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OAKLAND PARKS Coalition

2009 Community Report Card on the Maintenance of Oakland Parks

Submitted by

**The Oakland Parks Coalition
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Oakland Parks Coalition Steering Committee

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Attached to this Report:

- Survey Ratings
- Survey Comments

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Then and Now, an Historic Perspective

The recession has taken its toll on cities throughout this country and Oakland is no exception. Falling revenues have forced layoffs in all public sectors but a comparison of the historical levels of park maintenance in Oakland to the current situation is especially jolting. In the 1970s, Oakland enjoyed approximately 900 acres of parkland properties and allocated about 175 authorized full-time employee (FTEs) maintenance positions to care for them; many parks even had full-time gardeners. By 1989/90 maintenance had been cut by 37.5%, to 98 FTEs. Today's numbers are even more disturbing: with 50% more park acreage than in the 70s (currently, 1,350 acres of parks, medians, landscaped areas and open space) Oakland Public Works Agency (PWA) has authorized only 72 FTEs to care for those locations. In the long run, these drastic cuts in maintenance will surely be detrimental to our highly valued green assets.

In this report we will describe measures the Public Works Agency has taken to address the maintenance cutbacks and discuss Oakland Parks Coalition activities to support park care. We will also present the results of the 2009 Annual Love Your Parks Day Survey and explain their significance.

Oakland Parks Coalition Overview

Oakland Parks Coalition (OPC), a volunteer organization formed in 2003, was founded by Oaklanders Gillian Garro and Audree Taylor-Jones to address a perceived decline of conditions and programs in Oakland Parks. Its mission at that time was "to build a productive partnership between Oakland Parks and Recreation (OPR) and the public for the purpose of creating excellent parks city-wide". OPC has been working to achieve these goals for the past eight years: encourage members of the community (neighbors, businesses, service organizations) to actively participate in the care and improvement of their local parks and median strips; develop accessibility and accountability to the public within OPR, establish an effective system for the public to report park problems and track their resolutions; facilitate regular park evaluations and meetings between communities and maintenance staff.

With the transfer of park maintenance to the Public Works Agency (PWA) and the steady decline of City resources for park maintenance OPC deemed it important to concentrate its efforts on caring for the physical properties of our parks, dropping park programming from its purview. The OPC mission was revised in 2006 to read: "Oakland Parks Coalition is a city-wide association of community members and agencies working to implement standards of excellence for the maintenance of our parks and medians." OPC works to achieve those standards through its partnership with PWA by encouraging and supporting park stewardship, by conducting its annual park survey and by advocating at City forums for improved park maintenance. OPC also co-chairs the annual Oakland Volunteer Recognition Evening with PWA.

Its steering committee meets on the last Wednesday of each month and consists of citizen volunteers and representatives from various agencies of City government.

Park Maintenance Overview

OPC narrowed its mission to focus on park maintenance as a reflection of ever-decreasing maintenance resources. As mentioned above, park maintenance staffing has plummeted since its zenith in the early 70s but the reductions occurred slowly over the years as Proposition 13 curtailed City revenues. In 1993, in recognition of increased costs of all programs to the General Purpose Fund, voters approved the Landscaping and Lighting District (LLAD) to help pay for park maintenance and street lighting. As a consequence, voters expected an adequate level of maintenance would be assured. However, in subsequent years, while LLAD revenues remained flat, costs, especially energy, began to escalate. With no Cost of Living Adjustment (COLA) built into the LLAD, costs soon began to exceed revenues and the payment of the shortfall reverted back to the General Fund. Council Members attempted to rectify this anomaly with a second LLAD in 2006. Voters passed LLAD II but it was rescinded after a successful legal challenge in another California City to this particular funding model. In that budget cycle City Council was able to allocate monies from a budget surplus to make up the shortfall but it was imperative that a more permanent fix be found.

At the same time, in 2006, park maintenance services were significantly reorganized to make the best use of limited resources. PWA introduced the Hub deployment system that grouped all parkland properties into 32 geographical units; each would be maintained by a team consisting of a crew leader and a Gardener II, with the crew leader responsible for the condition of the hub. The work load was more evenly distributed under this system but gardeners were sometimes pulled away from their scheduled work to collaborate on special projects. Part II of the reorganization established routine maintenance schedules that could be accessed on line—park users could determine when their parks would be mowed, irrigated and would receive litter pickups.

