

This is a study session report and no Council action is required.

### **Executive Summary**

This report provides an update on the recently initiated City-wide parks, trails, open space and recreation facilities master planning process, including the consultant's scope of work, community outreach strategies, issues to be studied, project schedule and expected outcomes and deliverables.

The intent of this master planning process is for the identification and prioritization of community-relevant short-term (within 5 years), mid-term (10 years) and long-term (25 years) improvements, enhancements or acquisition of park and recreation facilities and a strategic funding plan to successfully implement the master plan. Through this process not only will there be a master plan for the entire parks system, there will also be complementary individual plans for each City park and recreational facility.

In addition to this initial update, staff and the consultants plan to provide the Council with a progress update presentation in early 2015, a detailed study session in spring 2015, and a final report to Council in fall 2015, after vetting the community-developed draft plan document with the Parks and Recreation Commission, Planning and Transportation Commission, Public Arts Commission, and Historical Resources Board.

### **Background**

A Capital Improvement Project for a Parks, Trails, Open Space and Recreation Master Plan (PE-13003) was adopted by Council for the 2013 Fiscal Year. The purpose of this project is to provide the necessary analysis and review of Palo Alto's parks and recreation system for the preparation of a long-range (25-year) Master Plan (Attachment A- Agreement and Scope of Work). The Master Plan will provide the City with clear guidance regarding future renovations and capital improvement needs for parks, trails, open space and recreation facilities. The master plan will also include recommendations to meet demands for future recreational, programming, environmental, and maintenance needs and establish a prioritized schedule of future park renovations and facility improvements.

In their presentation, staff and representatives of the contracted consulting firm MIG, Inc. will review the following components of the plan development:

1. Review project goals and objectives
2. Review the scope of the Master Plan (example only developed areas of open spaces)
3. Discuss the community outreach program
4. Project Schedule and timeline
5. The intended use of Park Master Plan Report
6. Feedback from council (expectations of the report)

Problem Statement the Master Plan Aims to Address:

*The City currently has no cohesive plan to manage, improve and expand its park and recreational facilities in order to keep the programs, services and facilities relevant to present and future populations; to appropriately balance recreational and open space conservation needs; and to provide adequate funding to meet these on-going needs.*

The last comprehensive city parks and recreation master plan was completed in 1965. This plan called for the creation of the Baylands Athletic Center, the future expansion of athletic fields throughout the city, and the expansion of Greer Park. The plan also set standards for the amount of neighborhood and regional park acreage per 1,000 residents and prescribed that parks be situated no further than one-half mile from any residential development.

Although the City has developed other specific planning documents in the intervening years affecting Parks and Recreation, such as the City's Comprehensive Plan (1998, update beginning in 2014), Baylands Master Plan (1978; updated 2008), Arastradero Preserve Plan (Arastra Property Study, 1981) and Infrastructure Blue Ribbon Commission Report (2011), there has been no comprehensive City-wide study or current and projected community recreation and park facility needs since 1965.

The City Council recognized there was inadequate maintenance and renovation of City facilities in FY 2000, and as a result staff implemented a revitalized infrastructure program (City Works) intended to catch-up on deferred infrastructure maintenance and repair. Even though approximately \$2,000,000 annually was earmarked for park and open space renovations, because of severely limited reserves, funds were primarily used to replace existing facilities in-kind, but not to significantly change or enhance the parks or facilities.

Realizing the limited funds available for investing in park improvements and expansions, in 2002 the City Council took advantage of the Quimby Act of 1975 (California Government Code 66477) and the Mello-Roos Community Facilities Act of 1982, to implement development impact fees for parks, community centers and libraries (Council resolution 8124). This additional funding mechanism has brought millions of dollars to the renovation and expansion of recreational opportunities in Palo Alto since its implementation in 2002. Even so, funding from these sources has not been adequate to acquire additional land to meet the acreage goals for park land established in the Comprehensive Plan.

Through the annual Capital Improvement Program (CIP) budget process, funds have been approved since 2000 for the most pressing facility improvements to ensure safety, compliance with building and state code, compliance with environmental regulations, compliance with the Americans with Disabilities Act, and for the efficient delivery of recreational services. However, addressing structural and programmatic needs through the annual CIP budget process has achieved only piecemeal planning for individual parks, the overall plan still falls short of meeting broad community needs and adapting

to the demographic changes in our community.

