



**AUSTIN
PARKS
FOUNDATION**



**SHOAL
CREEK
CONSERVANCY**



TREEFOLKS



BARTON SPRINGS CONSERVANCY



June 7, 2022

Cc: City Manager Spencer Cronk, Assistant City Manager Stephanie Hayden-Howard, City of Austin Parks Board

Re: Parks Budget Request

Mayor Adler, Mayor Pro Tem Alter, and Austin City Council,

We, the undersigned organizations, ask that you please include the following critical needs of the Parks and Recreation Department (PARD) in the COA FY 2022-2023 budget. You will notice that these items have a strong equity focus in line with the City’s climate equity plan and efforts underway to implement PARD’s long range plan with an equity lens.

We are sensitive to the tight nature of this budget year and have respectfully limited our ask to the most pressing, equity-centered, and community-supported needs. We ask that you add these items to PARD’s budget in order to meet Austin’s previously asserted goals of providing parks and open space close to where people live, work, and play (Imagine Austin), creating a park system in which all residents live within a ten-minute walk to a park (Council Resolution 20091119-068), and serving residents of all ages and abilities with accessible, diverse, and inclusive parks and recreation programs and amenities (Strategic Direction 2023). According to the Trust for Public Lands ParkScore, “Residents in low-income neighborhoods have access to 59% less park space per person than those in high-income neighborhoods” in Austin. **We are requesting that you approve this \$2.72 Million Dollar increase to PARD’s budget to fund equitable expansion of park services.**¹

¹ \$2,720,393.00 total; to include \$2,272,489 ongoing and \$447,904 one-time funds

INCREASING PARK RANGER and JUNIOR PARK RANGER programs

Total Cost: \$909,000

Cost Breakdown:

\$474,000 ongoing, \$75,000 one-time - 6 year-round FTEs + supplies

\$300,000 ongoing, \$35,000 one time- 18 temporary FTEs (Summer Season) + supplies

\$25,000 ongoing to Expand Youth Cadet (Jr Park Ranger) Program- 15 apprenticeships +supplies

Park Rangers are a universally popular approach to park safety, education, and conservation. They provide more “eyes on the parks” and are a trusted and non-threatening form of authority in parks. While New York City and Phoenix have around 55 and 65 park rangers respectively, Austin currently has 21 park rangers. We should aim to increase our park ranger program to 50 full-time year-round rangers in the coming years. We can do that by adding a team of 6 rangers each of the next few years.

In addition to the full time, year-round rangers, there is a need for additional rangers during peak season (April-August). These rangers are critical to curb poor behavior in key locations such as the Barton Creek Greenbelt. This crew of seasonal park rangers was hired last year on a one-time basis and was very important to monitoring and reducing risk in the greenbelt. Additional one-time costs will cover the necessary supplies and equipment (such as bikes, vehicles, uniforms, etc.)

The Park Ranger Youth Cadet Program is a collaboration with AISD to build outdoor leaders and create a pathway to employment with parks that is more reflective of the community served. Students take a yearlong course and have the opportunity to work with The City of Austin Park Ranger Unit as paid summer interns and peer mentors after completing the course. Currently, more than 10% of the current full time Park Ranger unit are former Cadets. This would support 15 new Cadet apprenticeship positions part time for 20 hours a week for 52 weeks.

EQUITABLE IMPLEMENTATION OF PARD’S LONG RANGE PLAN

Total Cost: \$124,848

Cost Breakdown:

\$121,848.00 ongoing, \$3,000 one-time

The Parks and Recreation Department adopted its long range plan “Our Parks, Our Future” in 2019. While some of the recommendations in the plan have begun to be implemented, there has been no clear strategy around plan implementation and measuring progress. When PARD hired its Equity and Inclusion Officer, who reports to the PARD Director, she was tasked with implementing PARD’s long range plan with an equity lens. The department is beginning that process by laying out a framework and appointing an internal committee to work on this. However, the success of this effort will hinge on staff support. There is a vital need to hire a business process consultant to coordinate equitable implementation of the PARD Long Range Plan including looking at business processes within the department that are contributing to inequities, coordinating the internal committee, and tracking data related to plan progress.

