

PARKS AND RECREATION ADVISORY COMMISSION



Parks and Recreation Advisory Commission Adapts to COVID-19

The past two years have been a tumultuous time for the entire world, and Oakland's Park and Recreation Advisory Commission (PRAC) has similarly seen a lot of change.

Probably the most obvious change to how the PRAC functions is that since the beginning of the COVID-19 pandemic in March 2020, PRAC, like most other public meetings, has moved to being held online, using the platform Zoom. In this digital setup, the PRAC Commissioners, staff, and other presenters are "panelists", able to mute and unmute themselves at will as well as turn their camera on to be seen, whereas the public participants are allowed to unmute through staff moderation at the times during the agenda when public comment is being solicited.

In November 2021, Governor Gavin Newsom signed Assembly Bill 361, allowing PRAC (and other public meetings) to continue their remote, digital meetings, but requires that PRAC continue to assess whether it is safe to return to public meetings and vote monthly to continue to meet remotely. As of this writing, extending this provision appears on each agenda under consent items.

Lake Merritt

Perhaps the most publicly visible issue PRAC has worked on during the COVID-19 pandemic is the state of Lake Merritt. Early on in the pandemic, the Lake became a magnet for people all around the region, drawing large crowds. This is likely due to having nearly every other indoor place of entertainment closed by orders of both the county and state Public Health Department. Lake Merritt offers a large, open air space with many amenities and places to gather.

Soon however, the popularity of Lake Merritt began to exceed the capacity of the park. Many vendors began to pop up regularly, who were selling items that were in violation of park rules, such as alcohol, cannabis, and non-permitted food. Often parties would go late into the night, causing elevated sound, traffic, and litter issues. Sadly, violence would break out on occasion with multiple reported shootings.

In an effort to strike a balance with allowing the public to enjoy the public spaces as well as enforcing rules to ensure the park can be enjoyed by all, PRAC, along with leadership from Councilmember and Council President Nikki Fourtunato Bas' office and Councilmember Carroll Fife, city staff, and representatives from the Oakland Black Business Fund developed a pilot program to designate an area at the northeastern end of Lake Merritt near the pergola for vending to take place. The program specified days and hours of operation. Using funding from

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the Coronavirus Aid, Relief, and Economic Security (CARES) Act, the City was able to implement the pilot and PRAC extended the program multiple times. Through the pilot program anywhere from 30 to 80 or more vendors set up shop in the area.

City staff from the Department of Economic and Workforce Development presented PRAC with an informational report on the proposed long-term plan of pilot vending program in January 2022. Funding that was earmarked for the pilot program concluded in November 2021 and there are currently no funds exclusively dedicated to Lake Merritt to implement vending programs, manage park resources, or enforce local laws and park rules. Implementing these efforts will require the allocation of additional resources by the city council. The 2021 vendor data are as follows: between May 22 and November 28, the pilot averaged approximately 34 vendors a day, with a high of 84 vendors on Saturday June 19 during the Juneteenth holiday weekend, and a low of six vendors on October 23 and October 31. The average number of Oakland vendors was 18 per day, with a high of 36 on October 16.

Measure Q Oversight

In March 2020, Oakland voters passed Measure Q, a parcel tax which funds improvements to parks and recreation (64%), programs to alleviate homelessness (30%), and improvements to water quality (5%), with 1% for administration, which is done by Oakland Public Works (OPW). For the fiscal year 2021-2022, Measure Q is budgeted to bring in over \$27 million.

Language in the measure directed the City Council assign to one more existing Boards or Commissions the responsibility of citizen oversight of the measure including the expenditure of the funds, and in October 2020, PRAC voted to oversee the 64% which goes to Parks and Recreation services.

PRAC created an Ad Hoc committee to assist in fulfilling its new role. The Measure Q Ad Hoc Committee meets regularly with OPW staff; Oakland Parks, Recreation and Youth Development (OPRYD) staff; members of the Yes on Measure Q committee, and others to dive into the issues surrounding Measure Q implementation such as hiring staff, development of goals, tracking deliverables, budget tracking, equity analysis, and more. Measure Q is now a standing item on the monthly PRAC agenda, and the ad hoc committee works to develop the content each month.

The ad hoc committee worked with OPW to develop and launch the Measure Q website, which will continue to be a repository for all things Measure Q, including original measure language, oversight information, and links to pertinent public meetings.

<https://www.oaklandca.gov/topics/measure-q>

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Sponsorship and Donor Recognition Guidelines

For many years OPRYD has accepted gifts from various corporate and philanthropic sources to fund improvements and programs in parks. City code related to recognizing funding sources is considered outdated and ineffective. Under the lead of Councilmember Noel Gallo's office, an ad-hoc committee of the Oakland Parks and Recreation Foundation Executive Director, OPRYD Director, and the PRAC Chair developed language to establish and formalize a sponsorship and recognition policy that encourages the giving of philanthropic funds to increase funding for City park facilities and programs.