The need for a comprehensive parks and recreational facility master plan has further been heightened in the past five years through the City Council's priority of facing and addressing environmental, conservation and sustainability needs for both the short-term and long-term.

## **Discussion**

After Council provided funding in the FY 2013 CIP budget for the City-wide parks, trails, open space and recreation master planning process, staff worked closely with the Parks and Recreation Commission to develop the scope of the *Request for Proposal* solicitation that was released last summer.

The Commission helped staff frame the questions and problems that need to be addressed by the Plan, which include the following elements for study:

### Demographic information and understanding our park and facility users

Staff and the Commission felt that it was essential to understand the needs of the entire community, and not just the portion of citizens who are presently using City parks, trails and recreational facilities. The needs of all segments of the community, from youngsters to seniors; from new residents, renters and long-time residents; and from those who work or visit Palo Alto, and take advantage of recreational, sports and City-sponsored entertainment opportunities, needs to be thoroughly understood. In order to have the broadest perspective on recreational needs, the study also needs to consider the use of City-brokered school district facilities including fields, tennis courts and gymnasiums.

To optimize the use of space, facilities and limited capital improvement dollars, the study needs to provide an analysis of current and forecasted community recreation needs; and identify opportunities and deficiencies for future recreation programs and services. Current and projected deficiencies would include identification of underserved populations, including those with special physical needs. For a number of years, the Parks and Recreation Commission has recognized the needs of dog owners for safe and social exercise opportunities that are not being met by the City's three under-sized dog exercise areas.

A key component of the plan development is the proactive engagement of the public and a broad range of stakeholders in order to fairly and completely inform the study recommendations. As one of their first tasks, MIG has formulated the attached draft public engagement plan (Attachment B). This plan utilizes a number of different strategies to gather and assess community needs through the use of surveys, in-person interviews, stakeholder sessions, in-depth meetings with staff from various City departments, and numerous community meetings conducted in a variety of locations around Palo Alto.

The consultant team has already begun to inventory and study current parks, trails and recreational facilities, as well as recreational programs and services offered by the City. An initial all-day tour for the consultant team and parks and recreation staff of City parks, open space areas and some of the City's recreational facilities was conducted on February 11, 2014, to familiarize the consultants with the distribution of parks and facilities, the unique programs and amenities available in Palo Alto, and to begin identifying constraints and opportunities presented by our current facilities.

Traveling through all quadrants of Palo Alto during the initial tour, the outing provided staff with an opportunity to discuss the mix and distribution of facilities, maintenance practices; and to identify policies and standards for the operation of our parks (Integrated Pest Management, Water Conservation, Field Use Policies, etc.). Wherever possible along the initial tour, the consultants were able to see park and facility users enjoying certain areas of parks and participating in a broad range of City-provided recreational and educational programs.

#### Outdated and obsolete facilities

Many city parks have features and amenities that are seldom used or that are outdated. Examples include shuffleboard courts and horseshoe pits at Rinconada and Mitchell Parks; the pétanque (french court bowling) court at Mitchell Park; the dancing/roller skating bowls featured at Pardee, Ramos, Seale and Robles Parks. Even the skateboard bowl at Greer Park, which was considered state-of-the-art when it was opened in 1991, is now considered outdated by skaters because it lacks the grinding rails and other amenities desired by today's skateboarders.

#### Emerging recreational activities and sports

A number of sports and outdoor activities have emerged in the past ten years, and demand specialized facilities or consideration in design of fields or amenities. Activities such as sport (rock) climbing, ultimate Frisbee, and BMX bike riding have become very popular in the past fifteen years, yet Palo Alto has no facilities designed around these activities that are growing in popularity.

#### Encouraging fitness, nature exploration, outdoor play

Author Richard Louv has described the growing phenomenon of children staying indoors, engaged with technology and virtual games, as "nature deficit disorder." In order to connect children with the world around them and to inspire attitudes of environmental stewardship, it is important to create outdoor play areas that are inviting, stimulating and that encourage both nature exploration and social interaction amongst children.

