



City Response to 2021-2022 Yolo Grand Jury Report: Clover Taking Over! Where Did the Grass Go in Davis Parks?

Summary Response

The 2021-22 Grand Jury provided a report to the City of Davis asking why the “parks show a significant lack of greenery during summer months” and suggesting that the overall maintenance of the parks was not meeting standards. While the City of Davis appreciates that the intent of the Grand Jury is to be instrumental and constructive, we have found this particular report to be challenging to respond to due to lack of definitions in the report, a lack of recognition for contributing factors to issues raised, and a disconnect between the Grand Jury findings and community sentiments.

The Grand Jury report does not define acceptable standard levels and several of the findings are general and subjective in nature. They do not take into consideration statewide restrictions due to historic drought conditions, local decisions related to limiting the use of pesticides to address public health concerns, or the fact that different areas of parks have different uses and therefore different appearances. Trying to determine what the Grand Jury means when it uses “unkempt,” “better maintained,” or “restoring turf areas” without specific details or expected metrics makes it difficult if not impossible to respond in a meaningful manner.

Since the City started tracking statistically valid resident satisfaction surveys in 2007, concerns about park maintenance have not been among the concerns stated by residents. On the contrary, in the most recent citywide survey from the spring of 2022, an overwhelming 86% of respondents claimed satisfaction with “Quality of parks and recreation programs,” second only to satisfaction with “Overall Quality of Life” at 87%.

The City of Davis takes great pride in its expansive parks and greenbelt system – a larger and more diverse system than any other community in Yolo County. We also take great pride in our environmental activity, providing recreation and open spaces, conserving water as needed or required, and limiting the use of dangerous chemicals, especially in areas where children may play. This may result in some areas that present more in their natural state rather than appearing heavily manicured. This may not be the preferred look of members of the Grand Jury, but it does not necessarily make spaces “unkempt” or poorly maintained. While the City does not purport to be perfect, and recognizes there is always room for

improvement in our practices, we believe it is important to keep the above concepts in mind when reviewing the totality of the City's responses.

FINDINGS

F-1 The Davis Parks budget no longer adequately covers park maintenance throughout the year at satisfactory quality levels.

Response: Partially Agree

The term "Satisfactory quality levels" in the Grand Jury report is very broad and not well defined nor does it provide what is "acceptable." The residents consistently indicate satisfaction with the parks maintenance as the City has not received complaints or comments about the overall park maintenance. Specific complaints, when received, are addressed and/or action is explained to the complainant. The Parks Maintenance Tax has been in place since 1998 at a level of \$49 per residential parcel. In 2018, voters renewed the tax and added a 2% annual inflator. The tax has never covered the entirety of parks maintenance. Currently, it covers approximately 10-12% of the Parks operations budget. Of the anticipated revenue of \$1,550,00 for Fiscal Year 2022/23, approximately \$200,000 goes toward the Urban Forestry division for maintenance of the street trees, parks trees, and greenbelt trees and approximately \$50,000 goes to the Open Space and Habitat division for maintenance. The remaining \$1,300,000 goes towards the maintenance of the parks/greenbelts and aquatics centers.

Since the initial Parks Maintenance Tax went into effect in 1998, the City has added the maintenance of

- three community parks (Arroyo, Mace Ranch and Walnut)
- seven neighborhood parks (John Barovetto, Sandy Motley, Wildhorse, Arneson, Willowbank, Harvest, Market and Cannery)
- 2 community gardens (Cannery and Grande)
- the Arroyo Aquatics Complex and
- approximately 43 additional acres of greenbelts and open space.

The City acknowledges that the multi-year drought, transition of IPM policy away from harmful chemicals, community growth and cost escalation have influenced what the City can deliver with constrained budget resources. The City has been pro-active this year with undertaking efforts such as turf conversions, updating irrigation systems, utilizing probation crews, volunteers and contract resources to expand the range of resources to address overall park maintenance.

As costs have escalated, and acreage and facilities have been added, the general fund portion of the parks maintenance budget has increased to pay for maintenance.

While additional funds would be beneficial, parks and greenbelts are currently maintained at a level consistent with existing park industry standard practices.

F-2 Davis Parks greenery is unkempt and shows a lack of consistent maintenance.

