

TO: PARKS AND RECREATION COMMISSION
FROM: DAREN ANDERSON DEPARTMENT: COMMUNITY SERVICES
DATE: FEBRUARY 23, 2021
SUBJECT: FOOTHILLS PARK POLICY DISCUSSION

BACKGROUND

On February 11, 2021, the Parks and Recreation Commission held a special meeting to discuss an annual pass option and the visitor capacity limit for Foothills Park.

The Parks and Recreation Commission (Commission) unanimously recommends that City Council adopt an ordinance to (**Attachment A**):

- A. Amend the Municipal Fee Schedule to add an annual pass option for Foothills Park with the following pricing structure:
 - a. \$65 annual pass for non-Palo Alto residents with a 25% discount for senior, active military, and veterans; and 25% to 50% for low income (variable based on income)
 - b. \$50 annual pass for Palo Alto residents with a 25% discount for senior, active military, and veterans; and 25% to 50% for low income (variable based on income). City of Palo Alto employees qualify for the Palo Alto resident rate per City Policy.
 - c. An annual pass is only applicable for passenger vehicles with nine people or less

- B. Amend PAMC Section 22.04.150(k) to authorize the City Manager to adjust the attendance limit at Foothills Park, 300 people/120 vehicles not to exceed 650 people/260 vehicles at any one time.
 - a. Do not count the following visitors towards the attendance limit:
 - i. Visitors with reservations (Towle Campground, Oak Grove Picnic Area, Interpretive Center Meeting Room)
 - ii. Permitted recreation and education groups (summer campers, school field trips, community partner youth groups)
 - iii. Entry fee exempt volunteers

The Commission also recommends by 5-2 vote that City Council adopt an ordinance to:

- C. Amend the Municipal Fee Schedule to include a 25% discount for non-Palo Alto and Palo Alto resident vehicles displaying disabled plates/placards (this discount cannot be combined with another discount).

DISCUSSION

The PRC Foothills Park Ad Hoc Committee met on multiple times in February to discuss Foothills Park policies (**Attachment B**). The Ad Hoc Committee focused on providing feedback on the following policies for the Commission’s consideration:

Vehicle Fee vs. Parking Fee

The Ad Hoc Committee prefers the term “vehicle entrance fee” over “parking fee”. Parking fee suggests vehicles could enter and drive through the preserve for free without parking.

Daily Vehicle Entrance Fee

The Ad Hoc Committee reviewed daily entrance fee pricing models for other park agencies for buses:

- California State Parks: \$30 for small bus (10-24 passenger capacity) \$60 large bus (25+ passenger capacity)
- San Mateo County Parks: \$20 for School/Public/Private bus
- Santa Clara County Parks: \$30 for Charter bus

The Ad Hoc Committee supports the following pricing structure for the daily vehicle entrance fee:

- \$6 for vehicles with up to 9 passenger capacity.
- \$30 for small buses (10-24 passenger capacity)
- \$60 for large buses (25+ passenger capacity)

Daily Entry Fee Discount Considerations

The Ad Hoc Committee supports having the \$6 vehicle entry fee apply to both residents and non-residents. They believe this will help make the fee collection process more efficient and reduce delays at the entrance gate. Staff also noted that different resident and non-resident daily vehicle entry fees would be difficult to enforce on weekdays when visitors pay at an automated payment machine.

The Ad Hoc Committee would like the Commission to revisit entry fees towards the end of calendar year 2021.

Standard Daily Entry Fee Waivers/ Additional Entry Waiver Options

The Ad Hoc Committee supports the following:

- Limited free passes available for checkout from Mitchell Park and Rinconada Libraries
 - Five passes available at each library. To start, this would be a physical pass that a person would checkout and pick up at the library and post in their windshield when they visit the preserve. A pass could be checked out for a few days and then must be returned to the library.
- Six designated free entry days
 - First Saturday in December
 - Third Monday in January (MLK Day)
 - First Tuesday in February

- First Wednesday in March
- First Thursday in April
- First Friday in May

These six days provide different days of the week, one holiday, and avoid some of the busier times of the summer so that people are less likely to find the preserve at capacity when they visit

- Free daily entry for vehicles with disabled person parking placard
 - Both Santa Clara County and San Mateo County Parks provide free entry for vehicles with disabled person parking placard
- Free daily entry for pedestrian and bicyclists
 - The Ad Hoc Committee believe this will help make the entrance process more efficient. However, the Ad Hoc Committee is concerned about people parking outside the park in locations that will impact nearby neighbors and want to find ways to mitigate that problem.
 - Most regional and County Parks do not charge an entry fee for pedestrians and bicyclists.
 - Impractical to collect entry fees for pedestrians and bicyclists at other entrance gates.
- Free entry for permitted school field trips
 - Request that staff record the number of these programs, which schools, and how many students.
 - Ad Hoc Committee recommends deferring to staff on details on group size and how many permits.

*The Ad Hoc Committee considered other discount and free options, such as early-bird and evening free entry for seniors, but due to administrative challenges recommended focusing on other discounts and providing a reasonably priced annual pass option.

