

COUNTY OF MILWAUKEE
Inter-Office Communication

Date: April 19, 2024

To: Marcelia Nicholson, Chairwoman, Milwaukee County Board of Supervisors

From: Guy D. Smith, Executive Director, Milwaukee County Parks

Subject: Strategies to Deter Illegal Dumping in Milwaukee County Parks

File Type: Information Report

REQUEST

Informational report regarding strategies to deter illegal dumping in Milwaukee County Parks.

POLICY

Wisconsin State Statutes:	
Milwaukee County Code of General Ordinances:	
Specific Adopted Budget:	
Specific Adopted Budget Amendment:	7 (10/25/2023)
Specific Adopted Capital Project:	

BACKGROUND

During the 2024 Budget process, Milwaukee County Parks (Parks) was requested via a budget amendment to research a “neighborhood parks watch program aimed at addressing illegal activities including dumping in Milwaukee County parks and parkways. The intent of the program is to encourage residents to collaborate with park authorities and local law enforcement to deter and report illicit activities. The Department shall provide a report back to the County Board by the May 2024 cycle regarding their findings and considerations.”

Illegal dumping is the dumping of waste illegally instead of using authorized methods, such as curbside collection or approved dropoff centers. Illegal dumping has a significant financial and environmental impact on local governments. Communities across the United States are struggling with addressing illegal dumping, including Milwaukee. The parks and parkways of Milwaukee County were designed as places of beauty and recreation for residents and visitors, yet far too often these same sites serve as dumping grounds of materials that can pose significant harm to park users and the natural environment.

The amount of illegally dumped material in the United States has increased and become more concentrated over the past decade. A 2021 report from the City of Los Angeles

estimated that 1.5 million tons of trash were dumped annually, and often were left in alleys, vacant lots, natural woodlands, and waterways.¹ In her 2017 thesis, Amory Brandt found that most illegal dumping sites that had materials greater than 15 pounds and took place within census tracts that had lower median family incomes, higher percentages of non-English speaking individuals, and a significantly higher percentage of residents who were renters.² Finally, the Center for Community Progress documented in 2021 the financial impact of abating the impact of illegal dumping took significant municipal resources that did little to break out of the continual and reactive cycle of responding to these incidents.³

Significant clusters of illegal dumping have occurred on Milwaukee County Parks property in recent years. The attached map shows that these areas are largely concentrated in the north side of the City of Milwaukee including:

- McGovern Park (Senior Center parking lot)
- Lincoln Creek Parkway (by 34th Street)
- Little Menomonee River Parkway (between Appleton Avenue and Mill Road)
- Washington Park (off Lloyd Street on the north side of the park)

A smaller dumping spot is at Copernicus Park on the City's far south side.

All these sites experienced activity that points to dumping of convenience in secluded areas. Much of the dumping occurred near the start of each month and consists of household materials, which follows the timeframe of household evictions by landlords. Many of the larger dumping events appear to be contractors disposing of construction debris from residential or commercial sites. Finally, there are instances of medical waste dumping at various parks.

Parks has taken efforts to combat dumping at parks within Milwaukee County. In June 2023, Parks closed off the Little Menomonee River Parkway between Appleton and Mill Road in preparation for converting this .9-mile roadway into a dedicated hike and bike trail segment of the Oak Leaf Trail. Closing this roadway has severely curtailed dumping at this park and has also provided a glimpse for park users of how the parkway will change once the roadway is converted into a trail. This conversion is currently under design and is expected to begin construction later in 2024 through federal American Recovery Program Act (ARPA) funding.

Secondly, Parks installed barriers at various parks to reduce easy dumping access. This includes additional fencing along roadways (Lincoln Creek Parkway), installing gates, boulders, and tree logs to prevent vehicle access, removing dumpsters from public

¹ Ron Alperin, Piling Up: Addressing L.A.'s Illegal Dumping Problem (Los Angeles: City of Los Angeles, 2021), <https://firebasestorage.googleapis.com/v0/b/lacontroller-2b7de.appspot.com/o/audits%2F2021%2FPiling-Up-Addressing-LAs-Illegal-Dumping-Problem-3.24.21.pdf?alt=media&token=04637eac-cc9a-44bd-98a3-79c0d4986d19>

² Brandt, Amory Anne, "Illegal Dumping as an Indicator for Community Social Disorganization and Crime" (2017). Master's Theses. 4835. https://scholarworks.sjsu.edu/etd_theses/4835

³ Alan Mallach, "How to Prevent and Reduce Illegal Dumping," Center for Community Progress, February 5, 2024, <https://communityprogress.org/blog/prevent-illegal-dumping/>.

access. In addition, our Operations Team does daily inspections through park sites, and our employees do a significant amount of rapid cleanup of Park sites when any dumping is reported to deter additional nefarious activity.

Thirdly, by working with partners, we have worked to increase our presence in these locations. This includes increased monitoring, additional signage, and enforcement by Park Rangers and the Milwaukee County Sheriff Office (MCSO). Residents report dumping to Parks via the Milwaukee County website (Issue Reporter) or by calling to our Operations Team.

