

## Comments on the May 22nd draft of the ActivateSJ report

by Larry Ames, 6/19/19

Here are some first impressions of the report. I expect there will be editing, so I won't comment on every misplaced comma or sentence fragment. Also, I expect that there will be some graphics to enhance the appearance.

Some specific comments:

On p. 3:

You need to say who you are: give the full name of the Dept. >and< its acronym (PRNS).

Clarify whether this study is for just Parks, or Parks & Rec, or all of PRNS.

"Our Guiding Principles" lists "Nature": should it include "restore" or "enhance", to be proactive and make things get better?

This is a 20-year strategic plan: it should be relatively "timeless": don't over emphasize recent or upcoming activities (e.g., VivaCalleSJ). And the updates every 5 years: will they extend the horizon (2045, 2050, ...) or reduce the plan's lifetime (15 yr, 10, 5)?

Give an overview of the report: say how you're going to expand upon the 5 topics, each in turn. Explain the jargon terms and acronyms so that the average member of the public can understand.

p. 8:

Identity: this sounds like a sales pitch for the SJ Light Tower.

Brag! Change "Alum Rock Park has its history" to "Our Alum Rock Park is the oldest park in California"

Who is the intended audience of this plan – the public or city planners? Most public won't know what's meant by "39 re-use buildings": need to explain.

Brag: change "San José has achieved the World Health Organization's (WHO) designation of an Age Friendly City." to "The World Health Organization's (WHO) has honored San José with the recognition as 'an Age Friendly City.'"

Remember your audience! Who will know what's meant by "Realizing the goal of the 2000 Greenprint to build 100 miles of trail..."? The Introduction should explain how ActivateSJ builds on the earlier GreenPrint.

Are those "100 miles of trail" also useful for transportation, or does the total include recreational loop paths such as those circling in Guadalupe Oak Grove, or climbing up and back in Alum Rock Park?

PRNS has 5 key divisions, and none of them is "Neighborhood Services"?

"urban village" – more unexplained jargon.

p.9:

“within various regions – North San Jose, for example” -- each part of town has its own considerations: this is only barely mentioned on p 13. Downtown is high density; east side has large sections of urbanized but unincorporated pockets that have residents but no parks; the west side is fully built out and so is lacking park funding from development in-lieu fees; the south side is more suburban and rural, with large lots and low population density that complicates the goal of parks within easy walking distance – and the large backyards reduce the need for them.

“Develop and cultivate a workforce that reflects the community we serve.” Just the workers? How about management? Why not say “a department”?

“Advance our reputation as one of the nation’s healthiest cities” – why worry about reputation and recognition? How about “our parks continue helping to make San José one of the nation’s healthiest cities”?

p. 11:

“no matter the color of their skin...” Besides race, could also include religion or culture or background, and also gender.

“...many families and older adults struggle to find housing or meet their daily living expenses” – this makes the free access to nearby parks even more valuable to them.

“Our 11 hub community centers” – should explain what they are and what they do: Are they just meeting rooms? Gyms for group recreation? Services for teens and/or seniors? Resources?

“Lowering from number 27 in 2018, we are now the 33rd best Park City...” Rephrase to clarify: “Unfortunately, San José’s ranking recently has dropped, and now we are only the 33rd best Park City...” Summarize what we’re going to be doing to stop the slide and hopefully improve.

p. 12:

that’s an interesting graphic: make it large and sharp enough for easier viewing. Have a link to a website where those interested can go zoom in on specific locations.

“We will ensure all residents are within a 10-minute walk to a quality park.” This is not viable for >all< residents: those few who live on ranchettes in south valley have parcels so large that they can’t even walk to the street in 10 minutes! We should concentrate on those who need parks the most: those living in high-density complexes who lack backyards and private patios.

I find no discussion on shared parklands, be it with school districts or private developers: no mention of parkland credit that is given for shared resources, courtyards, plazas, or POPOS (privately owned public open spaces).

p: 13

68 reservable fields? Plus how many from PAL for a total of what? I think it would help to include a

quick breakdown: so many softball fields, so many for soccer, so many for cricket, and so many multi-use.

