

comments on the Aug. draft of ActivateSJ  
by Larry Ames, Sept. 16, 2019

Here are some comments on the Draft ActivateSJ Report. I don't mean to nit-pick, but we were asked for a detailed final run-through of the draft, and so I may seem to appear somewhat critical. I do appreciate how far you have come, and I also appreciate that many of my earlier concerns have been addressed and suggestions have been adopted. That said, ...

p. 2: The to-be-written Letter from the Director can help set the tone for the report: quickly summarize the report's structure and the main take-away points, and say who this report is for. I note that the overall report is written in the first-person, and so the director's letter can say who "we" are, and to whom we are speaking. Are the PRNS Staff mainly reporting to Council and City Manager, or to the PRNS employees, or to the Parks & Rec Commission, or to the interested general public? The different groups will have different levels of understanding of terms, jargon and acronyms. The letter also needs to welcome the readers and assure us that we'll enjoy reading this report, at least that it'll be worth it.

p.3, 1st sentence: need to avoid or explain buzzwords, jargon, and inside-phrases. Otherwise, the average reader will feel excluded and won't bother trying to read.

Need to explain what "Greenprint" is. Maybe move it from the 1st sentence to the 2nd:  
"This ambitious plan, the successor to our earlier "Greenprint", will help ensure..."

p. 3, bottom: good graphic.

(You could add more info, such as the number of employees in each category and the budget for each.)

p. 4: "the budget cuts reduced, and in some cases eliminated, programs designed to improve quality of life..." Can you say which is which? "the budget cuts reduced programs designed to improve quality of life, such as aaa, bbb, ccc, and ddd, and even eliminated programs eee and fff."

p. 5, right graphic. I note that throughout the report, the different chapter heading and sections have different colors, which are also repeated in the table on p. 41: nice. A suggestion: Perhaps you could come up with 5 unique colors and introduce them in the graphic here? You already have sea-green for Stewardship, lime-green for Nature, sky-blue for Equity & Access; you just need to come up with two more colors and then be consistent throughout the document: it's a subtle way of tying it all together. Perhaps sequencing the colors (e.g., red, orange, yellow...) could help reinforce the order.

p. 5, lower right: "will evaluate progress, measure success, and refine or adjust these benchmarks every five years, from 2020-2040,..." Are you trying to say that this report has a 2040 horizon and that it'll be updated every five years? Hopefully we won't go through this entire process all over again next year in 2020, and by 2035 it'll be time to start thinking of the next major rewrite.

p. 7: interesting graphic: nice way of highlighting the various programs

p. 8: "... prioritize work orders to provide a consistent level of service across the City." Can you have something more positive than "consistent"? How about "consistently good" or "consistently high"?

p. 8: again, a good graphic. What's with the .5 tennis court? Is that the half-court at Backesto, or are there multiple half-courts at various locations that, together with full-courts, add up to the 84.5? Are two half-courts counted as a single full court?

p. 9, left: "OPPORTUNITIES & CHALLENGES". I see that this is a recurring heading (e.g., also on p. 16 and 22). Might help to have a (color-coordinated?) section title in front: "Stewardship", "Nature", etc.: "**STEWARDSHIP**: OPPORTUNITIES & CHALLENGES". Alternatively, the section names could be in the header or footer, or on a side-margin. Likewise for the other section headings, "Where we are", "Moving forward", and "Measuring our success".

p. 9, right: sorry, but this time this is a lousy graphic: it looks like you're trying to be impressive without actually succeeding at being impressive. The text talks about double- and triple-digit growth between 2000 and 2019, but the data shown in the graphic works out to less than a 5% increase in developed acres, and a miniscule 0.7% growth in both undeveloped and open-space acres, for the span 2009 to 2019. Was all the growth during the first decade? Why not show the actual improvements: have the graphs show the changes between 2000 and 2019. Also, the text talks about the increase in the number of parks, not the acreage of parks: change one or the other so the graph shows what the text describes.

p. 9: "Partners and volunteers are a valued and much needed resource." Nice sentiment – but is it real? Are potential management candidates asked during the recruitment and interview process about their experience in coordinating with, and benefiting from, volunteers?

