foothills Park Ad Hoc Committee (Jeff Greenfield, Jeff LaMere, Ryan McCauley)  
**Re:** Foothills Park Admission Policy / Pilot Program Discussion

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## **Overview**

The Parks & Recreation Commission (the “PRC”), the Foothills Park Ad Hoc Committee (the “Committee”) and, most importantly, the community, recognize that Foothills Park is a special place. Options for providing non-residents with access to the Park were discussed at the July PRC meeting. The Committee has further discussed those options and developed the following pilot program proposal. This memo outlines a focused pilot program proposal for discussion and comment by the PRC and the public:

- One year pilot program to test the concept of providing (1) a limited and adjustable number of Park passes for non-residents, and (2) broader availability for school field trips.
- Non-resident passes would be available on the City’s new online reservation portal. This system will allow us to gather more information about those seeking to visit the Park.
- Staff will use robust daily visitation data to adjust the number of non-resident passes available per day. Maximum cap of 50 passes for any given day.
- Encourage and formalize a school field trip program and reservation process, which is not presently anticipated by the Municipal Code.
- Potential to recover expenses associated with existing cost of staffing the entry gate.
- Continue to prioritize resident access—no changes to current access policy for residents.
- At conclusion of pilot, staff and PRC would review Park visitation and impact data, and recommend how to move forward, including potentially either reverting back to the current policy or making the pilot program permanent.

The Committee has considered numerous alternatives (discussed below) and recommends this pilot program because it ensures close control of total visitation to the Park and allows the option to assess fees for non-resident passes to recover at least some of the significant personnel costs related to staffing the entry gate.

## **Background**

The approximately 1,400-acre parcel comprising Foothills Park was acquired by the City in a favorably-priced acquisition from the Lee family in the late 1950s. 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 (peaking at approximately 372,000 visitors for two consecutive years in the early 1970s).<sup>1</sup> In the past 17 years, visitation has been steady at approximately 152,000 persons visiting each year. One recent exception was 2011-2012 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.

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<sup>1</sup> A more complete discussion of the background and detailed history of the Park is set forth in the Committee’s memo to the PRC in advance of the July 2019 PRC meeting.

Enacted in 1969, the Municipal 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).) 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 has not been approached except in the case of a special event many years ago.

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 less frequent. In the last five years, approximately 2,800 non-residents have been turned away on weekends each year, which is an increase from the last decade. Enforcement of the residents-only restriction requires that the Page Mill gate be staffed, with associated costs. As written, the Municipal Code provides no discretion for the City Manager or staff to allow unaccompanied non-residents, including school or volunteer groups.

The PRC received public comment before, at and following the PRC's July 2019 meeting. Comments were fairly evenly split between persons expressing support for the existing policy and those supporting expanded public access studied through a pilot program. Public comments largely did not relate to the menu of options discussed for a pilot. The comments from persons speaking against expanding access expressed a more general concern about overuse of the Park and potential impacts to the Park's ecology, and changes to the existing Park experience, with some commenters citing concerns about their personal safety if non-residents are allowed access. Persons speaking in favor of a pilot mentioned their desire for inclusiveness and a sense of being good neighbors, concern about "elitism" and being "embarrassed" by the current policy's exclusion of non-residents, that the City has lost economic diversity from the time when the residents-only policy was implemented such that the policy has negative effects not present when first implemented, and that a more effective policy could be crafted to ensure preservation of the Park while also allowing broader public access.

As discussed at the August PRC meeting, in addition to studying visitation data and other quantitative measures, staff have begun documenting a baseline for qualitative measurements to aid an assessment of the pilot program.<sup>2</sup>

### **Details on the Pilot Program Proposal**

The following pilot program proposal is made in light of the principal comments from the public and staff feedback on implementation and operational considerations:

1. One-year pilot program using extensive historic visitation data to dynamically adjust the number of unaccompanied non-residents able to visit the Park. Non-resident passes would be required on all days, with continued staffing of the entry gate on weekends and holidays.

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<sup>2</sup> The qualitative measures include, but are not limited to, the following: (1) level of and frequency of restocking restroom supplies, (2) usage of parking and picnic areas during typical summer weekends and holidays (including photos), (3) any impacts to the landscape, such as social trails (including photos), (4) notes on any impacts to staff resources, (5) frequency of barbecue cleaning and maintenance, (6) frequency of Greenwaste refuse and recycling pickups, etc.