By October, 2008, the recession had taken its toll on City coffers and the inevitable was inescapable: park maintenance staffing was slashed by 13.5 positions, or 15%. The downward spiral continued and in the next budget cycle, July, 2009, four more maintenance positions were eliminated.

Given these budget conditions, caring properly for City parks, landscaped areas and medians became a substantial challenge and PWA was left with few good options. In the wake of the 2009/2011 budget cuts PWA took drastic measures: two-thirds of parkland properties were designated as “non-priority”, i.e., they would receive no routine maintenance. This left 212

mini-parks, neighborhood parks, special use parks, parking lots, plazas, medians and streetscapes without litter baskets, litter pick-ups or any gardening care. Signs were placed at those locations to inform the public of this withdrawal of maintenance. The remaining 104 "priority locations" would continue to be serviced, albeit on a reduced level. The long-term viability of all these locations is precarious, but even more so at the locations that no longer receive routine maintenance.

PWA Analysis of Conditions

As a result of the July cutbacks, PWA Parks and Buildings Manager, Jim Ryugo, oversaw the reconfiguring of the hub system. With crew leader positions reduced from 27 to 18 the elimination of many hubs became a necessity. Although this translated into a two-tiered maintenance program of "priority" and "non-priority" parks, Ryugo explains that the "non-priority parks are not being neglected: the crews now practice "smart maintenance". He says that his crews are very familiar with the "non-priority" trouble spots and continue to visit them on a regular basis to stave off more serious problems down the line.

Assistant Director of Public Works Brooke Levin dedicates several days a month to park inspections and her last inspection was in late November: "I did not see a lot of locations that were problematic and it kind of surprised me", she replied, when asked how she found conditions in the parks. Both Ryugo and Levin made the same observation: that our parks appear to be weathering the maintenance storm. They share these ideas about the reasons:

- Park maintenance workers are receiving more training and have become more efficient in this time of crisis.
- The removal of waste containers in the "non-priority" parks has reduced the litter from overturned containers.
- The public is aware of the crisis—"no-routine maintenance" signs have brought the message to every median and neighborhood pocket park in the City, and citizens are stepping forward as volunteers to help fill in the gaps.



The last point—that volunteers have stepped forward—is the perhaps the most pertinent but it is very hard to quantify. OPC has seen an increase of park stewards this year but, while PWA personnel think that more groups are volunteering in the parks, they do not have the data to substantiate the notion. He recognizes the need for a reliable mechanism to count volunteer

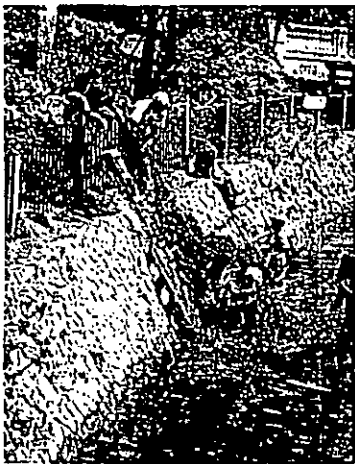
hours. In any case, Ryugo thinks that it's time *park users* become better park supporters and proposes certain steps to build "park-pride" among them:

- Work with recreation center staff to teach park users the importance of cleaning up after themselves.
- Change language in rental agreements to ensure that park users understand the importance of cleaning up picnic sites after use.
- Work with adult users of athletic fields to clean up after themselves. Jack London Soccer League already does it, he says, and it saves many work hours for crews.

Levin recognizes the challenges of working with volunteers: "Keep Oakland Clean and Beautiful (KOCB) volunteers are much more oriented around [specific tasks like litter pickup or graffiti]. Other volunteers need more support. That has definitely been something we have to work on." She adds that park supervisors are not yet trained to work with volunteers, something else to work on.

OPC Park Stewardship & City Support for Volunteers

The 212 "non-priority" locations, which include parks, landscaped areas on city property and medians, remain open to the public. Keeping parks open is essential to preserving the integrity and vitality of neighborhoods, but keeping them open without proper care is an invitation to blight and crime. Historically, when citizens learn about such a crisis they are eager to volunteer their time to fill in the gap and OPC has conducted outreach to engage those citizens to sign on as park stewards. Stewardship can not only forestall park decay but it can build community in our neighborhoods by encouraging disparate groups or individuals to work together to protect a neighborhood asset.