Hectic schedules, sedentary lifestyles and over-eating have led to a marked increase in interest in fitness programs – mostly in gyms with specialized equipment. Only one Palo Alto park (Greer) is equipped with an outdated exercise "par" circuit course. In order to

promote healthy lifestyles, neighborhood parks should provide opportunities for personal fitness beyond tennis and jogging.

#### Right-sizing our facilities, including fields, tennis courts, picnic areas, etc.

In the past fifteen years, since the implementation of the City's infrastructure program, an emphasis has been placed on maintaining existing facilities. When a park is renovated, the existing tennis or basketball courts will be resurfaced and fencing will be repaired. When the Phase IV area of Greer Park was improved in 2008, there were requests from various interest groups to add tennis courts, to expand the skate park or to add a baseball field. There are very few metrics on how frequently specialized facilities, such as basketball or tennis courts, are used during the week and whether there are too many or too few courts in Palo Alto. The Master Plan hopes to look at current use patterns for fields, courts and other facilities to determine whether the distribution of facilities is correct and whether certain specialized facilities need to be 'right-sized' for today's use patterns. Study of use patterns and the market segment served by various facilities will help provide information on whether certain existing fields need to be converted to artificial turf in order to provide more hours of play per day, or whether lights need to be added to some facilities to expand the hours of access and use.

#### Designing parks and recreational areas that are inviting to the community and that create a sense of place

A recent study by the Knight Foundation identified city programs that are inviting and inclusive and the city's aesthetics in terms of open spaces, trees and urban design as being two of the three most important factors to people considering where they should live. The National Citizen's Survey of Palo Alto residents consistently indicates that residents not only highly value their parks and open spaces, but also rate the quality of experiences in parks and recreational facilities as extremely high. As housing and business density increases in Palo Alto over the next twenty-five years, it will be increasingly important that city parks and open space areas provide respite and gathering places for the community, and that recreational programs and facilities provide opportunities for all residents to interact, recreate, learn and relax.

#### Acquisition of new park land; expansion of existing park land; meeting the goals of the comprehensive plan

The recent update to the Community Services & Facilities element of the City's Comprehensive Plan continues to prescribe the National Parks and Recreation Association standard of two acres of neighborhood parks (at least two acres in size) and two acres of district parks (at least five acres in size) should be provided for each 1,000 people. In addition, the Comprehensive Plan suggests parks should be situated within one-half mile of where people live for easy walking access. With 187 acres of urban parkland, Palo Alto is far below the 264 acres of park land suggested by the Comprehensive Plan. Many parks have been completely renovated in the past fifteen years and many new amenities have been added. Even with the addition of the two-

acre Heritage Park in 2006, and the addition of developer-provided pocket parks at Alma Plaza and the former Elks Club site, Palo Alto still has a shortage of neighborhood park land. Parcels where existing neighborhood parks could be expanded or strategic sites where park land could be acquired should be identified. Considering the significant cost of acreage in Palo Alto, funding for the acquisition of park land needs to be identified.

#### Developer-provided park land and recreational facilities

Developer-provided (“in-lieu” of park development impact fee payment) park space has provided some easily-accessible recreational space near new housing developments such as Alma Plaza and Edgewood Plaza. Because of the very limited size (less than a quarter acre) of these neighborhood “parks,” the facilities offered by the developer have been limited to a few play features for children, a handful of tables and benches and small landscaped areas. Unfortunately, these areas do not provide space for playing fields and other sought-after sports facilities. Whether the City continues to encourage in-lieu contributions towards park land acquisition and park expansion, or the development of on-site mini-parks with limited amenities needs to be studied to help meet our long-range recreation goals.

#### Utilization of open space (public and privately-owned) for green spaces and trail easements

Not all of Palo Alto’s park, open space and green belt areas are ‘dedicated’ as park land under the provisions of Article VIII the City Charter (Palo Alto Municipal Code Chapter 2). A number of notable exceptions, such as the Utilities-owned Tower Well site at Alma Street and Hawthorne Street, the Matadero Creek Well Station parkette on Matadero Road, and the Anna Zschokke Plaza next to the High Street parking garage, demonstrate the City manages a number of landscaped and furnished gathering spaces that augment the 32 urban parks. City property that has been leased to non-profit partners, such as Gamble Garden on Waverley Street, the Museum of American Heritage at the Williams House on Homer Avenue, and the EcoCenter (operated by the Environmental Volunteers) at the Baylands Nature Preserve, provide other indirect services, programs and unique community facilities and green spaces.