And the next sentence is convoluted. How about something like:

"We aim to improve and streamline our processes, requirements, and standards for involving volunteers in helping with our programs and services."

p. 10, top left box: confusing: third sentence seems unrelated to the first two. How about combining first two, and then segueing into third: "The Project Hope program was a success when implemented in 2015, **and** the community has requested expansion of this program every year since its inception. **Also**, in the 2019-2020 Fiscal Year, BeautifySJ, along with some staffing to support this growing program, will formally come under our portfolio."

p. 10, left column: "and when compared, San José is among the cities with lower staffing." When the graphic shows 5 cities above SJ and 4 below, SJ appears to be more "middle of the range". Or if, as you say, the point is that PRNS is so busy doing the NS part that there's many fewer doing P&R, then the graphic should be annotated or adjusted: take out the non-P&R personnel for each city and then replot.

p. 10, top right: it'd be fascinating to see a graph of staffing levels, from, say 1995 to present, to show the effects of the 2000 dot-com boom & bust and the 2008 great recession, and to show which aspects of PRNS dipped and recovered, which were held steady, which were discontinued entirely, and which new programs were added along the way. (Use inflation-adjusted costs and "per capita" population-adjusted counts.)

p. 10, right middle: “We have launched Placemaking” – want to include a phrase that explains what that means? Is this about VivaPark events or unique and interesting structures and sites?

p. 11: This report has a number of “Moving Forward” pages. Different color may help (see note re: p.5 above). It’d also help to have the section title (“Stewardship”) repeated somewhere here, either in the text box or as a label in the photo.

p. 12: “We will ... report annually on our successes.” To whom? Council? Staff? P&R Commission? Public?

p. 12: “S2C” – for consistency, want a lower-case “c”.

p. 14: “By using our parks, trails and community centers, 24,000 adult residents engaged in sufficient physical activity ...” – How often? daily, weekly, monthly? What is “sufficient”? Also, 24,000 seems like a very small number for a city of a million.

p. 14, left: “San José parks aid in storm water management by allowing rainfall to soak into the ground...” This is all well-and-good, but what about the City’s pending plans that *prioritize* the taking of parkland for use in creating “Green Stormwater Infrastructure” (GSI)? This is likely to be an issue during the lifespan of this report: is PRNS going to readily accommodate the needs of the Environment Services Dept., or will it strive to preserve parkland for the public’s current and future recreational uses?

p. 18, N3a: want to add “local” to “native” when discussing plantings? Joshua Trees and Giant Sequoias are both native to California, but neither might be ideal for San José...

p. 18, N4a: “with target of 10% California friendly materials at each location”. Is that a typo, or just a very low goal? Everything should be “California friendly” if you hope to grow it here – you don’t want to try growing Hawaiian orchids here! The goal should be to have as much local native plantings are practical: we’ll still want grass playfields, but landscaping can be switched over to local natives as the areas are refurbished.

p. 18, N5a: typo? “assign liaison from our department *four* our partner agencies”

p. 18, N6c: does any of this actually do anything? Remove dangerous diseased and dead trees; trim dangerous tree limbs in publicly accessible areas; plant and maintain new local native trees?

p. 19: “A robust... department *who* prioritizes...” Grammar? “that”

p. 20, top left: “City residents are also grappling with how best to support a growing segment of unsheltered individuals. We commit to acknowledging these differences and delivering services that understand, respond and address people’s access to better, safer, and healthier life opportunities.” What?! Is PRNS the responsible agency for dealing with the homeless now? I empathize with the homeless, recognize that they are members of our community that need assistance, and know that their

current impacts on the city's parks need to be mitigated, but is PRNS now taking the lead on homelessness? Is this a new addition to the "NS" part of PRNS? – it surely is beyond the scope of the Parks & Rec Commission. Is PRNS running a parallel effort with the Housing Commission, or is the Neighborhoods Commission (now under PRNS's purview) now responsible for finding solutions to the homeless issue?

Also: from my time on the GreenPrint task force, I thought that "people's access to better, safer, and healthier life opportunities" meant getting people away from their computer screens and video games and into the outdoors for some fresh air, sunshine, and exercise. I can see a second interpretation, where this means dealing with the homeless encampments along the creeks that impede the general public's use of the trails, or dealing with the sanitary issues at parks and playgrounds that sometimes is caused by the homeless. But I feel that it is way past our scope to provide jobs and housing ("healthier life opportunities") for a "growing segment of unsheltered individuals."

p. 20, 2nd paragraph: Interesting to see the ethnic diversity of our community. That many of us do not speak English well points to the need for park signage to be symbolic or multilingual. (I know that when I travel abroad, I really appreciate the efforts others make to accommodate visitors who may not know their local language!) But the paragraph's last sentence about struggle for housing does not follow from the ethnic diversity.

p. 20, 3rd paragraph: "We believe wholeheartedly that our facilities must serve all members of the community." True that: our parks are not just for the well-to-do or the certifiable home-owners. (I'm still resentful even years later that I was once denied access to a Palo Alto park just because I didn't have a Palo Alto address on my driver's license!) However, I can't just go out to my local park and pitch a tent in the middle of wherever I want, and nor should members of the "unsheltered community".