Glen Echo Park Clean-up, April '09

OPC partners with PWA to recruit stewards for parks and support their activities by helping them connect with other volunteers and by providing an organizing toolkit and support to facilitate their volunteer service. OPC Park stewards (68 citizens have taken the OPC Stewardship Pledge) participate in various activities in their parks and medians: monitoring the park and reporting problems, participating in the annual survey, cleaning litter or weeding, organizing group clean-ups or green-ups. OPC urges them to sign on with Keep Oakland Clean and Beautiful so they can receive City support services such as trash and green waste pickups and hand tools for the jobs.

We must also acknowledge the work being done by City Councilmembers who have launched their own efforts to recruit volunteers for the parks. Here are two examples: District 1 Councilmember Jane Brunner reached out to the community this summer for park volunteers and held a community training session in early December with the 37 people who answered the call; Councilmember Jean Quan and her staff support park stewardship by organizing a number of "Friends" groups and helping to recruit volunteers through announcements in her weekly e-newsletter and by co-sponsoring clean-ups and providing support at Earth Day and Creek to Bay Day events, with hand outs and when feasible, refreshments.

Surveying Oakland Parks

Why bother to survey Oakland Parks? The answer is simple: park users have a perspective that public employees do not and their assessment of the parks is a valuable tool that can be used to improve them. OPC saw this need and has conducted surveys in different formats in Oakland parks since 2003. In 2006, we switched to an annual survey called *Love Your Parks Day (LYPD)*. The annual survey, taken at approximately the same time each year, has certain advantages: it enables us to compare the same parks from year to year with the same seasonal conditions and to determine, through the survey, if parks are getting the attention they need.

The surveys are taken by volunteers on *Love Your Parks Day* in the fall and by stewards who survey their own parks during a designated period before or after the event day. On event day, volunteers are teamed and assigned 3-5 parks to survey in a given district and return the surveys that same day. All surveys are tabulated and entered into a spreadsheet. Results of those surveys can be seen on-line at www.oaklandparkscoalition.org and as an appendage to this report.

OPC revised the survey this year to provide a more comprehensive evaluation of park conditions. Past LYPD surveys called for overall ratings in nine categories of maintenance: litter; picnic areas; restrooms; hardscape, furniture, signage; drainage & irrigation systems; greenery; recreation centers; outdoor sports areas, outdoor children's play areas. The 2009 survey now provides several ratings within each of the nine categories in addition to the overall category ratings, thus enabling the pinpointing of concerns within each park.

Park surveys can be an important tool in determining specific issues in parks but should not be construed as the last word on conditions in a park; they are a description of a park at a point in time. On a given day a particular park may have just been mowed or a volunteer group may have recently done work in the park, thus elevating the survey ratings. And, two other factors must be taken into account: survey teams are instructed to find consensus for their ratings while park stewards usually survey their parks alone; stewards may judge their parks more

critically than volunteers who have no expectations regarding the particular parks they are assigned. So, we ask you to look at these surveys with the understanding that they are only one tool—the one OPC can provide-- in assessing park conditions.

2009 Love Your Parks Day Survey Analysis

Our fall *Love Your Parks Day* survey and anecdotal evidence paint a picture of our parks at a point in time. The 2009 *Love Your Parks Day* survey event was held on Saturday, September 26th. Many park stewards had completed advance surveys of their own parks in the three-week window prior to the event which left about 59 parks to survey on event day. Thirty-six



volunteers attended, among whom were students from Oakland High Honor Society. They formed teams and were given assignments to survey 3-5 parks. A total of one hundred parks were surveyed and survey results were compiled into an Excel spreadsheet which is attached to this report.

The survey rating system ranges from 1-4, 1 being the best.

- 1=good/yes
- 2=satisfactory/mostly
- 3=fair/partly
- 4=poor/no

The spreadsheet accompanying this report lists the survey ratings according to Council Districts for every question on the survey for each park and averages the ratings for each category for each district. Most averages were around 2, or *satisfactory* and were generally somewhat better than 2008 averages (see below for grand averages and details in attachment). According to the survey comments there did not appear to be many egregious conditions in the parks. District 7, with averages consistently well over 2.0, had the lowest ratings.

