



To: Nicole Burnham, Deputy Director
San Jose Department of Parks, Recreation and Neighborhood
Services
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Re: ActivateSJ Strategic Plan

Please accept the following comments on the benchmarks proposed in the Activate San Jose Strategic Plan to define and guide the City’s parks stewardship efforts. The comments are submitted by the following Environmental Groups: the Santa Clara Valley Audubon Society, the Sierra Club Loma Prieta Chapter, Keep Coyote Creek Beautiful, the South Bay Clean Creek Coalition and the California Native Plant Society Santa Clara Valley chapter.

We appreciate the work staff has invested into looking ahead and creating the ActivateSJ document. We also believe the aspirations, as part of the mission to “connect people,” require stronger integration with the diverse, innovative, and vibrant community of San Jose. The public outreach process clearly showed residents interest in local, close-to-home, community-focused programming, nature and beauty. The proposed benchmarks, in our opinion, miss many opportunities to deliver the community’s wishes, as explained below.

- Fundamentally, ActivateSJ should provide benchmarks that guide improvement of the 25% of parks ranked as “unacceptable” to become “acceptable” or better. This cornerstone of ActivateSJ should inform the majority of the Guiding Principles and should be considered for all aspirations and steps.

- Stewardship, nature and identity depend on the community. People and community groups should be appropriately represented, engaged, empowered and leveraged. For example, many groups already participate in the BeautifySJ program. This program highlights litter and graffiti, but could be expanded to become a showcase program for all community-facing projects, such as adopting a park or community center, cleaning up creeks, nature-focused programming, cultural events and more.
- Data is already available in various reports and tools, such as the Trust for Public Land 2019 Park Score Index referenced on page 22 of the Strategic Plan. Instead of building new data-centric tools, focus on actually developing and implementing plans for those parks that are “unacceptable”.
- Diversifying funding for a sustainable system is an important aspiration. We agree grants should be coordinated through one grant management team, and we further suggest the San Jose Parks Foundation should coordinate all private fundraising to provide long-term stability.

Stewardship

Taking care of existing parks and facilities in San Jose already is a big job, and since the Great Recession, has been an even larger challenge due to the backlog of required maintenance and reduced staff. However, the public can play a larger role in this effort as volunteers: building fences, planting and maintaining gardens, repairing BBQ stands, etc. – if only given the tools and equipment to install them. Additionally, safety has been a growing concern in parks, along trails, and in community centers and libraries. This is partially due to the increase in crime in parks and homelessness. Solutions to these problems require collaborative efforts with San Jose Police, Housing, Valley Water and other agencies. If these facilities are not safe, then people will not go to them.

- Nearly 25% of parks in San Jose are ranked at an unacceptable rating. The maintenance priorities are a good start to identify those that need immediate focus for the next 3-5 years, and the information is already available so there is no need for additional studies. Coordination and partnership with Public Works can alleviate some of the backlog. In addition, many community groups would like to help improve their parks if given material support (saws, post hole diggers, fencing supplies, plants etc.). The City should support and empower these groups.
- Historically, rangers have provided safety in the parks along with police officers as needed. To continue to keep people safe when in parks and along trails, PRNS must work in cooperation with partners in the City’s Housing Department, Valley Water and other agencies to relocate homeless people out of parks and waterways and enforce appropriate use of community facilities.

- Instead of spending money on an innovation lab, learn from other cities about new technologies that reduce maintenance burdens and capital costs, focusing on achieving zero “unacceptable” rated parks.
- To meet the aspiration of flexibility, allow for partnership with community groups who already have expertise in certain realms such as creek cleanups, habitat restoration and native plantings, caring for trees, monitoring biodiversity etc. By acknowledging and utilizing these resources and experts, not only can the City save money but it can also enhance the volunteerism spirit that many of the other ActivateSJ aspirations invite.
- The current Adopt-a-Park program is not performing effectively, and it competes for volunteers with the Anti-Litter, Anti-Graffiti, Adopt-a-Trail, and BeautifySJ programs, which already partner with existing volunteer groups. We strongly recommend that the City unify these volunteer activities under the BeautifySJ program operated by the Anti-Litter staff to provide volunteer opportunities at facilities, natural areas, waters and urban forests within the park system.

Nature

Public outreach identified nature as the most important element in parks. When asked, residents identified elements of beauty: trees, flowers, native plants, birds, butterflies and water features as the things they loved, and wanted to steward, protect and enhance these. Residents also expressed a clear desire to have nature amenities in their local parks and local nature focused activities and programming. Indeed, BioBlitzes, nature journaling, bird watching, park and creek cleanups, and other nature focused activities are very popular in San Jose. Increasing native California plantings, planting trees, and building on the existing programming of nature-based nonprofits is the most logical way to “activate” nature-oriented activities in San Jose. We suggest modifying the three proposed aspirations and their associated programs and steps as follows.

