

**TO: PARKS AND RECREATION COMMISSION**

**FROM: DAREN ANDERSON DEPARTMENT: COMMUNITY SERVICES**

**DATE: JANUARY 26, 2021**

**SUBJECT: Foothills Park - Discussion on Proposals for an Entrance Fee, Visitor Capacity, Preserve Management, and Environmental Studies.**

**RECOMMENDATION**

Staff recommends that the Parks and Recreation Commission discuss potential proposals for an entrance fee, visitor capacity limit, and preserve management and environmental studies for Foothills Park.

**BACKGROUND**

On November 2, 2020 City Council passed the following Motion (Minutes<sup>1</sup>):

- A. Open Foothills Park to the general public by removing limits on non-residents, while maintaining the maximum capacity of 1,000 persons and providing residents first access to reservations for all facilities.
- B. Amend or delete outdated and duplicative code language.
- C. For the first 90 days, temporarily limit the capacity to 750 people at any one time.
- D. Return to Council and the Parks and Recreation Commission with proposals for fee, capacity, and park management/environmental integrity studies; and
- E. Direct staff to use the renaming process to consider renaming Foothills Park to Foothills Nature Preserve.

**DISCUSSION**

On December 17, 2020 Foothills Park opened to the general public. Since the opening, the number of visitors coming to the preserve has been significantly higher than in previous years. On weekends, holidays (Christmas and New Year’s Day), and several weekdays, the preserve reached capacity (750 people) multiple times each day. The visitation during the weekend before Christmas 2020 (4,081 visitors) was almost six times higher than the same weekend in 2019 (688 visitors). On the days the preserve reached capacity, an average of about 400 vehicles were turned away per day.

On January 9, 2021, staff implemented a temporary policy of closing the entrance to vehicles once the capacity is reached in response to observations of safety concerns on Page Mill Rd. and on the internal preserve roads. Capacity has been reached most frequently between 10 a.m. and 3 p.m. several times each day on weekends and holidays. This temporary measure is to help manage the number of visitors in the preserve at one time and provide a safe, enjoyable, and consistent experience for parkgoers.

On Saturday, January 9, the preserve entrance was closed from approximately 10am to 3pm, and there were approximately 1,517 visitors. On Sunday, January 10, 2021, the visitor capacity limit

wasn't reached, the entrance remained open all day.

It is also important to note that in addition to being opened to the general public there are a few factors that are contributing to the increased visitation, and that it is difficult to predict long term visitation trends. The COVID-19 pandemic has brought about a tremendous interest in people visiting parks and open space areas throughout the region and the nation. In 2019, the visitation to Foothills Park was 156,000. In 2020, the visitation increased to approximately 223,000 visitors (Attachment A: Foothills Park 2020 Visitation Report). There is also a likely increase in visitation due to interest and curiosity in visiting the preserve that had been inaccessible to non-Palo Alto residents since it opened in 1965 (other than resident guests and hikers via the Bay to Ridge Trail).

#### Visitor Capacity Limit

Staff have analyzed the impacts to the preserve during this brief period of very high visitation. The challenges with having 750 people (approximately 277 vehicles) in the preserve at one time include:

- Potentially unsafe conditions for pedestrians and bicyclists using the preserve roads, which are too narrow to safely accommodate them when many vehicles are traveling in both directions, and
- The majority of visitors try to park near the preserve entrance area, Boronda Lake, Orchard Glen Picnic Area, and Vista Hill, which results in people parking and walking in inappropriate locations causing damage to natural areas and creating potentially unsafe conditions for pedestrians and bicyclists.

Staff estimate that with current activity levels at different portions of Foothills Park, approximately 500 people or 185 vehicles would allow for better preserve management and visitor safety. This figure of 500 people or 185 vehicles are in addition to those persons/vehicles entering with facility reservations. The reservable areas of Foothills Park (Towle Camp, Oak Grove Picnic Area, and the Interpretive Center Classroom) are areas where parking spaces are generally underutilized compared to those closer to the preserve entrance.

If the City Manager is authorized to adjust the attendance limits at Foothills Park below the maximum, minor adjustments to the number of visitors can be made quickly and efficiently to protect the health, safety, and welfare of preserve users; to protect the wildlife and natural resources in the preserve; and/or to account for limits in parking, facilities, or staff availability.