I like the graphic on equality vs equity: nice!

p. 14:

“Be a trusted partner through inclusive decision-making” It’s not clear with whom the city would partner. (Also, how do I phrase this tactfully? – I’m afraid that I’ve noticed that San José is not always very inclusive in its decision making...)

p. 15:

“Favor California landscapes” – want to say why? Helps support native wildlife; are adapted for our local microclimates; low-maintenance and drought-tolerant.

p. 17:

“Our trail network includes 13 miles of scenic rural trail[s] [in] Guadalupe Oak Grove Park [and] Alum Rock Park.” These are lovely hiking trails, but are they being included in the 100-mile goal of off-road non-motorized transportational trails like the Los Gatos, Guadalupe, and Coyote, or have I been misinterpreting the 100-mile goal all these years?

Family Camp is lovely, but may need some explanation: not everyone knows that SJ operates a campground and recreational program near Yosemite, several hundred miles from San José.

p. 22:

“We have 204 Parks (a 61% growth)” – an interesting statistic, but potentially misleading: how many were pocket parks? You could also include total acreage before and after, and also total developed parkland acreage before and after.

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### **Comments on the Benchmarks Matrix.**

I don’t have very many specific comments here: instead, I tried to “listen for the dog that didn’t bark” and try to see what was overlooked...

p. 1 & 2: Public Life

- PL4: should include a mention somewhere (as PL4d?) that new development needs to provide new parkland: make specific reference to the “3.5 Acre/1,000 new resident” requirement.
- PL6a: what is meant by “partnership” with the Fire Department? I know that we’re losing parkland to make Fire Station 37 on Lincoln at Curtner, and I’ve heard that the Fire Dept. is eyeing other “free” parkland as well. Don’t give away our parks!
- PL7d: VivaCalleSJ is great! How about including the possibility of coordinating with adjacent cities (Campbell, Milpitas, Santa Clara, Cupertino, Los Gatos) and the County for possible future routes that might cross borders.

- Add a new bullet, PL12?, to talk about variety: a park in Japantown need not be identical to one in Little Saigon or Little Portugal. Also, design parks with maintenance and sustainability in mind: native plants and easily maintained facilities.

p. 3 & 4: Identity

- ID1d: yes, let's celebrate Alum Rock's 150th anniversary!
- new point (ID1i?): Expand the Regional Parks:
  - Develop Coyote Meadows (50A landfill between Story and I-280) and integrate it into Kelley Park and tied into Olinder and Williams St Parks: make a "Grand Park"
  - Coordinate with sister agencies to create "seamless experiences", such as tying OSA's Sierra Vista in with Alum Rock Park to accommodate longer hikes and more trail access points.
- new point (ID3f?): break down the institutional "silos". For example, the person or group dealing with "trails in parks" should share information with the person/group dealing with "trails along roadways" and also the person/group dealing with "recreational facilities in parks".
- ID8: clarify whether the 100 miles is a total of all trails or is just trails also useful for transportation. (Does the total include Guadalupe Oak Grove and Alum Rock Park?)
- add a new bullet (ID9?): Don't lose parkland. Don't allow useful parkland to be considered "free land" and taken for other purpose, such as processing of stormwater runoff, or as a site for Fire Stations or Libraries, or to provide temporary or permanent affordable housing.

