

DATE: September 2, 2014

TO: City Council Members:

FROM: Parks and Recreation Commission

SUBJECT: MEMO REGARDING CONSEQUENCES OF GROWTH AND DEVELOPMENT FOR PARKS AND RECREATION INTERESTS

Parks and recreation resources are vital to preserving the health and quality of life of our community. Significant increases in residents and nonresidents within our city limits create substantial burdens on our parks and recreation treasures. Yet these burdens are not as highly visible as traffic and parking. This memo describes some direct and indirect consequences of City growth and development for parks and recreation. We strongly urge you to be cognizant of these impacts as you consider policy frameworks for the Comprehensive Plan update and to build in requirements for analyzing, monitoring and mitigating them.

Impacts on Health and Quality of Our Parks

Despite significant growth in residents and nonresidents who spend their days in Palo Alto, there has been little recent expansion of park inventory. By default, our existing parks endure the wear of increased usage. There is also a rising demand for our facilities to meet the diverse needs of our growing population (e.g., playing fields, dog parks, restrooms, and equipment that is accessible for all ages and abilities). As a consequence, we face increasing costs and challenges to maintain the quality of our facilities, increasing conflicts among user groups over how space should be used, and a loss of passive green space as we try to accommodate multiple dedicated uses within limited space.

Following the standards set by the National Recreation and Parks Association, our current Comprehensive Plan strives for parks within walking distance (1/2 mile) of neighborhoods and employment areas, and at least 3-4 acres of parks for each 1,000 people. However, some residents in several neighborhoods lack park land within the 1/2 mile radius and recent growth in residential development in South Palo Alto and commercial development in Downtown Palo Alto creates uneven burdens on parks in those areas.

In addition, we are already 25 acres behind our per capita goal, not counting nonresident users. To meet the minimum acreage goal for our forecasted resident population in 2035, (84,000), we would have to increase our park inventory by 2.3% (4 acres) annually. Expansion of housing or commercial square footage must go hand in hand with creative and vigorous pursuit of ways to expand our park inventory. If denser use can make room for more buildings, it can also, or alternatively, make room for more parks.

As our City has grown, its demographics have also changed. From 2000 to 2010 we saw more than 20% growth in the population of senior residents and over 22% growth in school-aged children. These age groups are prominent users of recreational services. As their numbers grow, we must plan to accommodate their particular needs. In addition, for these groups, even a ½ mile park service radius may be a long distance to cover. And as vehicle traffic increases, it becomes harder for them to get there safely.

We already face deficits in park funding to support our changing and growing population. Development impact fees for parks have grown more slowly than anticipated. Since 2006, the City has collected, on average, only about \$600,000 per year, despite a projection of \$1.3 million annually based on ABAG forecasts of population and employment. As a result, the capital improvement project to renovate El Camino Park, alone, will consume 60% of the entire Park Development Fund balance. In addition, those funds are restricted and cannot be used for maintenance or improvement of existing facilities.

According to the IBRC report, as of FY 2011-12, we were underfunded for neighborhood park maintenance by \$5.6 million (catch-up); when you add in open space and golf, the number is closer to \$14 million. As our facilities continue to age, and with projected population growth of 27% between 2013 and 2035, the gap between needs and resources will continue to grow.

Finally, increased density adjacent to parks or recreation facilities affects those resources in indirect but significant ways. In addition to noise, pollution, and greater traffic hazards, overflow parking from commercial users or displaced neighbors may impair access to public facilities. This may be particularly problematic when PAUSD reopens Cubberley or if commuter shuttle service attracts more users than can be accommodated by the proposed satellite parking near the Golf Course and Baylands Athletic Center.

Impacts on the Health and Quality of Our Ecosystems

In addition to the impact of growth on our ability to serve park users, increased development creates significant risks for our local ecosystem – risks that are too often largely unrecognized before damage results.

Our rich urban forest provides habitat to a wealth of species – birds, animals, insects and microorganisms – all of which play vital and interdependent roles in maintaining the ecosystem. Seeing birds and animals outside also enhances our daily life. As we make major changes in the location of canopy or welcome people into areas that were previously remote, habitats are disrupted. Even the types of trees we plant have impacts. Systematic shifts to trees and plants that are drought tolerant, or small enough to accommodate power lines, or serve aesthetic demands for fewer tree droppings, make irreversible changes to the variety of creatures that live here. That's not to say that such shifts should not be made, but rather that they should be considered thoughtfully, evaluating the potential ecological costs.

New commercial and residential buildings and lighted facilities also pose risks to our local species. Large glass windows and reflective siding invite bird deaths. Tall buildings disrupt flight paths, lighting alters animal behaviors, and formal landscaping, while aesthetically natural, does not replace habitat. When such development occurs adjacent to parks and open space, the negative consequences are magnified.

Looking Forward

As you move forward with the Comprehensive Plan update, we urge you to:

1. Forecast impacts of increased vehicle traffic and parking demands, not just on neighborhoods and businesses, but also on safe access to parks, open space and recreation facilities by walking, biking or driving.
2. Collect and consider data regarding recent growth in both residential and commercial square footage, forecast how planned growth will increase the number of park users, and set limits on the number of employees permitted within certain square footage, especially when located within our neighborhoods.
3. Ensure that any plan for growth reflects a commitment by the City to promote expansion and maintain the quality and health of our parks, recreation and open space resources. Such a plan should include:
 - a. Increased collections through alternative park impact fee structures that are sufficient to expand inventory, and active pursuit of opportunities to do so;
 - b. Reliable and sustainable mechanisms to address a growing gap in maintenance funding;
 - c. Quality measures to monitor the health of our parks and recreation facilities in the face of growing demand and use, and to evaluate services to rapidly growing and changing demographic groups;
 - d. Quality measures to monitor impacts on habitat and ecosystems and conservation plans to preserve and protect them.

With these policy guidelines and safeguards in effect we can assure future generations that any new growth will not degrade Palo Alto's recreation opportunities or unique outdoor experiences in our parks and open spaces.