Response: Disagree

The City Parks division is responsible for maintaining over 485 acres of parks and greenbelt areas. While certain areas are landscaped, others are intended for active use by over 65,000 Davis residents. The acreage is kept to park industry standards based on use, set to maximize safety and functionality for users, and to include environmental and other considerations.

The term unkempt in the Grand Jury report is subjective and not well defined nor does it provide what is “acceptable.”

The City acknowledges that there have been challenges this year with weeds and have taken extra steps to address the weeds situation. The City has launched a new page dedicated to Landscape Management and Weeds which provides useful information to the public on the impact on the usage, health, beauty and resources of our community and the City is utilizing an array of strategies and tactics to diligently and methodically resolve this issue.

<https://www.cityofdavis.org/city-hall/public-works-utilities-and-operations/integrated-pest-management/landscape-management-weeds>

The City of Davis routinely updates its landscape and maintenance practices (no more than 15% weeds or 5% bare ground, for example) to align with industry best management practices and to incorporate current City Council goals. The goal of the landscape maintenance standards is to provide the most effective and efficient operational strategies as well as address the necessary resources to support the current and future parks system with the City of Davis.

City staff is further increasing the efficiency of City maintained parks and greenbelt locations by:

1. Utilizing volunteers on a biweekly basis to complete weed abatement and mulching along walkways and planted areas.
2. The Parks Division is set up into two geographic teams (Northwest and Southeast) to care for the larger parks and adjacent greenbelts. City maintenance staff are experienced, committed and have strong technical skills. Efficiency has been maximized by increasing the use of City maintenance staff by maintaining high profile parks and adjacent greenbelts, and utilizing contractors for other areas.

The City is working on a Parks & Maintenance Design and Standards document that will more clearly define how the parks and amenities should be serviced and at what frequency. Parks staff have been working together with a consultant to assist with the development of the document and there is a working sub-committee comprised of three Recreation & Park Commissioners reviewing the draft material. The draft document will be presented to the full Recreation & Park Commission and City Council later this year. Maintenance standards create an estimated frequency schedule for staff to follow that ensures quality amenities are addressed in a timely and routinely basis. Staff is also looking at baseline services provided by staff and contractors. The services will then be viewed as the basis for improvement objectives for the short and long-term maintenance efforts.

The Davis community has long worked to balance safety, functionality, aesthetics, environmental stewardship (i.e. IPM and drought management) and cost effectiveness. This balance results in parks and greenbelts that are not necessarily “pristinely manicured” at all costs, which would require funding levels well beyond what the community is willing to pay. Lastly, the City is in the midst of shifting IPM strategies (as per directions from the City Council in 2018) and weathering a multi-year drought and COVID impacts on staffing and contractors.

F-3 The City of Davis has been unsuccessful in hiring additional maintenance staff and an IPM Specialist, as outlined in the City of Davis Policy and Procedures.

Response: Partially Agree

The Parks Division did have 2 vacancies (Parks Maintenance Workers I/II) for about 6 months. The positions were filled in late May 2022 so the full 8 positions in the Parks Division have been filled.

The City IPM (Integrated Pest Management) Specialist position is vacant. The City has undertaken three recruitments for the IPM Specialist position. Prior to the third recruitment effort the City adjusted the compensation range of the position upward in an attempt to attract broader interest. It has proven a challenging position to fill due at least in part to a very specialized skill set that is required to be successful in the role. Since 2020, the City has experienced (along with most jurisdictions) greater challenges in the recruitment of employees at all levels of the organization. The City will continue to undertake recruitment efforts to fill this role. In the absence of the IPM Specialist position, the Public Works Utilities and Operations Department Director created an interim IPM program coordination team consisting of the Environmental Resources Manager, Assistant to the Director, Open Space Lands Manager, and the Wildlife Resource Specialist. This team, working with an independent IPM consultant, has provided effective oversight of the program and the model may be a suitable long-term solution for the program, should future recruitments also prove unsuccessful.

F-4 Parks that are maintained by the City of Davis are better maintained than the parks that are serviced by the sole contractor.