IMPROVE PARD COMMUNITY ENGAGEMENT

Total Cost: \$232,000

Cost Breakdown:

\$226,000 ongoing, \$6,000 one-time- Hire 2 Community Engagement FTEs

Currently, PARD has **only one** Community Engagement Specialist that is a full time employee of the department. Funding is needed for an additional Community Engagement Specialist and a Community Engagement Consultant.

In FY20, PARD spent \$146,218 on outside community engagement consultant services.² In FY21, the Department was budgeted to spend approximately \$230,000 on outside community engagement services for Capital Improvement Program (CIP) projects.³ This is not a sustainable practice for the Department to “enhance communication and collaboration” with community or to “equip employees to better engage vulnerable and historically marginalized communities” per SD23's Government That Works priorities. With each project, a new company brings their own engagement approaches, which rarely consider issues of equity or access for Austin's diverse populations. Staff must then spend time editing, and in many cases re-writing, the consultants community engagement plan(s) to provide "consistent and clear" communication and engagement, sensitive to the various needs across Austin. Language Access also remains a key priority for community engagement within the department.

MAINTAINING PARD FACILITIES

Total Cost: \$981,183

Cost Breakdown:

\$255,000 ongoing- Increase Athletic Maintenance to Improve Public Access to Ball Fields, 3 FTE

\$86,942 ongoing, \$53,333 one-time- Increase HVAC Support- 1 FTE + Supplies

\$228,609 ongoing, \$92,571 one-time- Increase Plumbing/Irrigation Support- 3 FTE +supplies

\$124,728 ongoing, \$140,000 one-time- Additional Ground Maintenance Support- 2 FTE +supplies

More field maintenance is needed to increase the inventory of playable and rentable fields equitably across the city. Currently, various Youth Services Organizations (YSO) assist with field maintenance. This is not an equitable approach as some YSOs have the funding and resources needed to maintain fields while in other areas of town this maintenance is a burdensome proposition. This also means that the quality of fields is variable across the City. With this additional funding the City could take more responsibility for maintaining fields.

In addition, the existing Plumbing and Irrigation staff, HVAC Techs, and ground maintenance capacity cannot adequately serve the increased number of fields and irrigated areas, air conditioned buildings,

² for Emma Long Master Planning, Montopolis Recreation & Community Center, Dougherty Arts Center Preliminary Phase, Zilker Clubhouse Rehabilitation and Govalle Park.

³ including: Givens Pool Rehabilitation, Colony Park Pool Development, Asian American Resource Center Facility Expansion Plan Implementation, Mexican American Cultural Center Facility Expansion Plan Implementation, Pharr Tennis Center and the Zilker Park Vision Plan.

and grounds in the parks system. This problem requires new staff positions plus equipment such as mowers. It is critical to invest in these plumbing, irrigation, HVAC, and grounds maintenance professionals so that PARD facilities can be properly maintained for the community.

INVESTING IN NATURE PLAY AND WAY-FINDING

Total Cost: \$260,362.00

\$150,000 nature play support

\$110, 362 ongoing-dedicated Way-finding Program Coordinator - 1 FTE

Nature play is a priority in the PARD long range plan and the City recently created “Nature Play Guidelines” to further this new and important program area. Expansion of nature play spaces has extremely important equity implications. Historical and current systemic racism have led to Austin’s natural spaces being unevenly distributed and accessed. Research has shown that children who play and learn in nature are healthier, happier, and perform better in school. PARD is receiving a growing number of requests for nature play areas through the Community Activated Park Project Program. Additional funding will allow PARD to prioritize projects proposed within historically underserved areas by leveraging external and internal funding for design, development and educational activations. The \$150,000 will be used for maintenance, design, installation, signage, training, data collection, and educational activation of nature play areas.

