

MARICOPA COUNTY PARKS AND RECREATION DEPARTMENT
PARKS AND RECREATION COMMISSION MEETING
Regular Meeting of August 18, 2020

LOCATION: Virtual Meeting via *GoToMeeting* (live feed and telephone). Maricopa County Parks Headquarters, 41835 N. Castle Hot Springs Road, Morristown, AZ 85342

COMMISSION MEMBERS PRESENT: Thomas Rhoades, Jack Stapley, Robert Branch, Eric Mears, and Isabel Chavez

COMMISSION MEMBERS ABSENT: Megha Budruk and Shelby Scharbach

STAFF PRESENT: RJ Cardin, Director; Donna Southard, Recorder; Ken Vonderscher, Planning and Development Manager; Dawna Taylor, Public Information Officer; Jennifer Waller, Operations Manager; Aimee Upton, Administrator; and Betsy Pregulman, Deputy Maricopa County Attorney

The official correspondence and staff recommendations contained in this Commission folder are hereby entered as supportive material to the official minutes of the August 18, 2020, Parks and Recreation Commission special meeting.

PARKS AND RECREATION COMMISSION REGULAR MEETING

ITEM #1 – CALL TO ORDER – Robert Branch, Chair, Maricopa County Parks and Recreation Commission

- The regular meeting was called to order at 10:01 a.m.

ITEM #2 – ROLL CALL – Roll Call taken - a quorum was present

ITEM #3 – DIRECTOR’S SUMMARY OF CURRENT EVENTS – R.J. Cardin, Director, Maricopa County Parks and Recreation Department

- Director Cardin informed the Commission that the Parks System Master Plan Update was put on hold in April due to the COVID-19 situation. Staff is targeting to resume the update in the September/October timeframe. Due to the COVID-19 pandemic, all schools, weddings, and Scout groups' reservations were canceled. With the possibility of COVID continuing and reviewing various budget reduction scenarios, the decision was made to close the Desert Outdoor Center (DOC) for fiscal year 2020-2021. The intent is to reopen the facility in July 2021. All DOC staff have been redeployed to other vacant positions throughout the department. The Board of Supervisors approved the request from Parks to allow Concessionaires to defer payments without late fees if requested. A brief overview of the report was provided.
- Commissioner Chavez inquired how long the deferred payments were authorized. Director Cardin informed the Commission that the Concessionaires could defer their payments for up to six months, however, none of the Concessionaires opted to utilize the deferment option.
- Commissioner Mears requested a copy of the environmental report for the Joe Foss Shooting Range.
- Chairman Branch inquired about the budget impact of Six Flags closure on the department. Director Cardin informed the Commission that most of the Concessionaire agreements have a minimum payment amount and a percentage above based on revenue. Six Flags has a 5% revenue share agreement which is over a \$200,000 impact to the department. Staff will continue to monitor the budget to stay structurally balanced.

ITEM #4 – Maricopa County Parks and Recreation Department Fire Damage and Remediation Efforts – Jennifer Waller, Operations Manager, Ken Vonderscher, Planning and Development Manager, and Juanita Armstrong, Natural Resources Specialist, Maricopa County Parks and Recreation Department

- Ms. Waller shared a map showing the 2020 fires to date and provided the impact on the closest park.

- Mr. Vonderscher informed the Commission that these fires were wildland fires on the urban park interface that possibly caused irreparable damage to the landscape.
- Ms. Armstrong discussed the post-fire assessments at Cave Creek and White Tank Regional Parks. From 1970 through 1999, regional wildfires burned an average of 124,000 acres every ten years. During the past 20 years, that average has increased to 547,000 acres every ten years. Climate changes, wet winter cycles, increased fine fuel biomass, increased invasive species, and encroaching developments have contributed to the increased fire damage. Mitigation efforts include the management of invasive species, clearing trail edges, reduction in fire fuel loads, research, collect native seeds, education. A post-fire assessment was developed specifically for the upland desert using three different methods: random sampling plots, saguaro long-term monitoring, and burn severity. The majority of the 550 acres burned from the East Desert Fire within Cave Creek Park boundaries have been assessed at a moderate to low severity damage rating. It is estimated that 77,000 trees and shrubs were affected by the wildfire with a greater than 50% scorch; research has shown that saguaro's with greater than 30% scorch are likely to die within ten years. Signs of recovery have been seen with new Fairy Dusters growing and Mesquite trees re-sprouting. White Tank Park fire burned 126 acres. This fire was rated as a low fire intensity with approximately 1,100 trees and shrubs scorched above 50%. Staff, partners, and volunteers collected 80 lbs. of native seed at Cave Creek and White Tank Parks representing 30 species.
- Commissioner Mears inquired if removal of non-native species is a goal and the impacts on the wildlife escaping fires. Ms. Armstrong explained that complete removal of non-native species most likely cannot be accomplished, however, strategic measures can be used to reduce the fire impacts.
- Chairman Branch thanked Director Cardin for the continued communications received by the Commission during and after the fires.

