

Santa Clara County Board of Supervisors
70 W. Hedding,
San José, CA 95110

re: Changes to the County Parks Charter Fund

Dear County Supervisors,

I'm writing to share my personal opinions on the role of Santa Clara County Parks and future of the Parks Charter Fund: basically whether they should continue to be mainly for rural regional parks or whether they should also provide parks for urban residents, including those in unincorporated pockets who currently lack any parks.

[I served as County Parks and Recreation Commissioner from 1995 to 2004, and I also worked on several of the Parks Charter Fund campaigns (including as Treasurer for the 2006 election). I served on the County Park Commission's Land Acquisition Subcommittee and the Strategic Plan Taskforce, and also on San Jose's Parks' Strategic Plan Taskforce – working on both “The GreenPrint” in 2000 and on its Update in 2009.]

I feel it is critical that the County continue to follow the plans and policies as approved by the voters, which clearly state that the County Parks Charter Funds are only for projects, rural and urban, that are of countywide significance.

County Parks and Recreation has its unique role as part of the overall regional system of parks and recreation:

- While cities provide the urban neighborhood-serving parks (tot-lots, picnic areas, playgrounds, etc.), it is the County Parks that can provide the rural regional parks with services such as the campgrounds in the mountains surrounding the valley. There is some overlap: for example, Alum Rock and Kelley are urban regional parks operated by the city of San José, while Vasona and Hellyer are urban regional parks run by the County.
- County Parks also has an environmental role, and was for years the “purchaser of last resort”, the agency that could buy environmentally sensitive hillside lands to save them from being logged, paved over, and/or developed. Now, thanks to Mid-Peninsula Regional Open Space and the Santa Clara County Open Space Authority, County Parks & Rec. can concentrate on the more recreationally important lands while the open space organizations can help protect some of the environmentally sensitive lands.
- And County Parks provides assistance in coordinating, designing, building, and maintaining the regional recreational trails system, including urban trails such as the Los Gatos Creek Trail, Guadalupe, Coyote, Three Creeks, Penitencia, San Tomas Aquino, and others. I believe County Parks should partner with other agencies (the cities, SCVWD, and open space) to continue supporting trails: the typical trail user doesn't care who builds the trail so long as it is well-designed and well-maintained.

When I served on the Parks & Rec. Commission, we discussed the balance between urban and rural parks, and the tradeoff between having some acres of land that is readily

accessible to a sizable population vs. having more acres in a less accessible region. I continue to be one of the advocates for the more urban bias: while I love Uvas Canyon and Mt. Madonna County Parks, I think Vasona is the crown jewel of the County Parks system. I feel that much – not all – of the future County Parks development should serve the urban regions that are home to the vast majority of the County’s residents. This bias has strengthened over time as I see San Jose and the other cities in the county adopt Urban Growth Boundaries and the State adopts directives to reduce urban sprawl and vehicle-miles-traveled: cities will no longer be growing out to where the parks are built, and so the parks should be where the people can enjoy them without making them drive to the less expensive but more remote lands.

However, these more urban county parks should still be “*County Parks*” – of regional import, with unique characteristics and/or serving the regional community. I do not think that the County Parks Charter Fund should be used to build or operate small neighborhood parks: that I believe should remain the province of the City.

Which comes to the issue at hand: what to do for the County residents who live in an urban area and are not served by a city? – after all, they *are* tax-paying county residents. Originally, when their homes were built, the residents chose to avoid paying city taxes and to accept fewer services (such as parks) in exchange. But post-Prop-13, everyone is paying basically the same rate, and yet they still receive the reduced services. My thoughts:

- For those in small unincorporated pockets: encourage the residents to be incorporated into the adjacent city. As part of the incorporation process, the County may need to work with the city on getting the infrastructure up to standard: this might include improvements to the streets and a contribution towards neighborhood parks, but the County should not construct nor maintain them.
- For the unincorporated eastern hillsides: it may be appropriate to develop a regional County Park somewhere in the vicinity, but again I would say that the County should not get into the business of developing and maintaining small neighborhood parks. While the specific state law for the incorporation of county pockets may not be applicable to the eastside hills, those regions can still be annexed by other processes if the residents so choose, and then the City could provide the neighborhood parks.

I attended several public meetings recently regarding the Park Charter Fund. I agree with the various acquisition criteria that were presented there, such as “regionally important”, “serving deficient regions”, and “connected”: the criteria were all consistent with the voter-approved policies. I suggested two additional criteria: “opportunity” and “ephemerality”: it’s great to make a long-range strategy for acquiring additional park lands, but sometimes an opportunity arises after the plans have been adopted, and sometimes an opportunity has to be seized before it is gone. While the acquisition of the Union Pacific Railroad right-of-way for the Three Creeks Trail (and the Five Wounds Trail that can connect to it) can easily be justified by the “Trails of Regional Import” and “Parkland Connectivity” criteria, it also falls under these additional criteria as well: the railroad hadn’t announced its intent to abandon the ROW when the parkland acquisition plan was being developed, and the ROW could quickly be sold off for housing if the public agencies don’t act in a timely fashion. Another example where these criteria could come into play: San José may be considering the eventual sale of a small golf-

course in the eastern part of town, and that parcel might be suitable for an eastside urban regional County Park.

County Parks should still have a role in acquiring some rural lands, both for recreational purposes and also for environmental preservation as part of the Habitat Conservation Plan. But I feel it is appropriate for County Parks to emphasize serving the urban areas, especially by connecting residents to parklands with the regional trails.

In summary: I personally believe you should leave the Park Charter Fund as it is, and as the voters have approved it. The acquisition criteria that have been presented in the public meetings are fine, and I would suggest the addition of the “opportunity” and “ephemerality” criteria. I support a “bias” towards more urban trails and County Parks, so long as they are “regional” and/or “unique”. I do *not* think that County Park Charter Funds should be spent to develop small neighborhood-serving parks: that is the mandate of the cities, and residents in unincorporated areas can either opt to be annexed into the adjacent city or to remain unincorporated and forego the city-provided neighborhood parks.

I would welcome the opportunity to discuss this in more detail if you wish – please feel free to call me at 408/742-1798, or email Larry@L-Ames.com.

Dr. Lawrence Ames
Santa Clara Co. Parks & Rec. Com’snr, 1995 - 2004

cc: Santa Clara Co. Parks & Rec. Acting Director Julie Mark
Co. Parks & Rec. Acquisition Project Team: Tim Heffington, Patrick & Jane Miller
Yes On Parks: Lisa Killough, Garnetta Annable, Kitty Monahan
Park advocates: Blanca Alvarado, Don Weden, Bob Levy, Eric Carruthers,
Virginia Holtz, Helen Chapman, Randi Kinman, Michael LaRocca
Trail advocates: Taisia McMahan, Bill Rankin, Terry Christensen