WE ASPIRE TO	TO ACHIEVE OUR ASPIRATION WE WILL	IN THE NEXT 3 TO 5 YEARS WE WILL TAKE THESE STEPS
Enhance opportunities to connect people to nature through nature-focused programming, community	N1 Increase participation in nature-focused programs for all ages in part by working with partners	N1a [Remove –Yosemite already provides a nature experience for the few that are privileged to experience it. The Nature element of ActivateSJ should focus on immersive and exploratory experiences in City parks, including the urban core,

<p>partnerships and access to nature in every City Council District.</p>	<p>N2 Increase and promote us of natural parks and trails in San Jose</p>	<p>where people live.</p> <p>N1b Develop baseline inventory of current nature-based programs offered by the City and by community groups, including participation rates.</p> <p>N1c Evaluate baseline data from N1b and identify gaps of desired programming that is not offered by the City or and community groups.</p> <p>N1d Implement nature-focused education, interpretive programs, habitat restoration, and nature focused activities at parks, community centers and regional parks, including collaboration with NGO partners.</p> <p>N1e [Reconsider Park Ranger activities since Pak rangers are desperately needed for enforcement activities, and because community groups are already fulfilling this duty due to limited ranger staff.]</p> <p>N1.f Develop Nature Play areas in parks that lack natural assets (nature play area simulate nature: logs, butterfly gardens, rocks).</p> <p>N2a Develop programming that uses the trail system to expand community interaction with nature.</p> <p>N2b [Remove expansion of rural trails since rural trails are provided by other agencies (Open Space Authorities and County parks) and are not in short supply. This is also an equity issue, as investment is needed close to home for people with limited means – not on the outskirts of the City]</p>
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<p>Reflect our California native and drought-tolerant landscape to create a sense of place</p> <p>Honor nature and wildlife through intentional design</p>	<p>N3: Emphasize use of local California native trees and plants in parks and landscape design</p> <p>N4. Create habitat for local California native fauna through intentional design</p>	<p>N3a. Develop and implement Park Design Guidelines that use native oaks trees and a drought-tolerant, locally native plant palette by working with community partners and other native plant experts.</p> <p>N4a. Increase native California planting and habitat in neighborhood parks and civic grounds with a target of 15% California-friendly materials at each location.</p> <p>N4b. Identify strategies for increasing the native planting and habitat areas within San Jose neighborhood parks and civic grounds. Start with:</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • N4b1 Develop at least one pollinator/butterfly garden in every City District • N4b2 Plant at least one Valley or Live Oak tree per acre in every city park of over ¼ acre in size.
<p>Protect, preserve, promote and enhance nature in our growing city.</p>	<p>N5. Coordinate with Santa Clara County Parks, Santa Clara Valley Open Space Authority, and Midpeninsula Regional Open Space District to enhance programs and services in open spaces outside the urban core</p> <p>N7. Establish urban forestry program within the San Jose Parks system</p>	<p>N5a. Identify and assign a liaison from PRNS to work with these partner agencies.</p> <p>N5b. Support partner agencies in their efforts to preserve and protect the open spaces outside the urban core through cross marketing and policy support.</p> <p>N7a. Inventory all trees within the San Jose parks system to evaluate the health and biodiversity of the tree canopy.</p> <p>N7b. Establish forestry-related protocols and standards to manage</p>

		<p>all tree resources, with a focus on planting native oaks, habitat creation, climate change and carbon sequestration.</p> <p>N7c. Develop and implement a dedicated urban forestry team (such as Our City Forest) to plan, guide and sustain our tree canopy and increase diversity, habitat value and longevity of our resources.</p>
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Identity

The diversity of San Jose is the City’s heart and strength, and ethnic and cultural interests are the reason why some master planning efforts failed (e.g., Kelly Park Master Plan). As with other sections of ActivateSJ, we believe that the main focus of the Identity aspiration should be, as identified in the document, to celebrate San Jose’s diversity, culture and history. A large part of this can be done by promoting and leveraging offerings by community groups, cultural groups, religious and ethnic groups from the many colors of San Jose.

This section focuses on 1) studies and master planning, 2) staff development, and 3) an interest in healthy living.

- The nexus between staff development and identity is not clear. It is also redundant with staff-development steps in the Stewardship aspiration.
- The City has prepared many master plans that overlap, are incomplete, or were dropped. For example, the Kelley Park Master Plan was put on hold because the Vietnamese community wanted a community center, which it now has. But this regional park needs more bathrooms throughout the park, improved picnic facilities, lighting in the amphitheater, and other basic amenities that should be developed. We are concerned that the great emphasis the identity aspiration puts on new studies and planning will detract from the ability of PRNS to complete and implement existing efforts.

Public Life

Like the previous aspirations, public life over-emphasizes reliance on City programs and resources. We recommend a stronger emphasis and investment in partnerships that engage and empower community groups and volunteers, especially highlighting a deep engagement around nature. A recent example is the Kelley Park Sunset Walk, completing

its third year, which is a partnership with the parks department, community groups, and the Open Space Authority.

We thank you for the opportunity to provide comments,

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