ITEM #5 – COVID-19 PARKS STATUS UPDATE – Jennifer Waller, Operations Manager, Aimee Upton, Administrator, and Ken Vonderscher, Planning and Development Manager, Maricopa County Parks and Recreation Department

- Ms. Waller presented the timeline of events that occurred from March through August related to the COVID-19 pandemic. At this time, staff is targeting to reopen the Nature Centers on October 4. The Parks Department has partnered with ASU to conduct a survey on how COVID is affecting Park users.
- Ms. Upton provided a high-level overview of the FY21 budget. In April, all County departments were requested to reduce their General Fund budget by 2%; as so little of Parks' operating budget is from the General Fund, Parks was able to absorb the cuts into the Enhancement Fund. The first month of FY21 budget has closed; Ms. Upton provided an updated revenue forecast.
- Mr. Vonderscher provided an overview of the impact of COVID-19 on the Parks' Capital Improvements Program. Due to the County capital improvement budget cuts, several major projects have been postponed for possibly one to three fiscal years. Some C.A.R.E funding has been made available to assist with some COVID related projects.

ITEM #6 – REQUEST FOR EARLY TERMINATION OF USE MANAGEMENT AGREEMENT – R.J. Cardin, Director, Maricopa County Parks and Recreation Department

- Director Cardin informed the Commission that on July 6, 2020, Tres Rios Golf, LLC, a division of C-Bons International Golf Group (CBIGG), which operates the Tres Rios Golf Course at Estrella Regional Park submitted a letter that they wanted to exercise the 180-day termination clause in their Use Management Agreement (UMA) due to on-going business losses. There are currently 17 years left on the agreement and it generates approximately \$100,000 annual revenue for the department. Then, on August 14, notification was received that the golf course would be closing on August 17, 2020. Negotiation continues on lease payments, maintenance of the turf area, and contractual obligations. Termination requires the Board of Supervisor's approval.
- Next steps: staff will review both future short and long-term options for use of the property and develop a new solicitation or possible assignment for a Concessionaire on the property. The property was acquired from the State Land Department and has a Recreation Patent on the property which requires the land to be used for recreational purposes only or revert to the State Land Department.

- Chairman Branch asked Director Cardin to provide some background regarding Tres Rios' agreement and payment history. Director Cardin provided a brief history of the property since the course was built in 1969/1970.
- Commissioner Mears inquired how many rounds of golf are played at Tres Rios per year. Director Cardin estimated approximately 22,000–26,000 rounds last year. In comparison, the 500 Club averages approximately 80,000+ rounds per year. Commissioner Mears expressed his concerns that the course has not been well maintained which is reflected by visitor usage and recommends an assessment of the course and the facilities' condition.
- Commissioner Stapley asked if the current Concessionaire is using this situation as a possible re-negotiation tactic and how will maintenance be handled. Director Cardin did not feel that is the case based on their communications and their profit/loss statements. At this time, the Grounds Superintendent is still on-site to maintain the course. Staff is currently conducting a risk assessment to prevent any potential vandalism with the closing. Estrella Park volunteer hosts will be visiting the course grounds every day to monitor watering and any other potential issues that may occur.
- Commissioners Rhoades and Chavez expressed their frustrations that Tres Rios put the County into the current situation.

ITEM #7 – CALL TO THE PUBLIC

- None submitted via email

ITEM #8 – CALL TO THE COMMISSION

- Commissioner Chavez stated that the Department works very well to adapt to situations with little impact to park operations and employees while there was a substantial increase in park visitors.

ITEM #9 – ADJOURNMENT

- There being no further business, Commissioner Mears motioned and Commissioner Chavez seconded to adjourn the meeting. With all in favor, the meeting was adjourned at 12:00 pm.

R.J. Cardin, Director

Robert Branch, Chair