Council has suggested staff explore options for the better utilization of other publicly or privately-held open space areas for additional recreation or trail access opportunities. Examples of sites with potential for providing expanded recreational activities might include the Sterling Canal for dog exercise or community gardens, creek and roadway right-of-ways for urban trail connections, and undeveloped City-owned property for pocket parks and informal gathering spaces.

#### Integration of the Parks Plan with other strategic planning documents to ensure compatibility

Developed over many decades and formulated in response to different Council and City Department priorities, the City’s assortment of plans and studies do not provide a clear

and cohesive vision for the maintenance and enhancement of City's park, open space and recreational facilities. Some documents, such as the City's Comprehensive Plan and Baylands Master Plan, do not provide adequate direction for the implementation of the policies and programs within their plans. Having a comprehensive Master Plan with short-term (within 5 years), mid-term (10 years) and long-term (25 years) objectives for all City parks, open space areas and recreational facilities will allow the City to better integrate and articulate the principle objectives of its various plans. In this way, too, the implementation of various projects and improvements can be prioritized in terms of funding and timing to better reflect the key goals of the City's planning documents and policies.

#### Connecting parks and open space areas with neighborhoods and schools through safe trail and bike routes

Since every neighborhood park will not be able to adequately provide the array of play equipment, picnic facilities, specialized sport facilities and amenities that each neighborhood needs or desires, it will be important that citizens have safe and easy pedestrian and bicycle access to parks and community centers through an integrated system of "safe routes to parks." As mentioned above, in order to encourage residents – and especially children – to explore and connect with the natural world around them, having routes and trails that draw people from their homes and businesses to their neighborhood, regional or district (open space preserves) parks for rest, relaxation, exercise and social interaction will be very important. Strategies will be developed in the Master Plan to help physically or programmatically bridge gaps or reduce barriers to parks and recreational facilities.

#### Dog recreation

Palo Alto was one of the very first communities to designate specific areas within parks for dog exercise and play in the early 1960's. While Palo Alto was a pacesetter for demonstrating the value of community dog exercise areas, unfortunately the three dog areas were designed without the benefit of years of experience in dog park design. Our current exercise areas, which are all under a half-acre in size, are far below the current industry standard of two-acre minimum to allow for dogs to vigorously exercise, to avoid over-crowding and to allow for the maintenance of natural grass in the fenced area. Neighboring cities have experimented with the limited joint-use of fenced ball fields as dog exercise areas during certain hours of the day. Recognizing that Palo Alto is essentially built-out in most of its urban area, creative solutions will need to be explored for providing adequate space to dog owners to train, exercise and socialize their dogs off-leash in a safe, healthy and fun environment.

#### Accessibility of facilities

Through the City Works facility renovation program over the past fifteen years, the City has been able to provide minimum compliance with the Americans with Disabilities Act of 1990. Sand surfaces in many parks have been replaced with "poured-in-place" accessible rubberized surfaces. Public restrooms equipped with specialized furnishings

and stalls have been updated to provide easier access. Pathways through parks and connecting to designated parking spaces have been provided in a number of parks and community centers. Palo Alto falls short, however, in ensuring that the needs of all citizens with a broad array of physical and mental needs are adequately met. Recommendations are needed to determine how the City can quickly retrofit play structures, exercise facilities and access to buildings in such a way as to further expand and encourage access and enjoyment of facilities. The Magical Bridge Playground at Mitchell Park, which is currently under final design and review, points to the unmet needs for “universal access” in City parks and open space areas.