"Many unsheltered residents live in our parks..." – no!, **no** one, rich or poor, is supposed to be living in our parks: parks are for **visiting**, not dwelling! One can't enjoy the nature and recreation if one is tripping over the unsheltered's shelters.

"We partner with the Housing Department and others to provide shelter, hygiene services and respite opportunities." This definitely seems beyond the charter of Parks & Recreation. If it is now part of Neighborhood Services, this should be clearly stated, and it should not interfere with Parks & Rec facilities or services. Yes, after an emergency, everyone needs to work together – people camped in Golden Gate Park after the 1906 earthquake – but it is not a solution for an everyday problem: Golden Gate remains a park and was not converted over to be a housing project.

"Through our #BeautifySJ program, we aim to have safe and clean streets and neighborhoods for all including our unsheltered residents." – does this mean that everyone, including the homeless, can enjoy seeing clean streets, or does this mean that PRNS will be providing housing for the unsheltered so as to help keep the streets clean?

p. 20, 4th paragraph: "providing services to all, including, the disadvantaged..." Typo: don't need 2nd comma.

Why is the Vietnamese-American community singled out? Aren't there community centers or support groups for other communities as well? Mexican, Portuguese, Korean, German, Chinese, Italian, Irish, ...?

p. 21: Map. Nice!

- Can it be bigger for easier viewing?

- Show the full city, including western and northern parts of SJ.
- Provide a link so interested parties can view the map online and zoom in on details.

I'm glad that the 3.5A/1000 residents metric is included.

We still have to somehow discuss a "density distribution": a scattering of pocket parks downtown and a large regional park at the edge of town would satisfy both the 10-min metric and the 3.5A metric, and yet the people downtown would be underserved by the overwhelmed little parks. Also need to somehow acknowledge demographics: there's less of a need for shuffle-board courts in the areas favored by young families, and less need for tot-lots by the senior housing. (There's still a need for a few tot-lots – for the visiting grandkids!)

p. 22, top left. Fees can be barriers for the less affluent. Scholarships can help. (How can the city assure that they are equitably distributed and that some don't game the system?) Question: are members of the various cultures and ethnic groups all adept at applying for them and comfortable about asking for money? Also, given the current political landscape, some may fear that a park scholarship might somehow impact their future ability to acquire a green card or become a naturalized citizen...

p. 22, left, 2nd paragraph: that's a long initial sentence!

Also, "high-rise residential development has provided downtown and north San José with fee collections..." – but what about all the fee waivers and trades for maintenance? But I guess this document should be apolitical, and also best to not be tied to the policies of a given moment.

I am glad this now discusses the entire city – thanks for making that change to the earlier draft.

p. 22, lower right. Are there cultural issues? Do different cultures appreciate the outdoors differently? Do some like "nature" more while others prefer "crowds of people"? Would a variety of ethnic festivals and events in the various parks encourage people to discover their parks, and also help provide some cultural mixing and awareness? I know I enjoy the Obon street fair in Japantown, and would be interested in learning more about the Portuguese or Vietnamese if I were aware of there being other festivals. Perhaps this is already being done as part of the VivaParks project?

Someplace, perhaps on p. 23: Mention dog parks. There is a quick call-out of dog parks in the p. 8 graphic, but it warrants more. Dog parks seem to be a great equalizer and socializer: everyone brings their dogs out for exercise and socialization, and their owners meet one another as their dogs mingle.

p. 24: Moving Forward. Want to mention culture and language? How about gender?– make it so everyone feels safe and welcome.

p. 25, EA2: What's "GARE"? Spell it out?

p. 25, EA3a: "transcreations" – Is that a word?

p. 25: "Provide exceptional experiences for all people in San Jose regardless of age, ability, income, or neighborhood" – Language? Culture? Gender?

p. 25, EA5c: perhaps subsidize programs or events at given locations rather than providing scholarships? Less demanding on understanding of an application process, and less worry about green-card issues.

p. 25, EA6c: seems like this should come before EA6a and EA6b. Also, would be nice to have an EA6d that is a program to actually acquire land and develop parks to meet the goals.

p. 25, EA7: A philosophical point about PCA's: seems like it should have a finer resolution, especially for the larger parks. The ball-fields might be in different condition than the tennis courts. Also, "broken restrooms & well-mowed lawn" and "good restrooms & shaggy lawn" might both average out to give the same score, but one is far more easily remedied.

