

Staff Report

File #: 20-67**Version:** 2**Date:** 10/12/2020**Item #:** 3.3a.

TO: Mayor and City Council**THROUGH:** Steve Powers, City Manager**FROM:** Norman Wright, Community Development Director**SUBJECT:**

Expansion of Park Ranger responsibility.

Ward(s): All Wards

Councilor(s): All Councilors

Neighborhood(s): All Neighborhoods

ISSUE:

Shall City Council approve the expansion of the Park Ranger's duties and service area to better serve the Community's needs.

RECOMMENDATION:

Approve the expansion of the Park Ranger's duties and service area to better serve the Community's needs.

SUMMARY:

Staff is proposing to expand the Park Ranger's service area to all City parks and add enforcement responsibilities.

Staff brought the issue of expansion of the Park Ranger's duties and service area to the City Council at its July 13, 2020, meeting. Council asked that staff return with additional information about how the Park Ranger's time would be allocated, what services the Ranger would be providing in the additional parks, some of the services the Ranger provides that are distinct from a traditional Code Enforcement Officer, and why the Ranger position was moved to the Neighborhood Enhancement Division.

The objective of the Park Ranger program is to enhance the use and enjoyment of the City's parks. The program provides customer service, public education and engagement, and enforcement of

simple code violations, such as smoking in parks, dogs off leash, and unlawful parking. Expanding the Park Ranger's service area and enforcement responsibilities will provide greater awareness of the Park Ranger program, add opportunity for public education and customer service, and improve overall park safety.

FACTS AND FINDINGS:

The Park Ranger currently serves four of the City's eighty-eight parks: Minto Brown, Riverfront, Wallace Marine, and Marion Square. Allowing the Ranger to visit all City parks will greatly increase the Ranger's service impact by increasing the customer service presence and educational opportunities for City park visitors. For example, the Park Ranger has created very successful "Owl Prowl" and "Eagle Watchers" programs within Minto Brown Park. Staff's goal is to initiate similar educational events if the Park Ranger program is expanded to all City parks.

Citizen complaints and code violations are frequently reported within local parks outside of the Park Ranger's current assigned area. The Salem Police Department is tasked with responding to these complaints and they often don't have available personnel resources to respond to ordinance violations in the City's parks. Allowing the Park Ranger to take immediate enforcement action in all parks will increase service efficiency and improve the appearance of City parks.

The Park Ranger is currently limited to enforcing SRC Chapter 45-Smoking in the Park, Chapter 94-Dogs off leash, and SRC Chapter 102-Parking (within Park guidelines). Additional common code violations within the City's parks that are currently outside the Park Ranger's Oath of Office include littering, illegal dumping, graffiti, vandalism, noise violations, abandoned vehicles, unlicensed vendors, damaging plants or trees, and disturbing restricted natural areas. These violations are often discovered by the Park Ranger during his rounds within the parks, but he cannot resolve them directly because of the Park Ranger's current enforcement limitations. Allowing the Park Ranger authority to enforce within the City's parks SRC Chapters 47-Solid Waste Management, 50-Property Maintenance (only as it applies to junk vehicles and their removal), and the remainder of Chapter 94-Offenses in Parks, will allow for the efficient abatement of issues and increase the safety of the City's parks.

Finally, while the Park Ranger's coverage area will increase with this recommendation, the position's primary focus will remain with the four parks currently assigned. The Ranger will maintain a consistent presence in these parks and visit other parks when complaints and requests for service arise. Past and current conditions indicate that this responsive approach will be manageable. Though exceptional circumstances may arise from one day to the next, the Ranger's ability to continue the excellent customer service already provided to Minto Brown, Riverfront, Wallace Marine, and Marion Square parks will not be impaired.

The Salem Parks and Recreation Advisory Board (SPRAB) has reviewed the proposed changes and supports the them. (Attachment 1)

BACKGROUND:

From when the position was approved by City Council in June 2016, the Park Ranger has improved its ability to make progress on the goals of protecting the parks and improving the experience of park visitors. Council established this position mainly in response to complaints of dogs off leash, predominantly at Minto Brown Park. The position was added to Parks.

After a year of experience, the code compliance responsibilities of the Park Ranger led to the position being moved to Community Development. With the Park Ranger assigned to the Compliance Services section of Neighborhood Enhancement Division, the position has support, tools, and compliance guidance. Neighborhood Enhancement has integrated the position within the network of field and outreach officers working in both NED and the Police department. Specifically, on January 26, 2018, the Park Ranger was sworn in as a Reserve Salem Police Officer. This enabled the Park Ranger to issue citations while maintaining the compliance-first approach incorporated in the rest of NED's compliance services.

In addition to enforcement and compliance, the Park Ranger uses education to increase awareness and protection of the City's parks and add to the park visitors' enjoyment. The Park Ranger, in cooperation with Recreation, provides a wide array of educational programs, teaching adults and children alike about our abundant wildlife and how to recreate responsibly. Educational programs hosted by the Park Ranger program include fishing clinics, birdwatching classes, evening hikes looking for owls called "Owl Prowls", a class on turtles, Junior Park Ranger clinics, and a daytime viewing area program known as "Eagle Watchers" which is staffed by volunteers and designed to educate park users about nesting eagles. The Park Ranger has partnered with local agencies and groups comprising of Salem Parks, Center 50+, Just Walk Salem, ODFW, Polk County Sheriff, Marion County Soil and Water Association, and many others, all working to enhance the Salem City Park experience.

Suzanne Reynolds
Code Compliance Supervisor

Attachments:

1. SPRAB Letter