Response: Disagree

The City is very proud of the care that our staff puts into park maintenance. The parks and greenbelts are currently maintained at a level consistent with standard park practices. The Landscape Maintenance Standards delineate work performed by City staff versus that of contracted services for the parks and landscaped areas of the City. The goal of differentiating the work is to achieve the highest and best use of City staff due their greater knowledge and experience with working with key park facilities and functionalities within the Davis park system.

City crews are responsible for the City's community parks, neighborhood parks with special purpose facilities or features, and a variety of city-wide functionalities that require knowledge, expertise, experience or ongoing relationships with internal and external customers.

City staff are working very closely with contracted services to be proactive and implement strategies that are efficient and effective. That said, there is always room for improvement as noted earlier, and the revised Parks & Maintenance Design and Standards document that will clearly define how the parks and amenities should be serviced and at what frequency by the City staff and the City contractor.

F-5 The City of Davis does not have a transparent policy in place regarding the bidding process for the publicly funded contractor supporting the Parks department.

Response: Disagree

The request for proposals (RFP's) for park projects are listed on the City website. The competitive bidding process involves public advertisement for the submission of sealed bids, the public opening of bids, and the award of contracts to the lowest responsible bidder that is responsive to the solicitation for bids. The City Council awards the bids during their meetings usually during their consent calendar portion of the agenda.

F-6 Although the City of Davis has mechanisms in place to promote volunteerism to beautify parks, volunteer opportunities could be better promoted to the public.

Response: Partially Agree

The dedicated City-Wide Volunteer Coordinator came on board in late 2019 to increase the number of volunteers and volunteer opportunities. In early 2020, the City issued a press release detailing volunteer opportunities and how to sign up. Unfortunately, as the program was gaining traction, the pandemic hit, and all

promotion and volunteer work halted due to safety. During the pandemic, the Volunteer Coordinator took this time and concentrated her efforts and maximized behind the scenes projects such as: updating the website, created an on-line interest form, made contact with various community groups and purchased and equipped a Volunteer Utility Trailer filled with tools for future community service projects so that projects could resume once restrictions were lifted.

In 2021, the City worked with the Emergency Operations Center (EOC) to permit small projects with limited numbers of participants, and 22 projects were completed. In total, more than 300 volunteers were engaged in 2021.

In 2022, the volunteer program has completed 30 projects, and has another 40 scheduled through the end of the year. This number is not indicative of the community groups and individuals who have sought out volunteer opportunities on their own. City staff project that this number will increase significantly when courses resume at UC Davis in the fall. To date, more than 600 volunteers have been engaged in volunteer participation in 2022. The City has greatly increased advertising and use of various social media channels to advertise for these volunteer opportunities, in addition to partnering with community service organizations

F-7 There is lack of coordination between the Public Works Department and the Parks Department when capital projects within the park system take place. This leads to the lack of re-greenification of Davis parks.

Response: Partially Agree

During the last two years, there were a few projects in which there was not a coordinated effort between Public Works (PW) and Parks and Community Services (PCS). Since then, adjustments have been made to correct for this and PW and PCS work cooperatively and communicate on a regular basis for all park and capital improvement projects.

RECOMMENDATIONS

R-1 The City of Davis should address the weed infestation in the parks and green belts, with removal of weeds and reinstall grass back to its original form by September 1, 2022.

Response:

This recommendation is being partially implemented as described below.

Currently, in line with the drought policies enacted by the State, the Parks division has reduced irrigation by more than 20% over the past two years, and is actively seeking to reduce this even more during the drought. In areas of the parks and greenbelts where applicable, turf conversion projects are being considered to reduce and/or eliminate non-essential irrigation.

The City has taken a number of steps to address the City-wide weed infestation, including temporarily increasing the contract services levels, implementing lesser used methodology (such as torching), working with community groups and volunteers to actively promote weed abatement within their communities, addressing the current Integrated Pest Management (“IPM”) policies and making changes where appropriate, and identifying alternative methods to weed abatement that align with City Council goals (such as grazing). The City has launched a new page dedicated to Landscape Management and Weeds which provides useful information to the public on the impact on the usage, health, beauty and resources of our community and the City is utilizing an array of strategies and tactics to diligently and methodically resolve this issue.