CATEGORY GRAND AVERAGES	Litter	Picnic Areas	Restrooms	Hardscape & Signage	Greenery	Drainage & Irrigation	Rec Centers Exteriors	Outdoor Sports Areas	Outdoor Children's Play Areas	Overall Rating	Final Average
2006	2.29	2.37	2.62	2.53	2.40	1.82	1.99	2.50		2.42	2.33
2007	1.81	1.78	2.27	2.12	1.98	1.80	1.99	1.87		1.97	1.96
2008	1.96	1.85	2.35	1.96	2.06	2.27	1.85	1.99	1.87	2.16	2.03
2009	1.98	2.01	2.24	1.73	2.00	1.73	1.56	1.83	1.91	1.93	1.89

How can we interpret this year's ratings? **This year's ratings suggest that the parks are holding their own, despite all odds.** In the face of the drastic cutbacks in maintenance we expected all ratings to decline but that was not the case. We can only surmise the reasons for the improved ratings and time alone will tell if they are valid:

- The survey was modified this year to include ratings for every question in a category. Heretofore we asked only for an overall rating for each category. This year we asked surveyors to answer the questions that were listed as a guide to rating in previous surveys. Here are the 3 questions in the Litter category that received ratings (yes, mostly, partly, no or N/A) for the first time:
 - Are the grounds free of litter?
 - Are trash receptacles available?
 - Are trash receptacles emptied?
- Although the question ratings were not calculated into category averages, the change in survey format may have changed the way surveyors settled on their overall ratings.
- In 2006, in an effort to improve efficiency, Public Works reorganized its maintenance department into a system of 31 hubs, each typically with a Gardener Crew Leader and a 2-person crew. Three years later this system, which has been embraced by Crew Leaders and has fostered competition among them, appears to have resulted in positive gains in productivity.
- The radical cuts made in the 09/11 Budget to staffing allocations had not yet had their *impact in September. The effects of these cutbacks will most likely be felt in months to come.*
- An early rain occurred just a few days before survey day, always a plus for parched turf.
- **OPC has been working hard to recruit park stewards and this year's campaign was especially successful. Individual volunteers and volunteer groups have been more active than ever before and parks are reaping the benefits.**

While the ratings are a tool for comparison from year to year the comments may be the most valuable assessment tool. All comments are attached in a document to this report but here is a sampling:

- **District 1, Helen MacGregor Plaza: Lorrie Fink, Susanna Zhang, Kevin Lu, surveyors:** Needs cleanup, litter, litter, litter! Not inviting, tended to but needs litter pickup and seems lifeless. Not a match for Children's Hospital!!!
- **District 2, Morcom Rose Garden: Maggie Kostoff, surveyor:** Given this lack of staff and resources, the Rose Garden is extremely well managed and maintained. Much credit can go to Tora and the many volunteers that support this park.
- **Lakeside Park/Pine Knoll: Paula Stetler, surveyor:** This park is in much better shape than 3-4 years ago. There's a small amount of litter but no sign of homeless inhabitants

as in previous years. The park is better maintained, (mowed, trimmed, weeded). It is a nice quiet accompaniment to the bustle of Lake Merritt across the street.

- **District 3, South Prescott Park: Mike & Beverly Kent, Darlene Hor, surveyors:** Jose Uribe lives next door to the park. He cleans, plants trees and plants [but, there is a] homeless population and dog poop around.
- **District 4, Allendale Park: Susan Angstadt & Sharon Hayden, surveyors:** Director of nursery school has done great job organizing and tidying the rec facility in the year she's been here. But, fence by sports field leaning dangerously and pathway between school and park is uneven and difficult to navigate for strollers, seniors and disabled.
- **District 5, Josie De La Cruz Park aka Carmen Flores: Maria Sanchez, Raymond Mach, Calvin Looc, surveyors:** Grass needs maintenance. Replace trees.
- **District 6, Rainbow: Karen Smulevitz, Lasonia Williams, surveyors:** Exposed electrical wiring in light post; Broken glass by tot lot, Fence near skate park needs immediate repair—hazard; Skate park is awesome but locked on a Saturday! Love the park. It needs swings.
- **District 7, 85th Ave/Eula Brinson Mini Park: Kristi Holohan, surveyor:** Park is generally in good condition. Broken fence on side where people can come in from apartment complex. There was a living room chair and grill left there. I spoke with neighbors and they said only drug dealers go into park and there have been bullets from park that hit their houses. Also, someone was shot in the park. People are afraid.