Visitor Capacity Limit

The Ad Hoc Committee recommends that pedestrians and bicyclists entering Foothills Park main entrance not be counted toward the visitor capacity limit. The Ad Hoc Committee feels that pedestrians and bicyclists do not have as much impact on the preserve as vehicles do. They also noted that there is no accurate way of knowing or controlling how many pedestrians enter Foothills Park given that pedestrians are allowed to enter Foothills Park via the Bay to Ridge Trail through Pearson Arastradero Preserve and Los Trancos Open Space Preserve.

Online Reservation System

The Ad Hoc Committee discussed some of the merits and challenges of a reservation system for vehicle entrance to Foothills Park. The Ad Hoc Committee is concerned that a reservation requirement may limit access unnecessarily, especially for people with limited online access. The

Ad Hoc Committee recommends that staff continue to investigate options for how a reservation system might work for Foothills Park, but not to implement one at this time. They recommend discussing reservation system option at the end of calendar year 2021.

Hillside BBQ Reduction for Fire Safety

The Ad Hoc Committee supports removing the nine hillside BBQ pits at Foothills Park to help improve fire safety in the preserve (**Attachment C**). The Ad Hoc Committee recommends that staff continue to evaluate the remaining Foothills Park BBQ pits for fire safety.

Dog Policy

The Ad Hoc Committee does not support making any changes to the existing dog policy for Foothills Park (Dogs are required to be on leash at all times and are not permitted in Foothills Park on weekends and holidays). The Ad Hoc Committee recommends reviewing the dog policy again towards the end of calendar year 2021.

Photography and Videography Policy

The Ad Hoc Committee noted that there is an existing **Park and Open Space Regulation** pertaining to commercial photography and filming (R1-21A) and did not feel that any additional policy action is necessary at this time.

Group Permit Policy and Oak Grove Picnic Area Policy

The Ad Hoc Committee reviewed the existing policies for group gatherings and for the Oak Grove Picnic Area. The Ad Hoc Committee is not in favor of restricting corporate use of Oak Grove Picnic Area. They feel that restrictions should focus on the number of people and how a facility is used, rather than which people use it.

- A gathering permit is required for any group greater than 25 people for Palo Alto Parks and Open Space.
- Here are links to the Oak Grove Picnic Area Use Policy:
 - <https://www.cityofpaloalto.org/gov/depts/csd/parks/preserves/foothills/oakgrove.asp>
 - <https://www.cityofpaloalto.org/civicax/filebank/documents/79674>

Environmental Monitoring & Data Collection

Environmental monitoring is being performed by Grassroots Ecology and Open Space staff. Grassroots Ecology is monitoring the following:

1. Monitor the first 250 feet of trails for high priority invasive species, such as Stinkwort and Yellow Star Thistle. They have baseline information for these species.
2. Monitor a sensitive habitat species- Western Leatherwood that occurs near trails. This is a special status plant in the preserve that has been mapped.
3. Provide anecdotal observations of any impact to animals or plants in the preserve. They do not have baseline monitoring information on the entire preserve. However, based on their

experience they can comment on problematic issues, such as increased social trails or prohibited mountain bike usage.

Open Space staff are monitoring the following:

1. The number of visitors entering the preserve.
2. The peak number of preserve visitors at any one time.
3. Litter along the trails, picnic areas, and other areas of the preserve.
4. Issues with exceeding the capacity of trash and recycling containers.
5. Visitors parking in non-designated areas.
6. Turn away of visitors with dogs on weekends and holidays at the entrance and dog off-leash observations on weekdays.

Staff is working with a stakeholder group (consisting of representatives from Grassroots Ecology, Friends of Foothills Park, the Environmental Volunteers, Stanford University Haas Center for Public Service, Jasper Ridge Biological Preserve, and the Chair and Vice Chair of the Parks and Recreation Commission) to identify and recommend improvements in the following areas:

- People: Education and programs, interpretation, docents, volunteers, public engagement, etc.
- Environment: Habitat and wildlife, impact monitoring and mitigation, regional outreach, and sustainability.
- Infrastructure and Funding: Safety, trails, traffic, parking, signage, preserve entry points, and funding for programs and infrastructure improvements.

Ad Hoc Committee supports the monitoring efforts being performed by Grassroots Ecology and the Open Space staff. They recommend that the recommendations suggested by the stakeholder group be discussed with the Commission for feedback. They also recommend that staff form partnerships with universities and community colleges for environmental research and study.

TENTATIVE TIMELINE

On February 22, City Council will discuss the proposed name change of Foothills Park to Foothills Nature Preserve and the Parks and Recreation Commission recommendations from the February 11 Commission meeting. If Council votes to approve an emergency ordinance, it will take effect immediately. If City Council votes to approve a regular ordinance, it would require two readings and become effective 31 days after the second reading.

On March 23, the Parks and Recreation Commission will again discuss Foothills Park policy considerations and make a recommendation to City Council. If City Council were to discuss Parks and Recreation Commission recommendation at their May 3 meeting and approves an ordinance, the ordinance would take effect on June 17.

ATTACHMENTS

Attachment A: February 11, 2021, Parks and Recreation Commission Motion Minutes
Attachment B: Parks and Recreation Commission Foothills Park Policy Considerations
Attachment C: Foothills Park BBQ Pit Analysis