Wayfinding— PARD is one of the largest stewards of land in the City of Austin with nearly 20,000 acres, 330 parks and over 250 miles of trails. Currently, PARD signage is deteriorated, poorly placed, cluttered and severely lacking. Park users have frustrating experiences navigating parks, and ultimately their safety may be compromised if they are not properly prepared or oriented. Multiple goals of the Climate Equity Plan cannot be achieved without the investment in a sustainable and accessible signage system.⁴ PARD’s 2021 Sign Modernization Plan identified gaps in PARD’s Signage and Wayfinding Program. A dedicated program coordinator and actively managed programmatic approach is essential to facilitate design, fabrication, installation and management of sign inventory. Further, a new comprehensive sign manual that prioritizes inclusivity, accessibility and sustainability is a critical need. PARD intends to fund the manual utilizing its FY22 budget, but without a program coordinator to oversee its implementation, it will not be successful.

SAFETY

Total Cost: \$213,000

Cost Breakdown:

\$43,000 one-time-vehicle and office equipment

\$60,000 on-going, security equipment

⁴ including Strategy 3: Increase community access and positive perceptions of public and by (1) Addressing the accessibility of trails and spaces for all ages and abilities (2) Ensuring both physical and perceived safety for users (3) Provide programming and signage that is inclusive, welcoming, in multiple languages, and highlights BIPOC histories and experiences on local lands.

\$110,000 on-going, 1 FTE

Currently, there is not a centralized standard within PARD for access keys and badges. In addition there is a need to consolidate the access control and security monitoring to enable staff to operate in a way that allows for access when needed for emergencies. PARD is requesting one FTE to manage the program, ongoing funding for purchasing card readers, locks, keys, and other security related equipment, and a vehicle for them to travel between sites. The individual would also be able to oversee the inspections of all fire and security systems as well as state and local licensed and regulated systems PARD wide.

For your convenience we have included a table in the addendum of this letter that summarizes these requests. **We ask that you please approve all of these requests in the FY-2022-2023 budget to improve equity outcomes for our City's park system.**

Sincerely,

Austin Parks Foundation

Austin Outside

ABC Kite Fest

Austin Youth River Watch

Barton Springs Conservancy

Blunn Creek Partnership

Environment Texas

Norwood Park Foundation

Treefolks

The Trail Foundation

Trail of Lights Foundation

Pease Park Conservancy

Shoal Creek Conservancy

Waterloo Greenway

Friends of Barton Springs Pool

Save Barton Creek Association

Hill Country Conservancy

Parks Budget Request 2022			
Item	Amount-1 time	Amount-ongoing	FTE
Park Rangers			
Park Rangers (Full time) Add 6 FTEs	\$75,000.00	\$474,000.00	6 FTEs
Park Rangers (Temp Staffing-PARD Proposal)	\$35,000.00	\$300,000.00	18 FTEs (for 5 months)
Expand Youth Cadet Program (Jr Park Rangers)		\$25,000.00	
Equitable Implementation of PARD Long Range Plan			
Hire Planner to coordinate equitable implementation of PARD LRP	\$3,000.00	\$121,848.00	1 FTE
Increase Community Engagement Services			
Hire 2 Community Engagement Specialists	\$6,000.00	\$226,000.00	2 FTEs
Maintenance and Facilities			
Increase Athletic Maintenance to increase public access to ball fields		\$255,000.00	3 FTEs
Increase Facility Services HVAC support	\$53,333.00	\$86,942.00	1 FTE
Increase Facility Services Plumbing/Irrigation Support	\$92,571.00	\$228,609.00	3 FTEs
Additional FTEs - Grounds Maintenance	\$140,000.00	\$124,728.00	2 FTEs
Investing in Nature Play and Way-finding			
Development and Support for Nature Play Areas		\$150,000.00	
PARD Signage and Wayfinding		\$110,362.00	1 FTE
Safety			
Standardizing access & security	\$43,000	\$170,000.00	1 FTEs
SUM	\$447,904.00	\$2,272,489.00	
Total ask (1x and ongoing)		\$2,720,393.00	