



Month Board Cycle

Milwaukee County Parks
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Date: August 20, 2020
To: Marcelia Nicholson, Chairwoman, County Board of Supervisors
From: Guy Smith, Executive Director, Milwaukee County Parks
Subject: Milwaukee County Parks: Department Status Update **(INFO)**

Issue

Within the context of 2021 budget development, Milwaukee County Parks is facing historic staffing and funding challenges, reaching all-time low levels of staffing and operating budget resources.

Background

As a result of ongoing budget reductions over decades in addition to the severe impacts of COVID-19 on the County's budget, Parks staffing levels and funding sources are at an all-time low.

Parks are crucial to the physical, mental, and emotional well-being of our community – now more than ever. They are equally essential in supporting the health of our lands, waters, wildlife, and vegetation which directly support our quality of life. Additionally, many forget that Parks are secret economic engines that increase property values, improving the local tax base, and are cited among the top 3 relocation factors.

Milwaukee County Parks is at cross-roads and the funding mechanisms to sustain our parks are broken. This time of global pandemic has magnified and accelerated the reality that the fiscal model that has funded Parks for years is failing, that it is not sustainable, and that new, long-term funding solutions are needed.

County residents contribute roughly \$1.50 per month to Parks through their taxes. These dollars make up only ~40% of Parks annual budget. The remaining ~60% of Parks' budget is funded through user fees & revenues – and this approach is not sustainable. Residents and park users are often not aware that parks are a non-mandated service, which means that Parks is among the first departments to be cut when funding challenges for the County arise as mandated services take priority.

Parks full-time staffing levels have been reduced by hundreds of people over the past 35 years - while our services have expanded, and our system footprint has grown. This means we have had fewer and fewer full-time staff taking on more



responsibilities. As context, in the mid 1980's Parks had nearly 1300 full-time employees on staff. Today we have 241 full-time employees maintaining and operating a larger system with more services offerings. Parks also relies on seasonal labor to support Parks operations, normally hiring more than 900 seasonal positions every summer. This year, due to COVID, we have only been able to hire 200 seasonals – and many of these seasonals support revenue-generating functions rather than core parks services like trash collection and mowing. We have redeployed 92 non-operations staff to the field 1-2 shifts (or more) per week to support with basic mowing and trash collection. 220 of our full-time staff have been furloughed for the last several months, working 36-hour weeks.

Because of these seasonal labor hiring freezes, Parks' will likely be able to recover about \$2.5 million in savings to close in on Parks projected 2020 budget gap of \$10 million resulting from COVID. We cannot emphasize enough the toll these freezes have on our full-time staff. This season has been like none other, and our Parks team has carried the weight to continue providing services to the community.

In terms of 2020 service reductions, our deep-well pools and community centers remain closed, as did the Sports Complex, Wehr Nature Center, and the Mitchell Park Domes. Special events including the July 3rd Fireworks, Lakefront Air Show, concerts, and festivals were cancelled. Only half of the wading pools were opened. The pandemic, coupled with our unsustainable funding model, have taken a toll to say the least.

Through the years, and even with the challenges of COVID-19, our staff have maintained the system by providing a strong level of service that, unfortunately, gives a false sense of security. Parks staff have done a heroic job over the years to make it feel like our parks system was alive and well. Within these constraints, Parks staff has done more with less over the years.

Up until this summer, residents haven't necessarily "felt" the urgency of Parks situation – and still may not. Many do not recognize Parks' very real needs. Despite all the best efforts of our incredibly dedicated Parks team, the community has and will continue to notice changes to Park's service levels including less frequent mowing, more trash, limited access to certain amenities, and fewer services.

We know that the community 'perceives' the Parks as essential, but that perception does not reflect our fiscal reality: there is no legal requirement to fund them, and the state does not recognize the parks as a mandatory service. Over the past decade, operations, equipment, and supplies have been cut past lean. Our staff have carried the burden of these cuts for decades. At this point, there's nothing left to trim but services.

Every year, Parks struggles to fund its annual operating budget and the county is unable to adequately fund the known \$300-400 million in Parks' deferred maintenance and capital costs. Milwaukee County Parks system funding has been broken for years and returning pre-COVID approaches will not provide a long-term fix. Parks resources have been in jeopardy for some time, deferred maintenance has long been an issue, and the impacts of COVID-19 are adding to the extreme challenges of our non-mandated, revenue-dependent parks system – threatening its viability.

We encourage leaders and the community to get involved with Love Your Parks campaign, launched on July 3rd to build the community awareness and education around Parks' current status. We are asking people to volunteer, donate to the Milwaukee Parks Foundation, and share stories on why you love your parks. These things can be done in our Parks Explorer app, downloadable at: LoveYourParksMKE.COM. Recent partnerships with Sprecher and Stone Creek Coffee have also given



the Love Your Parks campaign a boost. Parks will continue hosting monthly events within the Love Your Parks campaign to build community awareness and momentum as we look toward forging a more sustainable future for Parks.

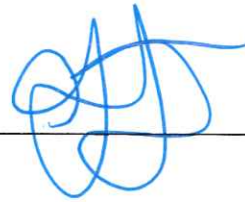
PLEASE NOTE: Due to the COVID-19 pandemic, most special events are not being permitted through Parks this season. The only group gatherings currently approved by the County and being permitted are small group fitness classes, photography, small weddings, and a small number of picnic sites. Many community events are still being planned, with organizers unaware of these limitations. As a result, Parks has been receiving more requests to support these events – often the day of. These events are often not authorized through Parks’ standard permitting process, and so they do not appear in staff workplans. These requests place an incredible burden on our very limited staff. The help of leadership throughout the County is needed in guiding the community’s understanding of the services available to them in the context of COVID.

Recommendation

No action required; report is provided for informational purposes.

Prepared By: Jen Francis, Deputy Director, Milwaukee County Parks

Approved By: Guy Smith, Executive Director, Milwaukee County Parks



Attachments

- Parks 2020 Summer Level of Service One-Pager
- Love Your Parks One-Pager

Copy

- David Crowley, County Executive
- Mary Jo Meyers, Chief of Staff, County Executive’s Office
- Sheldon Wasserman, Parks, Energy & Environment Chair, Supervisor District 3
- Steven Shea, Parks, Energy & Environment Committee Vice-Chair, Supervisor District 8
- Felesia Martin, Parks, Energy & Environment Committee Member, Supervisor District 7
- Sylvia Ortiz-Velez, Parks, Energy & Environment Committee Member, Supervisor District 12
- Liz Sumner, Parks, Energy & Environment Committee Member, Supervisor District 1
- Kelly Bablitch, Chief of Staff, County Board
- Julie Landry, Director, Department of Administrative Services
- Joseph Lamers, Fiscal & Budget Director, DAS
- Vince Masterson, Fiscal & Strategic Asset Coordinator, DAS
- Pamela Bryant, Capital Finance Manager, Comptroller’s Office



- Justin Rodriguez, Capital Finance Analyst, Comptroller's Office
- Kelsey Evans, Committee Coordinator, Office of the County Clerk
- Emily Peterson, Research & Policy Analyst, Office of the Comptroller
- Lindsey Peterson, Budget & Management Analyst, DAS-PSB

