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re: Some thoughts and comments on the SJ GreenPrint (aka "Activate SJ"?)

Hello, all,

I, as a Taskforce member, am writing some thoughts down so that they can be considered for the GreenPrint update.

I am sad that, since this (possibly last) GreenPrint Taskforce meeting was rescheduled to a time when I had a pre-disclosed conflict, I will probably have to leave early. And, as there is no draft of the GreenPrint for us to review, it is all the more difficult to give comments, as some of these points may already have been addressed in your working draft.

Having served on both the original 2000 GreenPrint Taskforce and on the 2009 Update effort, I feel that the current process is "disjointed". Part of this is due to the change in personnel, both on the project and in the department. There has been too long of a gap in the process, and additional meetings are needed to get the Taskforce back up to speed and for Staff to be able to receive their comments.

***There should also be a very public review process of the final draft:*** you want the community to "buy in" and support both the plan and parks in general.

In case this actually is the last meeting of the GreenPrint Taskforce, here are some of my thoughts, questions, and recommendations.

Some basic overriding thoughts and comments:

- ***Parks are very important for our city*** – any city! – as they help keep the residents physically healthy and active. Parks also help counter social isolation by enabling and encouraging people of all ages, ethnicities, and backgrounds to intermingle and network, which is important for both one's mental health and for a healthy community.
- Parks, trails, plazas and other open spaces are ***especially important in dense residential areas*** where the residents may lack private backyards.
- Parks, trails, etc. are especially ***important in less affluent neighborhoods*** where the residents may be less likely to, for example, fly off to Disneyland or off on a ski trip in Utah.
- Parks are also ***important in employment districts***, be it for company picnics or for employees to be able to find some peace and quiet for creative thoughts and escaping from chaotic office life. Trails are important for both mental relaxation and for transportation that's free of an internal combustion engine.
- The GreenPrint is meant to be an all-inclusive plan, as indicated by the catchphrase, "8 to 80". I would submit that ***"one to one-hundred"*** is just as catchy and better serves the target population, including the preschoolers (in their tot-lots) and also the seniors (with the all-accessible plazas and park trails).

The GreenPrint is for the entire PRNS Department: Parks, Recreation, and Neighborhood Services. I feel that the Taskforce has spent scant time on the “RNS” portion of the PRNS.

- **Viva Calle SJ is great!** I hope it continues, and perhaps can be expanded to be several times a year. I recognize it’s an extra challenge, but it is nice to explore different areas each time to showcase various parts of town: perhaps including Alviso one time, Alum Rock another, and out west on Stevens Creek a third.
- **Encourage festivals and events!** Sidewalk chalk-art at Backesto, Shakespeare at Willow St/Bramhall, Odon in Japantown, Pumpkins in the Guadalupe! Maybe encourage and support regional events such as Willow Glen’s “Dancin’ On The Avenue,” Shasta/Hanchett-Park’s “Stroll the Alameda,” and festivals over in Little Portugal or down in New Almaden. (At the very least, PRNS can share their experiences in arranging for street closures and security, so as to simplify the process for the event organizers.)
- Does PRNS still have **recreational programs**? Decades ago I used to participate in evening volleyball leagues at the local high school, but I haven’t been following it and am not aware of them now: are such programs still around, or were they cut during the budget crisis? Are there also Summertime Midnight Basketball games – especially in denser and/or underserved neighborhoods? Summer Day Camps for school-age kids? Aquatics and water-sports? Organized hikes for various age-groups/capabilities along various trails? (Tours of Alum Rock, Kelley Park? Possibly PRNS could coordinate with other agencies for nearby parks such as Heintz or Hellyer.)
- Also, isn’t the **GreenPrint supposed to cover Neighborhood Services** – the “NS” part of PRNS? Senior lunches and adult daycare? Gang prevention? Senior transportation? I don’t recall any discussion by the group on those matters.

## Financing

- I feel that **it’s important to keep the “3.5 A/1000 residents” requirement**, since that allows the City to collect the park impact fees. Can there be a corresponding impact fee on commercial developments – some number of acres per 1000 employees – to help pay for picnic sites, ball fields, plazas, and trails that likely could/would be used during the day by employees?
- **Do not “dilute” the Park Impact Fee:** we need to push back to make sure that the fee is not diluted by discounts, incentives, or overly relaxed estimates of the average number of residents per dwelling unit.
- **Areas with “affordable housing” also need parks**, and probably more so than in the more affluent areas: if parkland in-lieu fees are waived to make development of affordable units more financially feasible, then the needed parklands need to be financed by some other means. (Idea: seek citywide financing of parklands near affordable housing projects? If the public isn’t willing to have affordable housing “built in their back yards”, perhaps they’d be willing at least to pay for parkland to serve the affordable housing that is built elsewhere?)
- I’m disappointed that the city’s contemplated park bond fell thru this year and instead is being redirected: **parks need some source of funding** to recover from the years of maintenance cutbacks following the Great Recession: we have a lot of aging infrastructure that needs attention.