p. 25, EA7b: good! Nice to have an easy way for the public to report a broken sprinkler.

p. 25, EA9a: care to define "the eight domains of livability"?

p. 25, EA10b (missing): "Promote park usage through VivaParks and ethnic & cultural events."

p. 26: does "Identity" refer to the identity of PRNS or the identity of San José?

p. 27, left side: good to brag! Examples somehow seem better in 3's: want to also mention that Kelley Park has, in addition to the zoo, a Japanese Tea Garden and a History Park?

p. 27, right: is it "Building an Iconic Trails System" or "Trail System"? Also, (style): I'd say "more than 60 miles" rather than being overly precise...

p. 27, lower right: want to expand on "intervention programs"? Is that the Mayor's Gang Prevention effort? Midnight basketball? Programs at the community centers?

p. 28, top right: "the World Health Organization (WHO) honored San José with the recognition as an Age Friendly City in 2017." What happened in 2018? Are we resting on past laurels, or is that the latest year's record?

p. 28, top right: "The urban village plans currently underway..." – want to quickly explain "urban villages" for your non-geek audience? Planned higher-density walkable transit-oriented-developments in our "Envision 2040" General Plan.

p. 28, middle right: "As we continue to create a memorable parks and recreation system, we must pay attention to design details that embrace San José's history and culture." Like the Willow Glen Trestle? [Sorry, but I couldn't let that pass unnoticed...]

p. 28, lower right: "The Envision 2040 general plan sets forward the concept of "Grand Parks" for the City of San José." Coyote Meadows, to form a Grand Park together with Olinder and Kelley Parks?

"Securing large spaces, however, can be challenging given land costs and availability." The City already owns the 50 acres: just need to transfer from Office of Economic Development to PRNS.

p. 28, lower right: “Increasing urbanization may, in some cases, necessitate smaller “pocket” parks to provide quality outdoor space.” Pocket parks are fine, but in some areas (e.g., downtown), there need to be enough of them, and of sufficient quality, to be able to handle the anticipated use and demand.

p. 29: this whole page reads like a requirements specification for PRNS Management new-hires ....

p. 31: ID1a. Did you ever wonder why the signs at Kelley Park are green? At a Kelley Park taskforce meeting in 1990, when discussing the need for “cohesive marketing”, as a joke, I suggested “well, you could always paint all the signs in Kelley Green” – and so it became so.

p. 31, ID1b: “the park’s 150th anniversary” – I like it!

p. 31, ID1c: are you ever going to complete the update to the Kelley Park Master Plan?

p. 31, ID2: “Complete Parks ... Master Planning ... to insure [parks] reflect the culture and history of the neighborhoods in which they are located.” Interesting! But yet, ...

As I asked at the P&R Cmsn retreat, “Does having different parks reflect different cultural heritages embrace the diversity of the community and reflect local community wishes, or does it perpetuate and reinforce de-facto segregation? Does an <ethnic group> garden honor the local residents, or does it “encourage” them to congregate in that area?

p. 31, ID2c: “Prioritize Sub-Regional Park Master Plans” – is that a collection of several local neighborhood parks? How many? / What acreage?

p. 31, ID3b: “..., Willow Glen Trestle” <snark!>

p. 31, ID5: “Engage the next generation of parks and recreation professionals” Okay, now you’re not only identifying yourselves as “PRNS”, but as a specific demographic subgroup of PRNS.... (See comment re: p.2 as to who is “we”.)

p. 31, ID5b: “Develop relationship with local schools” – also an opportunity to arrange for volunteers, “adopt-a-park”, etc.

p. 31, ID6b: “development of a Prototype Park” – Interesting idea. Place to experiment with native plantings, alternative irrigation techniques, Integrated Pest Management Programs, volunteer coordination, maintenance regimens, ....

p. 31, ID7c: “Install bike racks” – good! I’m tired of having my bike stolen! And I worry about damage to the newly planted trees if I tie up to them!

p. 31, ID8a: “Evaluate programming for consistency with Age Friendly designation” –no mention of the “one to one-hundred”? ;-)

p. 31, ID9b. "Develop and implement a trails specific pavement management system" – yay!

p. 33, left column: " In 2019, for the first time, we held two Viva CalleSJ events in one year." Future past tense? (BTW: what is the "release date" for this report?)

p. 33, lower right: "estimated at \$51.2 million" – is that the estimated value? or the cost to implement?