All this work has come at a significant cost. Our Operations Team estimates there have been over sixty instances of large-scale illegal dumping (15 pounds or more) over the past three years that have cost over 600 hours of staff time per year to clean up at an average annual cost of \$14,000. This does not include the cost to use outside vendors to address medical waste clean ups (which was over \$5,000 in 2023 alone), as well as one large-size contractor dumping clean up that cost \$19,000 in late 2021. These resources used to clean up illegal dumping would have been used on other efforts to maintain our park system. This illicit activity by a few individuals is born by all Milwaukee County taxpayers.

To break the cycle of illegal dumping occurring within our park system, additional strategies could be pursued. These include:

Increasing fine amount for illegal dumping in parks

Parks has the authority to cite individuals for disposing of waste on county property under section 47.36 (Citation Authority) of the County Code. Under Section 47.48 (Department abatement of dumping), Parks is allowed to impose a civil penalty of two hundred dollars (\$200.00) for each day that dumping remains on county property after the Executive Director orders the responsible party to abate it. This ordinance was adopted in 1997, and in 2023 13 citations were issued.

Parks recommended that the existing ordinance be increased from \$200 to \$5,000. This amount would be in alignment with the City of Milwaukee's penalty for illegal dumping. In addition, other systems throughout the United States issue significant fines to fight illegal dumping, including:

- Chicago (minimum of \$1,500 for a first-time offense, up to six months of incarceration, and 200 hours of community service);
- Philadelphia (up to \$5,000 in fines, up to six months of incarceration, and vehicle seizure);
- Baltimore (up to \$50,000 in fines, five years of incarceration);
- Indianapolis (minimum fine of \$2,500);
- Los Angeles (up to \$10,000 in fines, up to six months of incarceration).

Use of Technology to Improve Enforcement Efforts

Parks currently works with the Park Rangers and MCSO to increase an active presence in our parks to deter illicit activity, including illegal dumping. While this includes having

personnel on site, Parks is also working to install additional cameras on site to document illegal dumping activity. Due to the vast amount of parkland that is subject to illegal dumping, providing unmanned surveillance in all impacted areas will be a challenge.

The City of Milwaukee Department of Neighborhood Services (DNS) is working with partner organizations to install solar powered trail cameras on city-owned property experiencing significant illegal dumping.

Increasing Partnership with the City of Milwaukee

The City of Milwaukee Department of Neighborhood Services (DNS) is responsible for addressing the city's illegal dumping activity. The City issues fines up to \$5,000 and rewards residents who report illegal dumping with up to \$1,000.

However, per DNS, most reports of illegal dumping are not investigated. Reasons for not investigating include the small amount of illegal dumped materials (only sites with more than 20 gallons of illegally dumped material are investigated), residents being unwilling to testify in court, and limited DNS staff resources to investigate these reports. In 2022, the City of Milwaukee received 438 complaints of illegal dumping, but only issued 14 citations. In 2023, 361 complaints were received, and 11 citations were issued. The total dollar amount of citations between 2021 and 2023 was \$1,986.

A closer partnership with the City's Sanitation Services Department could be a potential avenue to reduce illegal dumping. After waiving disposal fees in early 2020, the City of Milwaukee resumed their fees and reduced service hours in 2021 for loads of disposed materials at the city's two Drop Off Centers, which could explain the increase in illegal dumping of at county Parks properties. Parks has worked closely with Sanitation Services to address dumping in alleys adjacent to county Parks since 2021, and this effort has yielded some success.

Developing Partnerships with Neighborhood Residents

Parks believes that neighbors play a key role in protecting our parks. Many of our Parks have Friends groups, which often serve as our eyes and ears throughout our system, work tirelessly to clean up our parks after incidents of illegal dumping. Our Public Engagement team actively works to develop new friends groups throughout the county. The addition of three new engagement coordinators will serve as helpful conduits for building these groups throughout our system.

Related File No's:	Amendment 7
Associated File No's (Including Transfer Packets):	
Previous Action Date(s):	10/25/2023

ALIGNMENT TO STRATEGIC PLAN

Describe how the item aligns to the objectives in the [strategic plan](#):

1B: Create and nurture an inclusive culture across County government

3B: Enhance the County's fiscal health and sustainability

VIRTUAL MEETING INVITES

Todd Pisarski, Safety Security and Training Manager, Milwaukee County Parks

PREPARED BY:

Peter Bratt, Director of Operations and Skilled Trades, Milwaukee County Parks

APPROVED BY:

Guy Smith, Executive Director Milwaukee County Parks *Guy Smith*

ATTACHMENTS:

- Exhibit A – Illegal Dumping Map
- Presentation

CC: David Crowley, County Executive
Mary Jo Meyers, Chief of Staff, County Executive's Office
David Crowley, County Executive
Mary Jo Meyers, Chief of Staff, County Executive's Office
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Comm on Parks & Culture Member
Kelly Bablitch, Chief of Staff, Milwaukee County Board of Supervisors
Janelle M. Jensen, Legislative Services Division Mgr, Office of the County Clerk
Aaron Hertzberg, Director, Department of Administrative Services
Joseph Lamers, Fiscal & Budget Director, DAS
Vince Masterson, Fiscal & Strategic Asset Coordinator, DAS
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