I understand the City's desire to sign on to the international goal of a park within a half kilometer of every resident (or whatever the goal is), but I don't feel that that is as important for a suburban city like San José as it is for the denser cities of Europe.

- Repeating my statement from above, **residents in dense housing need nearby parks** to be able to get outdoors; those in suburban areas often can use their backyards.
- In the dense urban areas, there may be hundreds or even thousands of residents within easy walking distance of a park, whereas there might only be a dozen in the more sparse areas within the city limits: we should **concentrate on where the most people need the parks** and shouldn't be constrained by an arbitrary goal.
- **Parks need to be designed to accommodate the anticipated usage**: it's not enough to build a small pocket park and then say that meets the needs of all the nearby high-rise residents, even though, technically, they all are within walking distance of it.
- **Needs may vary**: the urban parks need to be able to handle the heavy foot traffic, while in suburban areas, residents are more likely to have access to cars and are more likely to drive to a park. Perhaps these suburban areas can have more widely dispersed but larger parks (e.g., for field sports league play) and may need to provide parking lots.

## Trails

There are many types of trail users, and there should be a variety of types of trails. Just as vehicular roads vary according to need – with freeways for the interstate truck traffic, local residential streets, scenic byways, and quiet parking lots where people can learn to drive – likewise there's a range of trails and paths.

- The major creek trails (Los Gatos, Guadalupe, Coyote, etc.) serve a range of purposes (commuter thru-traffic as well as for recreation and enjoying the scenery). **The solution to overcrowded trails is to provide more trails** to help spread the load and satisfy the demand.
- Coordinate with cities and county to **connect and maintain the trails** and on-street bikeways: together they provide an excellent non-motorized transportation network that helps reduce traffic congestion and greenhouse gases and also helps invigorate and relax the bike-commuters for improved work productivity.
- Just as highways are wider where car traffic is heavier, **trails should be wider in high-use places**: a 12' path is fine in many areas, but the trails downtown (e.g., the Los Gatos Creek Trail by Diridon) should be wider and/or use-separated with a trail for thru cyclists, a parallel trail for strolling pedestrians, and maybe even a quiet footpath down by the water's edge.
- **Quiet nature-hike loops** thru parks serve as scenic byways
- **Trails within and around park picnic areas and playgrounds** are great for beginners learning to ride.
- **Spur trails**, such as perhaps along Ross Creek or Silver Creek, can serve like residential feeder roads, connecting local neighborhoods to the regional trail network.

**Design the trails with the users in mind.** I can point out examples (e.g., on the Guadalupe River Trail south of I-880) where the paths were laid out to look interesting on a map, but which (thanks to numerous unlabeled forks and sharp hairpin turns) are confusing and difficult to traverse on the ground.

## Maintenance

It's nice to build new facilities, but it's also important to ***maintain what we have***. I recall once pointing out some minor roof damage somewhere (not in our parks) and being told that they didn't have the funds to patch the roof, but then said not to worry – in a few years they will just get a grant to replace the entire building. (As a taxpayer, I shuddered – if they'd just patched the roof, they wouldn't have needed to replace the building!) I do recognize that there is a balance: we wouldn't want to waste money forever trying to patch a leaky irrigation system when it'd be cheaper to replace it, but also don't go around replacing buildings just because they need minor repairs or a new coat of paint!

It makes sense to me that new neighborhood parks should be funded by the developers who create the demand: that's the thought behind the park impact fees and the 3/4 mile nexus. However, once built, the parks become part of the public system and are there for everyone's use, and it seems fair to me that everyone should share in the maintenance of the entire system: ***maintenance funding should come from a citywide source*** (e.g., the General Fund or a special citywide Parks Fund).

## Design

Not all houses in the city are alike, even though they have many features (toilets, stoves, etc.) in common. Likewise, not all parks should be alike, even if they too have common features such as standard-model picnic tables or playground structures.

- ***The different parks can have varied features*** that can differentiate the parks, and perhaps reflect the character of the neighborhood: Victorian details for St. James, perhaps, mid-century touches for Blossom Valley or western San Jose, maybe some futuristic-looking design for the new Diridon-area high-tech campus area. Some parks have ***historic structures*** that can be incorporated.
- Designs could also feature ***cultural variations***, reflecting the neighborhoods such as Japantown, Little Italy, and Little Portugal.
- San Jose has a ***Sister-City program***: how about coordinating a parks design (or redesign) with planners from Dublin, San Jose Costa Rica, Okayama, and others?
- And ***design with nature in mind***: some parks are along streams or creeks, others have hills or slopes, even the micro-climates vary across the city. The park designs can embrace and enhance these features. Designs may also need to address sensitive habitats: fencing, lighting, placement of features.