Room for Improvement

With a steady downsizing of the department since the 1990s PWA has found it necessary to discover ways to make park maintenance more efficient. Recent innovations and programs have proved effective:

- reorganization of park maintenance into the Hub deployment system
- the implementation of City Works, an electronic program which facilitates service delivery
- the institution of the Call Center, which fields citizen reports of problems

While these programs have done much to improve maintenance services, all could benefit from corrections:

- The Hub system brought immediate benefits to park care in 2006 when it was instituted. It is lamentable that budget cuts forced the elimination of almost half the hubs and remains to be seen how effective the reorganization will be under current conditions.
- City Works is not yet fully implemented; at this writing it is operating in East Oakland only. This system promises improved efficiency in the field and the much needed transparency that citizens would like. OPC urges the full implementation of the system as soon as possible.

- The Call Center makes it easy for citizens to report problems, but a system for quantifying and categorizing the calls is, apparently, not in place. This task was meant to be assigned to City Works but that component of the program has not been fully activated. In the meantime, it would benefit the agency and the public to know how many and what kinds of calls are received for given time periods (daily, weekly, monthly) and how and when they are resolved.

Recommendations

The City of Oakland will likely experience depressed revenues and mounting expenses for years to come and chances are park maintenance, which is supplemented by the ever-dwindling discretionary fund, will be facing cutbacks each budget cycle. Right now our parks appear to be benefiting from increased volunteer efforts and OPC will continue to support its stewards and work with PWA to recruit and support new volunteers. But, will these eager volunteers receive the support from the City that they need to make positive contributions to park upkeep? Furthermore, with the imminent addition of newly landscaped locations (Lake Merritt/Measure DD) and new locations that will benefit from Measure WW funds OPC is concerned that the well of volunteers may tap out.

Oakland's volunteer program, such as it is, is far from ideal. Since the *Volunteer Coordinator* position was eliminated in the last budget cycle businesses and non-profit organizations, which bring large groups of people to do volunteer work in our parks, no longer have a connection with a central coordinator, making project assignment and support more complicated and jeopardizing their continued participation. Furthermore, the *Adopt-a-Spot* program, which provides tools and support services to individual volunteers, is not adequately staffed to first engage and then keep volunteers enthusiastic about their service.

A volunteer program is essential to the survival of our green spaces but without a central coordinator it will never flourish. The position of *Volunteer Coordinator* as it existed until mid 2009 was never carefully defined, resulting in a limited benefit to volunteer programming. A new position should be created, one that is carefully designed to bring the disparate volunteer groups and programs together, to encourage the formation of "Friends" groups, to track and quantify volunteer efforts, in short, to optimize volunteerism in our city.

OPC encourages Councilmembers to do their part to keep our park system vital.

- They should strengthen their support to volunteers in their districts by acknowledging and supporting volunteer efforts, by recognizing their work at the yearly Volunteer Appreciation Evening, by keeping in touch with volunteers through workshops—these are all ways to recruit and keep volunteers active and productive.

- We hope Councilmembers will make prudent budget decisions such as not freezing hiring for supervisory positions when they are vacated-- the body cannot function properly without a head.

And, finally, we ask our representatives to keep in mind the following: a vibrant park system provides children and teens with safe and healthy alternatives; well maintained parks are an important way to attract businesses and/or residents, and to increase property values; parks preserve the historic and cultural character of Oakland. In short, our quality of life is inextricably tied to the quality of our parks; our precious assets must be valued and preserved to keep us all safe and healthy.

CC:

His Honor, Ron Dellums
PWA Interim Director, Vit Troyan
PWA Assistant Director Brooke Levin
PWA Parks & Buildings Manager Jim Ryugo
OPR Director Audree Jones-Taylor
Councilmember District 1 Jane Bruner
Councilmember District 2 Pat Kernighan
Councilmember District 3 Nancy Nadel
Councilmember District 4 Jean Quan
Councilmember District 5 Ignacio de la Fuente
Councilmember District 6 Desley Brooks
Councilmember District 7 Larry Reid
Councilmember At Large Rebecca Kaplan