p. 5, Equity & Access

- Related to being "a trusted partner through inclusive decision-making", add a new bullet after EA3: "Respect the partners and their contributions". It is quite disheartening to spend months, even years, volunteering on some task force, only to have the city totally ignore the recommendations. If the ideas are not viable or fundable, say so: don't leave volunteers in limbo. (Yes, I'm still bitter that, after all our work on the Kelley Park Master Plan, the city just simply ignored one of our major recommendations that the historic homestead on the property, Kelley House, should be stabilized (e.g., plastic tarps on the roof to stop rain leakage) until it could be evaluated as a possible Visitors' Center. Instead, it was left for decades to just slowly rot, becoming an eyesore surrounded by weeds with trees tearing apart the foundation, until eventually a homeless encampment moved in and torched it some 25 years later. And then there's the Los Gatos Creek Trail Master Plan of 1985 that called for a pedestrian crossing from Willow just west of Meridian: I've been reminding the city about that one for over 30 years, with never a "yes" or "no"...)
  - Add a new bullet after EA5: "Industrial and Commercial Areas". There is need for parkland in commercial areas as well: picnic areas for departmental parties, and trails, benches, and contemplative areas where the "intellectual workforce" can have some time to "sit and think", or at least get out of the office for lunch!
  - Add another new bullet after EA5: "Unincorporated County Pockets". I don't have a solution for you, but I think someone should start thinking of what to do: there are regions of the city (East Side and also Burbank) that are unincorporated county pockets. The County only provides Regional Parks, and, being outside the city limits, they don't have local parks. Yes, the developers years ago may have played tricks to avoid having to pay some local property taxes, but is that a reason to punish or slight those who now live in the region?

- And a third new bullet after EA5: “Affordable Housing”. Yes, it is important to have housing be affordable, but it should not be at the expense of the residents’ quality of life. Waiving park impact fees can help reduce the overall dwelling cost, but it is the residents of those dwellings that likely most need the nearby parks: the units are less likely to be spacious or feature balconies and backyards, and residents of affordable housing are less likely to be able to afford recreational vacations to Disneyland or even Raging Waters. I would like to see a statement in here somewhere to prioritize the development of parks in low-income areas.
- Point EA6a: I think that this goal needs clarification: it sounds nice to say “a park within a 10-minute walk of everyone”, but that is neither necessary nor sufficient. The city has incorporated vast swaths of undeveloped land, and it is not necessary to build a city park beside each ranch down around Anderson Lake or out towards San Martin. On the other side of the coin, it’s not sufficient to have a single picnic table every 8 blocks in dense regions like downtown: while it technically may be within a 10-minute walk, it is not sufficient to meet the needs of all the residents within that 10-minute radius.
- Another aspect of point EA6a: it is good if it encourages the city to provide walkways so that residents can cross barriers (e.g., freeways or train-tracks) to reach nearby parks. And it doesn’t count if one can’t access a nearby park because of a fence: the 10-minute walk has to be to an available entrance.
- Add a new point (EA9c?): for areas with high density of elderly residents, consider having “plazas” with seating in the sun and in the shade, for sitting, resting, and visiting. Perhaps have a small tot-lot for visiting grandkids.

p. 6: Nature

- N1a: “existing camps” -- plural? How many does SJ have?
- Add a new point (N6d?): Resurrect, update, and complete the “Riparian Restoration Action Plan”. This exists as a preliminary draft by Pat Colombe in 2000: a copy is online at [http://www.calsj.org/restoration\\_action\\_plan.pdf](http://www.calsj.org/restoration_action_plan.pdf)
- Add a new point (N6e?): kids need a place to play in the water: to skip stones and get muddy. The city should try to identify a couple places that are safe and have minimal environmental impact to develop for such a purpose.
- Bullet N7: SJ can also coordinate with the MidPeninsula Regional Open Space District.
- Add a point (N8d?): remove dead or dangerous trees. Plan, plant, and maintain new trees.

p. 7 & 8: Stewardship

- Point S2a looks like it should be S1c instead; points S2b, S2c, and S2d should be S2a, S2b, and S2c, respectively.
- S8a: are there other ethnic groups to promote as well? Vietnamese? Chinese? Norwegian? Indian?
- S9a: confusing wording at the end.
- S9b: identify grant opportunities and preparing grant applications.

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I’m sure I’ll come up with some more suggestions later, especially after hearing the discussion this evening. Until then, these are my comments. ~Larry Ames, 6/19/19.