

VENTURA COUNTY PARKS

INTRODUCTION

The County Services and Special Districts Committee investigated how the County parks are managed and funded to determine if they are being efficiently operated and maintained. This study is timely due to the fact that the Parks Department (Parks) lost its annual \$800,000 subsidy from Channel Islands Harbor (Harbor) commencing in 1997.

Parks are considered important for improving the quality of life, as an economical and social asset, to provide recreation facilities, to reduce stress and to preserve the natural environment.

INQUIRY

Visits were made to County parks leased to private citizens and/or corporations, which were compared to parks operated by the County by the use of camp hosts. Interviews were held with park hosts and lessees. Information was obtained from interviews with officials of the General Services Agency (GSA) and park employees of leased and County operated parks. The Committee attended a Parks Advisory Commission meeting and spoke to department managers. We also interviewed the County Auditor-Controller and the Director of GSA.

FINDINGS

There are 15 regional parks, 6 local parks, 7 leased parks, and 2 leased golf courses in the Ventura County Parks Department in Ventura (see Exhibit 1). Some of the privatized parks are well managed and self-sustaining, in some cases profitable. Leased parks are managed by on-site managers and receive no help or benefits from the County. An entrance fee is required for all parks. Lessees generally have multi-year leases (contracts) ranging from 5 years or more depending on the operation. The proposal includes user fees and maintenance options for the ensuing year.

For large parties or groups, reservations are required. By calling the Parks Operations Department one can reserve group camping or convention areas in County run parks. In the parks which are leased one must contact the manager of the park for reservations. A self register system is in effect at most of the parks. The County run parks have park hosts who live on the premises. When using the parks on an individual basis, the parks are on a first come, first serve basis.

Last year funding for the Parks was obtained from a Harbor subsidy, general fund, user fees and park lessee percentages in Fiscal Year (FY) 96-97. In November 1997 the Board of Supervisors eliminated the subsidy for FY 97-98. Even with the subsidy, all county parks were not

in good physical and financial condition. Prior to the separation from the Harbor, there were 32 park and administrative positions. Today there are 23 positions allocated with 19 positions filled and 4 vacancies. The Parks budget in FY 95-96 was \$3,857,900. The budget for FY 97-98 was reduced to \$3,071,100.

Salaries and benefits	\$1,301,100
Services and supplies	\$ 873,100
Other Charges	\$ 852,600
Fixed Assets	\$ 44,300
Total Expenditures	\$3,071,100

The Parks with the Parks Advisory Commission has a proposal to develop the Toland and Camarillo Regional Golf courses as well as the construction of an amphitheater to generate additional revenue to offset some of the loss of the Harbor subsidy.

Property owners are not taxed to support the County parks. Soule Park Golf Course and Saticoy Golf Course are run by private firms who are assessed a possessory interest tax. Last fiscal year the Soule Park Golf Course lessee paid \$65,000 in possessory interest taxes. This tax does not go directly to parks but is distributed like any other tax via the general fund. Revenue from the golf course was \$409,000. Income from all the parks totaled \$1,279,550. There is a projected operational deficit; this figure will be available at the conclusion of FY 97-98 audit.

Camp hosts or lessees must rely on local law enforcement for emergency or vandalism incidents. There are only four park rangers left in the entire County, therefor patrolling of parks is sporadic. The Parks have use of those sentenced by the courts to do community service work.

Parks receive State grant money. When the Parks use State grant money to fund a project, a maintenance operation agreement is signed. In essence this agreement assures the State that the County, or its designee, will assume responsibility for the on-going maintenance of the completed project.

Rincon Parkway is State owned, with the highway section maintained by the California Department of Transportation. The County collects fees for camping and day use.

CONCLUSIONS

The cash reserve of the Parks is very low and by next year will become critical. If the current objections from the Federal Agencies and the community can be overcome concerning the proposed amphitheater and golf course at Camarillo Regional Park and the Toland Golf Course, the outlook for parks will be greatly improved. When completed and in operation this new revenue is expected to support all parks.

Although park fees have been raised, maintenance has not improved proportionally in many cases. County-run parks as opposed to leased parks are poorly maintained.

The accounting system of the Parks needs improvement to correctly reflect an accurate financial condition on a park-by-park basis.

In order to continue to receive State grants, a minimum level of maintenance will be required in all parks. It is evident that park maintenance is done sparingly in County run parks.

Based upon personal observation leased parks are in better condition than the county maintained parks. Some parks had minimal facilities, such as no restroom, running water or picnic areas and are not used by the public.

RECOMMENDATIONS

- That the Board of Supervisors consider privatizing more parks
- That the proposed new golf courses (Toland and Camarillo) be supported by the Parks Department, Parks Advisory Commission and the Board of Supervisors
- That a *Parks' Needs Assessment and Utilization Study* of the parks be made
- That the Auditor-Controller prepare a comprehensive audit of the Parks Department to reflect the actual annual revenue and expenses of each park
- That consideration be given to closing some seldom used parks in order to improve others
- That the Parks Department make a concentrated effort to make greater use of those sentenced to perform community service as well as inmate work crews
- That a public relations and marketing program be established to promote County parks

RESPONSE REQUIRED

Board of Supervisors
General Services Agency
Parks Advisory Commission



FIGURE 1 - VENTURA COUNTY PARKS DEPARTMENT INVENTORY OF PARKS