#### Safety and security in parks

While Palo Alto has fortunately experienced relatively few accidents or incidents in community centers and parks, there are very few safety features designed into the majority of City parks. Only four City parks have emergency “blue” safety towers for summoning aide. Lighting in many City parks and community center parking areas – including regional parks such as Mitchell and Rinconada - is extremely limited and under-illuminated. Recent concerns about camping and long-term loitering in City parks has underscored the need for both designed solutions (improved lighting, visibility and fences) and programmatic solutions.

#### Sustainable design: water use and conservation strategies; control of pesticides; control of waste

Over the past ten years, with environmental protection identified as one of the Council's priorities, a number of strategies have been explored and implemented to make parks and open space areas more environmentally-friendly and sustainable. The City has adopted Bay Friendly water conservation practices. Through the implementation of the City's Integrated Pest Management Policy, the use of fungicides, herbicides, fertilizers and other toxic chemicals has been significantly reduced in the last eight years. Nine City parks have been designated as completely “Pesticide-Free Parks.” Work has begun in installing recycling and compost facilities in many City parks and plazas, and staff is working hard to educate park users about reducing waste when picnicking or visiting City parks.

#### Balancing developed recreational areas with conservation areas in open space parks

Intrinsic to conservation of Palo Alto's open space areas is the need to carefully balance the extent to which environmentally-sensitive habitat areas are accessible to the public and restricted to access for the benefit of undisturbed wildlife foraging, nesting and breeding. The Baylands Nature Preserve (technically named the John Fletcher Byxbee Recreational Area) is protected habitat for two federally endangered species. Most of the Baylands is remote and generally inaccessible to people, although the fifteen miles of trails brings visitors and their dogs close to nesting areas of burrowing owls, clapper rails and other protected species. As has been done through the development of trail plans for Foothills Park and the Pearson-Arastradero Preserve, analysis will need to be performed on where there are opportunities to appropriately expand recreational

opportunities, such as at the 10.5-acres of field space at the reconfigured Golf Course. The planning process will need to consider new opportunities for dog exercise, which will include an area of adequate space to meet the needs of large numbers of large and small breed dogs. Determining the best site for a dog park or other recreational facility that does not impinge on wildlife or native plant habitat will be critical in the formulation of individual development of open space area and trail plans.

#### Conservation of natural resources for habitat for a diverse range of species

Beyond just the control of people and their pets in open space and greenbelt areas for the protection of wildlife breeding, foraging and nesting areas, certain areas of Palo Alto's lands must be systematically protected from human access for the sake of control of non-native, invasive plants or diseases, such as Sudden Oak Death Syndrome (SODS). While the Parks and Open Space Master Plan will not go into area-specific conservation plans that will subsequently be prepared, the Master Plan will provide broad policy recommendations for the on-going protection and conservation of certain areas of high environmental sensitivity that should be restricted to human access near developed recreation or public works facilities.

#### Revenue generation in park and recreation facilities and programs, including new and expanded programs

Currently, the generation of revenue from City parks is limited to annual rent collected for community gardens, field use fees paid by teams for field scheduling, special permit fees for the exclusive use of park areas for weddings, and fees paid for reserving picnic tables at Rinconada and Mitchell Parks. User fees or off-setting contributions are also collected for some of the unique sports facilities within our parks such as entrance fees at Rinconada Pool and cost-sharing at the Lawn Bowls Center.

Many communities collect significant revenue from the rental of specialized group picnic sites, that feature such popular amenities as gazebos or sheltered tables, which are used for weddings, reunions or corporate picnics. Some local cities have contracted with vendors to manage their skateboard parks and the fees collected by users pay for the development costs of these specialized sports facilities. As part of the overall funding strategy for the improvement of parks and facilities, the Master Plan will make recommendations for where new revenue might be developed and where current fees for services or reservations can be expanded or enhanced. Similarly, the study will make recommendations for the effective utilization of rented and program space in our three community centers to determine where our programs could be expanded or rooms renovated in order to increase their rental potential.

#### Prudent utilization of Park and Community Center Development Impact Fees

Money collected from major project developers for Community Center Impact Fees and Park Impact Fees is intended to significantly expand the capacity of existing facilities or to add new facilities to compensate for the growth in population caused by the development. Since the implementation of Impact Fees in 2002, funds have been used

to finance the development of the newly-acquired Heritage Park and the Stanford-Palo Alto Playing Fields sports complex, to replace natural turf with an all-weather artificial turf at the Cubberley Community Center, to expand Greer Park (Phase IV), and to add new public restrooms at Seale, Briones and Hoover Parks. The expanded Mitchell Park Community Center and the recently renovated Art Center both utilized Community Center Impact fees for a portion of the project funding.