#### Entrance Fee

Staff recommend an entry fee as a revenue source to help offset park maintenance costs and a way to keep visitation at a manageable level. Santa Clara County Parks charge a \$6 vehicle entry fee and have a \$95 annual pass option. San Mateo County Parks charge a \$6 vehicle entrance fee and have a \$60 annual pass option. California State Parks charge a \$10 vehicle entrance fee and have a range of different annual pass options. Staff looked at a range of pricing options for a daily vehicle entry fee and annual pass for Foothills Park:

- \$6 to \$10 daily vehicle entrance fee (applies to Palo Alto residents and non-residents)
- \$65 to \$80 annual pass for non-Palo Alto residents with a 25% discount for either seniors or low-income

- \$50 to \$60 annual pass for Palo Alto residents with a 25% discount for either seniors or low-income
- Free entry for pedestrians and bicyclists
- Free entry for people coming to volunteer in the preserve that day (City supported volunteer programs: Grassroots Ecology, Friends of Foothills Park, Environmental Volunteers, etc.)

Please note that whatever fees are selected, the resident rate cannot be more than 25% less than the corresponding non-Palo Alto resident rate.

Based on a cursory assessment of a \$6, \$8, or \$10 vehicle entry fee and a 500 person at any one time capacity limit, the approximate annual revenue would be \$350,000, \$433,000, \$500,000 respectively. Cost recovery levels would align with a Low (0 to 30%) to Medium (30.1 to 70%) cost recovery level group per the City's User Fee Cost Recovery Level Policy ([Policy 1-57](#)). The approximate annual cost to maintain Foothills Park (staff, vehicles, equipment, supplies and materials, utilities, and maintenance contracts) is \$1,530,000.

Due to the recent high volume of people trying to enter Foothills Park, staff will explore the possibility of using a reservation system for weekend and holiday access. The City's existing recreation software, CivicRec, can be used for this purpose at no additional cost.

#### Management/Environmental studies

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 don't have baseline monitoring information on the entire preserve. But, based on their experience they can comment on problematic issues, such as increased social trails or 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. Monitor dogs on weekends and holidays at the entrance and dog off-leash observations on weekdays.

In response to the extreme 2020 wildfire season, Open Space staff analyzed the picnic and BBQ areas of Foothills Park for fire safety. The attached report (Attachment B) provides a description

and analysis of the six different day-use picnic and BBQ areas. Open Space staff recommend removing 9 BBQ pits located on hillsides. The picnic tables in these areas would remain in place. Given how seldomly the hillside BBQ pits are used, removing them will not have a negative impact on the visitor experience and will make Foothills Park safer from wildfires.

#### Volunteer/Partnership Support

In November, staff gathered a group of stakeholders and partnership groups (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 discuss ways of making the opening of Foothills Park a positive and welcoming experience.

Some of the suggestions proposed from the group that have already been implemented include placing a welcome banner at the entrance to the preserve, placing large trail map displays (with the one-way trails prominently displayed) in numerous locations in the preserve, and galvanizing volunteers to help support the preserve and protect the natural resources (for example several Scout groups are coming to the preserve to pick up litter, and the Environmental Volunteers are arranging for a naturalist to help assist and educate new visitors on weekends).

The stakeholder group is currently working on developing task groups to focus on:

- 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, parking, signage, preserve entry points, and funding for programs and infrastructure improvements.

#### Parks and Recreation Commission Foothills Park Ad Hoc Committee

Staff met with the Parks and Recreation Commission (PRC) Ad Hoc Committee (Committee) on November 13, 2020, December 2, 2020, January 5, 2021, and January 15, 2021 to discuss entry fees, the visitor capacity limit, and environmental monitoring. The Committee supports having an entry fee of \$10 and an annual pass \$50 for residents and \$65 for non-residents. The Committee feels that a fee will be helpful for supporting maintenance and staff costs, as well as helping manage visitation levels. They also expressed hope that the entrance fee could be revisited at some point in the future, be considered a temporary situation (perhaps tied to financial recovery from the pandemic), and that ideally entry would be free. They highlighted the importance of providing underserved communities access to the preserve.

The Committee agrees that a limit of 500 people at any one time would be an appropriate number of visitors to manage the preserve. They noted that this limit may also be helpful in ensuring that we don't exceed the capacity of preserve amenities like restrooms, picnic tables, etc.

The Committee supports the monitoring efforts from Grassroots Ecology and staff (as described above). They advocated for developing a long-term docent program and relationships with local universities to conduct environmental studies, that may further help in preserving and protecting

the natural resources of the preserve. They also support the recommendation to remove the nine hillside BBQ pits.

The Committee also noted that on their visits to Foothills Park since it has opened to everyone they have noticed that the vast majority of visitors seem to be having a positive experience, are glad to have access to this special place, and are following the rules.

## **ATTACHMENTS**

Attachment A: Foothills Park 2020 Visitation Report

Attachment B: Foothills Park BBQ Analysis

---

<sup>i</sup> <https://www.cityofpaloalto.org/civicax/filebank/blobdload.aspx?t=52246.83&BlobID=79232>