The legislation proposes a process where the PRAC reviews all sponsorship requests and those requests that are over \$250,000 would require City Council resolution, in order to streamline the process for smaller gifts. The proposed legislation defines timeframes for funder recognition, with options to renew; therefore, removing "permanent recognition" (e.g. the basketball courts at Bushrod Park). The legislation also provides guidelines as to ensure funding is not accepted from donors whose values run counter to those of OPRYD/City, and that the OPRYD Director shall prepare an annual report to City Council listing the donations that were accepted in the previous year.

Park Rules Update

In 2015, PRAC formed an ad hoc committee to refresh Oakland's park-related municipal codes. After holding two Town Hall meetings and gathering lots of public input and feedback, the ad hoc committee drafted and released a new draft of the municipal codes. The codes were then to be reviewed by the Life Enrichment Committee (LEC) of the City Council and then go to City Council itself for adoption. The codes did not make it through LEC and went back to PRAC.

On May 25, 2021, Life Enrichment Committee hosted a joint meeting of PRAC and the Cultural Affairs Commission to discuss the rules, mainly owing to the growing situation at Lake Merritt (see above). Two follow ups occurred from that meeting. Since the revision of the codes cover issues across the entire City and all City's parks, the issues of Lake Merritt ended up being addressed separately. A pilot program was developed for Lake Merritt to assign spaces for vendors and control traffic. Another outcome of the meeting was that the Cultural Affairs and Parks and Recreation Commissions met numerous times to go over the code language and prepared further edits collaboratively.

The subcommittee of the two commissions has developed new language and has drafted a timeline for obtaining additional public input before returning to PRAC, and going to LEC and City Council with the additional amended codes. This process will occur in 2022.

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Need for Rangers and Ambassadors

Aside from perhaps hearing of issues at Lake Merritt and tree conservation, the most common feedback PRAC commissioners hear (and see) is the need for the return of Park Rangers and/or Ambassadors. The Park Ranger program was eliminated in 2010, but the need to have dedicated staff at city parks, especially the larger ones, remains and is perhaps more pertinent than ever. PRAC urges the City to provide additional support to OPRYD to fill this need and help provide safe guidance and supervision at our parks

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Park Renovations

Digital Arts and Culinary Academy (East Oakland Art Center) - Currently undergoing the planning of CIP Phase 2 remodel. Phase 2 scope includes building out multi-purpose rooms, storage, gender-neutral restroom, ADA improvements to the kitchen, electrification of the building and removal of gas in accordance with the ECAP, approved by Council in July 2020.

Mosswood Park - In early February 2021 Mosswood Park Master Plan and CEQA determination were presented to the City Council, both items were officially adopted which provides authorization to proceed with the development of the new Community Center design. It also allows the City and OPW to pursue additional funding. Phase 1, the construction of the Community Center is anticipated to commence in 2022. Phase 2 is proposed to be a new gym and Phase 3 to be a therapy pool. Various landscape and park improvements would be parts of each phase as well as potentially being addressed independently of the buildings.

Lincoln Park - Awarded \$8.5 million from state grant funding to create a new community center with an outdoor classroom, and badminton court, two patio and garden areas, and landscaping and lighting throughout the park. As well as three renovated basketball courts. Construction is expected to begin in 2023.

Verdese Carter Park - Awarded \$8.4 million from state grant funding to construct a new community plaza with promenades, picnic area, nature area, fitness area, walking loop and shade structure. As well as a renovated playground, community garden, and multi-use field.

Auditor's Report

Toward the end of 2021, the City Auditor released a report concerning allegations of improper activities within the OPRYD Department, its leadership, and its fiscal arrangements with the Oakland Parks and Recreation Foundation. PRAC, nor any of its commissioners, were implicated, and PRAC will continue to monitor the developments as they occur. PRAC does not foresee the report interfering with any of PRAC's functions.

Prepared by:
Princess Allen, Chair
Coire Reilly, Past Chair

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PRAC Membership 2020-22

Commissioner	Term
Princess Allen, Chair	11/17/20 - 11/16/23
Donna Duhe	05/10/19 - 05/9/22
Jinhee Ha	11/14/20 - 11/13/23
Isaac Kos-Read	03/18/21 - 03/17/24
Peter Moore	11/14/20 - 11/13/23
Daral Smith	11/14/20 - 11/13/23
Kenzie Smith	11/14/20 - 11/13/23
Tam Tran, Vice Chair	11/14/20 - 11/13/23
Evelyn Torres	11/14/20 - 11/13/23
Robert Watkins	11/14/21 - 11/13/24
Dwayne Aikens	11/17/17 - 11/16/20
Amy Cole, Past Vice Chair	11/14/17 - 11/13/20
Coire Reilly, Past Chair	11/14/18 - 11/13/21
Ethel Howze	11/15/17 – 11/14/20
Emilie Wolfson	11/14/17 - 11/13/20