The upcoming renovation of El Camino Park will heavily utilize Park Impact Fees for the installation of artificial turf on the soccer field, the addition of field lighting, the expansion of the restrooms and the installation of new picnic areas. All of these amenities are intended to expand the capacity of the park by extending the hours of play on the fields, by enticing new park users for picnicking, and by expanding the number of games that can be played on the fields each year.

Since the source of Impact Fees are limited, it is essential that these limited funds be used prudently to effectively expand recreational opportunities for the greatest number of residents over the longest period of time. Where possible, it is also important that Impact Fees be used to acquire new or supplemental park land in order to meet the per capita standards of parkland prescribed by the City's Comprehensive Plan. Although staff has developed an informal list of potential sites where parkland might be acquired (either adjacent to existing City parks or in under-served neighborhoods), the Master Plan will need to prioritize the areas of Palo Alto where new or expanded parks should be developed.

#### Encouragement of public/private improvement projects following recent model projects

One of Palo Alto's demonstrated strengths has been the ability to foster public-private projects for the development, expansion and maintenance of its facilities. Our community has a long history of significant projects that have enhanced the range of recreational opportunities. Buildings such as the Lucie Stern Community Center and Theatres, Sea Scout Center (Lucie Stern), Esther Clark Preserve (Esther Clark), Elizabeth Gamble property, and Williams' property are some of the pioneering contributions to Palo Alto's inventory of parks and community centers. Other successful public-private projects have endowed the City with new playgrounds at Heritage and Mitchell Parks, performance spaces at the Children's Theatre (Magic Castle), and the significant renovation of facilities at Lytton plaza and the Palo Alto Art Center. Building on the model of these very successful partnerships, the Master Plan needs to explore opportunities for additional public-private partnership projects that can effectively leverage limited funds from the Infrastructure Reserve/Development Impact Fees for the enhancement or expansion of parks and recreational facilities.

#### **Timeline**

The Parks, Trails, Open Space and Recreation Master Planning process was initiated in December 2013, and is anticipated to take twenty-one months to complete the entire study. Staff and the consultants plan to provide the Council with progress update

presentation in early 2015, a detailed study session in spring 2015, and a final report to Council in fall 2015 after vetting the final draft plan document with the Parks and Recreation Commission (early May 2015), Planning and Transportation Commission (mid-May 2015), Public Arts Commission (late May 2015), Historical Resources Board (late May 2015).

### **Resource Impact**

Funding for this study and planning process was provided by Capital Improvement Program project PE-13003: Parks, Trails, Open Space and Recreation Master Plan.

The objective of this study is to assess the long-term needs for development and improvement of existing parks, open space areas, regional trails and recreation facilities; the acquisition of new park land or expansion of existing park land to meet the on-going needs of the community; meeting the strategic maintenance needs of existing facilities in a cost-effective manner; the prioritization of recommended improvement and acquisition projects; and to provide funding strategies (public and private) for the improvements and acquisitions suggested by the report. The intent of this planning is to utilize limited Capital Improvement Fund and other resources wisely and effectively, and to leverage these resources with grants or private funding whenever possible. Obviously, the intent of the report is to make recommendations that could call for new investments in the future.

### **Policy Implications**

The proposed Parks, Trails, Open Space and Recreation Master Plan is consistent with the Comprehensive Plan Policy C-26 of the Community Services element of the Comprehensive Plan that encourages maintaining park facilities as safe and healthy community assets; and Policy C-22 that encourages new community facilities to have flexible functions to ensure adaptability to the changing needs of the community.

### **Environmental Review**

This is a planning study and therefore exempt from California Environmental Quality Act (CEQA) review pursuant to Section 15262 of the CEQA guidelines.

Eventually, as projects and recommendation of the Master Plan are implemented as capital improvement projects, an environmental assessment will be completed in conformance with the provisions of CEQA.