2. Purpose for pilot is to assess quantitative and qualitative impacts to the Park's ecology, infrastructure and maintenance. As noted above, staff have begun documenting a baseline for qualitative measurements. Staff will measure and assist in analysis of visitor impact data.
3. Establish a pass system for non-resident visitors. Up to 50 vehicle/bicycle passes available per day, with staff adjusting number of passes available based on visitation patterns.<sup>3</sup> (E.g., busy weekends would have 0-10 non-resident passes available.)
  - a. Non-resident visitors accompanying a Palo Alto resident would still be allowed and would not need to obtain an online pass, pursuant to current policy.
  - b. An option for discussion is dividing the total number of passes available among student/volunteer populations and the general public (e.g., 10 passes reserved specifically for non-resident students, 10 for non-resident volunteers and the remainder for the general public).
  - c. "Students" means preK-12 students, which is a key population to target for access as identified through academic research and community feedback. "Volunteer groups" means those organized volunteer groups that are strategic partners with the Community Services Department (as determined by staff), including but not limited to Grassroots Ecology, Canopy, Environmental Volunteers, etc.
4. All passes would be available online through the City's new Parks & Recreation reservation system. The Committee has been advised that staff at Mitchell Park and Lucie Stern Community Centers would be available to assist people with the online reservation system. (If we recommend a prioritization for students or volunteers, those persons would also need to use the online portal for tracking purposes.)
5. Formalize and promote City-authorized school field trip programs to the Park, which are presently not anticipated by Municipal Code. The Committee has been advised that staff would develop a system to centrally coordinate school/co-curricular and volunteer group reservations to optimize the educational experience.
6. The existing 1,000 visitor cap would remain in place. Current restrictions on reservation of group spaces would also remain in place (*i.e.*, restricted to residents).
7. Option to charge for non-resident access passes (e.g., \$10), which would aid recovery of costs related to current need to staff the entry gate on weekends and holidays. If a fee is assessed, Committee recommends prioritizing access for students and persons volunteering with City-supported programs by way of a fee waiver through the online portal.

### **Factors Supporting Pilot**

- a) Effectively mitigates principal concern about overcrowding/overuse of the park.

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<sup>3</sup> For administrative ease, passes would be for each passenger vehicle or bicycle group. Using the historical average of ~2.7 visitors per vehicle on weekends, 25 passes would equate to approximately 68 visitors and 50 passes would equate to approximately 135 visitors. A passenger vehicle would be defined as one carrying up to eight people. For persons entering by bicycle or other non-motorized means, one pass would cover a maximum of eight people.

- b) Incorporates focus for students and volunteers.
- c) Addresses public input that policy should be revised to allow reasonable non-resident access.
- d) Allows for experimentation during pilot program on the number of passes available (up to 50 but often fewer), means for distributing passes, and potentially the cost of visiting the Park.
- e) If a fee is charged for non-resident passes, the pilot would generate modest revenue that would help offset the cost of staffing the entry gate.
- f) Good policy: uses robust data to inform the policy and adjust its implementation, with that quantitative information reinforced by the more qualitative information that ranger staff is developing for a baseline comparison.

### **Potential Risks**

As noted previously, the principal risk is that additional visitation will negatively impact Foothills Park's natural resources and improvements, or otherwise tax park resources. 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 and the effective controls on total visitation that are the core of this pilot. For a pilot program, no capital expenditure is 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. Finally, 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 this pilot program.

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

### **Options for Specific Discussion**

1. Fees: Whether to charge a non-resident fee on weekends and weekdays, and the amount(s) of the fee.
  - a. One option would be to study visitation and online portal user feedback through phases relating to the implementation of a fee for part of the pilot program. (E.g., Phase 1 for the first six months would not include a fee and Phase 2 would include a fee, to allow staff and the PRC to study demand and inform a final recommendation.) As noted above, the Committee recommends a fee waiver for students and volunteers.
  - b. If fees are charged, should fees be different for weekends/holidays and weekdays?
2. Further Prioritization for Students and Volunteers: Whether to create a further prioritization of access by dividing the number of available non-resident passes among students, volunteers, and the general public. Again, one option would be to study this as part of the pilot program to gauge student and volunteer interest versus general public interest. However, dividing the number of available passes by group will likely create complexity for administration of the online portal. Or is there something else we can do to better prioritize student and volunteer access?

3. Geographic Limitations on Prioritized Student Groups: Whether to limit student preference to those students attending the Palo Alto Unified and Ravenswood School Districts, or to allow prioritization for any preK-12 students regardless of their place of residence.
4. Weekdays: Should the pilot pass program for non-resident visitor include weekdays as well as weekends? If so, should the same maximum pass limit apply? If the program does not include weekdays, then should the current Municipal Code provision that makes it a misdemeanor for non-residents to enter the Park unaccompanied be changed?