<https://www.cityofdavis.org/city-hall/public-works-utilities-and-operations/integrated-pest-management/landscape-management-weeds>

“Reinstalling” grass by September 1 would not be cost effective, is not a budgeted expense, and would not be environmentally responsible in light of the current drought. However, the City has instituted a more vigorous turf maintenance program for the turf we do want to keep that includes aeration, over seeding, fertilizing, and top dressing. Where applicable and safe, herbicidal applications are also incorporated to eliminate undesirable vegetation on turf such as sports fields and dog parks. Much of this work is seasonal and is completed during appropriate times of the year that increase full effectiveness. The City is implementing these strategies in areas where turf is essential and requires higher levels of maintenance to ensure ongoing usage and safety.

While the City does not want clover in lieu of turf in all green spaces in town, clover does provide benefits as a nitrogen fixer. The City has no plans to try to eradicate clover in all locations. In locations where clover is problematic the City has aggressively addressed the issue. In the Aquatics Centers, for example the City has applied 2 rounds of substances to curtail the clover growth and will do additional turf maintenance (aeration and fertilization) in the fall when the weather

is more conducive to these types of applications. Staff has recently approved plans to undertake treatments at the Playfields complex this fall, which will be applied when the weather is more favorable for a successful outcome.

R-2 The City of Davis' competitive bidding process should be transparent when awarding contracts to this contractor and should provide an explanation of said process regarding by September 1, 2022.

Response:

This recommendation has been implemented. As already mentioned, the City does have a public bidding process in place and the request for proposals (RFP's) for park and capital improvement projects are listed on the City website, are fully transparent, and contract awards made by the City Council as part of their public meeting agendas.

R-3 The City of Davis should actively recruit for the IPM Specialist position or in the absence of a qualified candidate, the City of Davis should outsource this position by September 1, 2022.

Response: This recommendation has been implemented. As already indicated, the City has been working with an IPM consulting firm and utilizing current City staffing to continue the operations of the IPM Specialist position until a successful recruitment can be accomplished.

R-4 The City of Davis Parks Department should actively promote civic pride and the volunteerism programs already in place such as ADOPT-A-PARK. Additional ideas for volunteer recruitments include: • enlisting Scout troops to help contain weed growth in the parks. • working with service clubs (e.g., Rotary, Lyons Club, Kiwanis) to help maintain the parks. • amplifying public service announcements encouraging "pull weeds in your neighborhood green belts and parks."

Response:

This recommendation has been implemented. The Volunteer program has worked with the Parks division to promote biweekly mulching, quarterly parks improvement, and multiple standalone volunteer projects. Parks has also worked with the Volunteer program to expand the Adopt-A-Park program. Traditionally used in the parks and greenbelts, the Adopt-A-Park program has worked with members of the community who have taken it upon themselves to complete landscape maintenance activities in their neighborhoods on a consistent basis. These areas include streetscapes, medians, and easements.

Volunteer opportunities are promoted on the City Website (<https://www.cityofdavis.org/city-hall/parks-and-community-services/volunteer-opportunities>), through city communications, and on the Volunteer Match

website. Once we return to a full “normal” there are also tabling opportunities at community events and on campus. The City’s Volunteer Program Coordinator has developed a “Menu of Volunteer Opportunities,” that details the City’s current and future volunteer opportunities and how they benefit the City. Weed abatement projects are the most utilized volunteer opportunities in the City.

R-5 The City of Davis should publicize an annual Measure H spending report detailing expenditures as they specifically benefit the parks and aquatics centers.

Response:

At their October 4, 2016, the City Council approved and distributed the Parks Maintenance Tax into different division programs. Below is the link for the administrative report and how the Parks Maintenance Tax is distributed on a yearly basis (Attachment 5, page 78). The distribution proportions have remained the same since this time.

This report was published as part of the City Council agenda packet for the public hearing to discuss fees and the distribution of revenues, including the maintenance tax. In addition, the City ordinance Chapter 15.14.105 provides that there will be an annual review by a commission or commissions. Annual review of the proposed budget is performed by the Finance and Budget Commission.

<https://documents.cityofdavis.org/Media/Default/Documents/PDF/CityCouncil/CouncilMeetings/Agendas/20161004/04-CSD-Revenue-and-Pricing-Policy-and-Cost-of-Service-Analysis.pdf>