p. 34, lower right: "to weekly neighborhood get-togethers, ..." – any chance that PRNS can help reduce / eliminate to cost of a block-party permit? It's a great way to meet your neighbors, but the \$100+ permit has put a crimp in our street's decades-old custom...

p. 35: might want to somehow coordinate, acknowledge, accommodate, or whatever: SJ BikeParty. It's a "founded in SJ" cultural experience! Also, Bike-to-Work Day.

p. 36, PL1c: "..., Shakespeare in the Park, Music in the Park, Movie Nights, ..."

p. 36, PL2b (new): Coordinate with events such as Stroll The Alameda, Luna Park Chalk Festival, Bark-in-the-Park, etc.

p. 36, PL3c (new): SJ BikeParty; Save Our Trails tours, Almaden Cycle Touring, ... Kayaking along the creeks? Ethnic/cultural festivals?

p. 36, PL5d (new): for public safety, PRNS on occasion needs to deal with individuals and groups that impact public safety. PRNS either needs to coordinate with SJ Police Dept. or else establish and implement a policy for arming at least some of the park rangers. Make trails and parks safe and inviting for all members of the community.

p. 36, PL8i (new): website w/ info on status of city trail network: have they been cleaned after recent weather events, or blocked by planned festivals or charity races?

p. 36, PL9a: ADA accessible? lighting for evening use?

p. 38: want to acknowledge how long the process took?

p. 40, left: "We will revisit the benchmarks every five years" – rather than an undefined "next year", want to be specific and say that the report is to be updated in 2025 and 2030?

p. 42, right column: "Megan Medeiros" is now once again Megan Fluke.

p. 43, top left: "Keep Coyote Creek Beautifulv" – typo.

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And now, for items I couldn't find in the report but that I feel should be discussed in a strategic plan:



- **Schools:** The GreenPrint talked about sharing school playgrounds after hours, but it is not mentioned here. Is this a change of policy? Should this change be at least acknowledged?
- **POPOS and Private Facilities:** I see no mention of Privately Operated Public Open Spaces (POPOS), or of private facilities (e.g., swimming pools or courtyards at apartment or condo projects). Some projects are granted credit to offset their required contribution to the park impacts: this should be discussed. Do these private facilities help reduce the demand on the existing public facilities in the surrounding neighborhoods, or do they increase resentment between the “haves” and the “have nots”?
- **Reid-Hillview Airport and the County Fairgrounds:** One or both of these are likely to change in the next twenty years, and a strategic plan should anticipate such changes. If these county lands are converted to residential use, what would the impacts be on the city park system? Would they be treated like any other development, or would their size mandate a special process of some kind?
- **Gentrification:** Housing is less expensive in the underserved regions of town. If parks are provided to these regions, will that make them more attractive and thus more expensive, thereby “gentrifying” the areas and driving out the current residents? Should there be some processes or policies to mitigate the impacts of introducing or improving park facilities? Or are the recently passed state rent-control laws adequate?
- **County pockets:** There are a number of unincorporated county pockets that likely will be absorbed into San José over the lifespan of this plan: what are the plans to provide appropriate park and recreational services for these new city residents?
- **Fee waivers:** I found no discussion about the impact of park fee waivers for downtown high-rises or for affordable housing. As I’ve said at various public hearings, I feel that parks are critical for the physical and mental health of our residents, especially for those who live in high-density developments that lack private backyards, courtyards, or patios. Residents of affordable housing units are those who are least able to afford the costs of private recreation: they can’t afford to fly off to Utah for skiing or to LA for Disneyland: they need their local neighborhood parks – but those are less likely to exist if the park fees are waived for those developments.
- **“Future proofing”:** Interests change over time: Hoop-rolling and kite-flying were big in the past; golf seems to have had its day; now it’s soccer, cricket, and disk-golf – and who knows what will be big in the future. What are the mechanisms by which the park system can adapt to the current needs (the draft doesn’t even mention cricket) and those of the future?
- **Changing demographics:** This report discusses aging park facilities and aging park users, but there’s one other consideration: aging park employees. Has any thought be given towards providing park services when there are fewer teenagers looking for summer jobs? What are the impacts of crackdowns on immigration, legal or otherwise? And will city policies on “living wages” raise maintenance costs to the point that the parks are unmaintainable?

Once again, this report is much improved over the earlier drafts!

Sorry if it may seem as if I’m picking on you – I’m not! – but you did ask for a detailed review....

Hope this helps! Contact me with any questions!

~Larry Ames, longtime creek, trail, park, historic, and community advocate