## Maintainability

***Parks should be designed to be sustainable***: easily maintained and requiring minimal water. Emphasize the use of native plants rather than thirsty exotics. An "English Garden" with its beds of pansies and petunias is pretty, but it requires too much labor to maintain, and also is just not "San Jose".

## Safety

Parks are not enjoyed if they're not used, and ***the public won't use the parks if they don't feel safe***. Since the SJ Police Department discontinued their park-patrol unit some years ago, it falls to PRNS to utilize Park Rangers to patrol the system.

- The Park Rangers need to be ***properly trained – and adequately compensated*** so that they're not easily hired away after they're trained.

- The Park Rangers need to be ***properly equipped*** for the situations they may encounter, especially since the Police Department discontinued its Park Patrol Unit. (I hear that there is a Ranger Study coming before Council in October where the issue of arming the rangers will be discussed. While I'm uncomfortable approaching an armed officer to ask the location of the bathroom, I also do appreciate that the Rangers may encounter drug dealers and drugged individuals in the squatter-encampments that are now all-too-common along some of our creeks and trails.)

Parks should also be ***designed and maintained with safety in mind***:

- Trees trimmed for improved visibility.
- Trails designed in a manner to avoid blind curves, hidden ambushes, or entrapping fencing.
- And the homeless encampments should be removed and the areas kept clear.

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I am somewhat disappointed by the anticipated ***overall format*** of the (still unfinished) GreenPrint as well. The 2000 and 2009 versions served us well, highlighting existing and planned park facilities and future possibilities. When Union Pacific abandoned the Willow Glen Spur line, we were able to show the 2000 GreenPrint to Councilmembers and say, "see: the GreenPrint calls for the rail Right-of-Way to become a trail that serves these communities in Districts 6 and 7." The GreenPrint enabled trail advocates to challenge the plans of the developers, and enable us and the city to preserve open space and trail connections for numerous communities.

There are a number of items I was hoping would be included in this next rendition of the GreenPrint. I was hoping, among other points, that the GreenPrint would:

- Study how to "close the gap" in the Los Gatos Creek Trail: make the connection between Meridian and Lincoln.
- Coordinate with developers on an improved plan for the Los Gatos Creek Trail in the Diridon Station Area, given the anticipated influx of development and subsequent increased usage.
- Highlight plans to complete the Coyote Creek Trail, connecting Kelley and Stonegate Parks, and to complete the Guadalupe River Trail, connecting Virginia Street and Chynoweth Avenue.
- Feature "Coyote Meadows" – the former landfill and homeless encampment / future 50-acre park that could connect Kelley Park to Olinder and William Street Parks: a "mention" in the GreenPrint could prove useful in future discussions between advocates and Councilmembers!
- Outline the development plans for St. James Park, and the public/private development of the Levitt Pavilion.
- Prioritize the refurbishment and maintenance of major parks such as Overfelt, the Japanese Tea Garden, and others.
- Plan for ethnic centers such as the Vietnamese Garden.
- Discuss how to serve the East Side, given the mix of city and unincorporated county pockets.
- Discuss the future of the city-owned golf courses: Municipal, Los Lagos, and Rancho del Pueblo. How can they be operated in a manner that doesn't burden the city?
- Enumerate what has been accomplished thanks to the past Park Bond Measures and list what promised projects remain to be completed. (Aren't we still owed a soccer facility somewhere?)
- And include a "wish list" of points that could be included in a future bond measure proposal.

I'm sure that there are many more items that I and my fellow Taskforce members could come up with, given some more time for thought and discussion.

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I wish that the Draft GreenPrint had been available for review: many of these comments may already have been addressed. I also wish that I did not have the schedule conflict that will preclude my participation in the group discussion.

On the other hand, there may not have been time to discuss all these points, and also it's nice to have a written copy so that details are not forgotten.

***I hope that there will be additional GreenPrint Taskforce meetings once the draft document is completed.*** Allow sufficient time for review, suggestions and revisions – from both the Taskforce *and* the Public. And allow time for Staff to make any needed revisions prior to it being submitted to City Council for final adoption.

Please feel free to contact me with any questions.

Thank you,

Larry Ames,  
GreenPrint Taskforce member (2000, 2009, and 2018).

email: [PRC3@SanJoseCA.gov](mailto:PRC3@SanJoseCA.gov), Aug. 30, 2018

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