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FEBRUARY 23, 2021

DEPARTMENT OF PARKS AND RECREATION BUDGET RESTORATION

The COVID-19 pandemic has demonstrated the vital role that well-maintained, adequately staffed parks, and open space play in supporting a high quality of life for Los Angeles County residents. County Parks have portrayed a major role during the COVID-19 pandemic and have demonstrated more than ever that parks are critical and essential infrastructure in our most vulnerable communities. County Parks provide social safety nets and an anchor for those most impacted by this crisis to seek refuge, rest, and recreation. The Department of Parks and Recreation (DPR) identified in its 2016 Park Needs Assessment the high and very high need communities that include the most vulnerable populations made up of primarily low income and communities of color.

Unfortunately, it is the communities located in the high and very high need areas that are the most impacted by the public health crisis and are also the most vulnerable to economic shocks and job insecurity. Children in vulnerable communities impacted most by COVID-19 will need the support of their schools as well as community programs and spaces, like those offered in Los Angeles County Parks, to help them address the trauma of isolation, as well as the many impacts of COVID-19.

The severe economic decline caused by the COVID-19 public health crisis led to an unprecedented loss of revenues in the County’s budget. As a result, County Departments including DPR, were required to take an eight percent curtailment, and for DPR this represented a \$12.9 million reduction in Net County Cost (NCC) funding. DPR’s Operating Budget was further impacted by an additional \$9.9 million reduction in funding due to a shortfall in revenues. To address the curtailment and loss of revenues, the Department significantly reduced its recurrent and temporary staff by 857 employees. Recreation services staff was reduced by 43 percent, and recurrent pool lifeguard positions were 100 percent eliminated, recurrent lake lifeguards were reduced by nine positions. In addition, 53 grounds maintenance positions and grounds contract services for the maintenance of park amenities and restrooms were deleted. However, as part of Supplemental Changes, DPR’s Operating Budget was restored by \$4.5 million to address maintenance of park amenities and restrooms resulting in an overall net NCC curtailment of five percent or \$8.4 million.

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The critical loss of recreation staffing at DPR's Parks have resulted in the inability to provide programming at our parks without achieving full cost recovery, which directly impacts and leaves out many of our low-income and communities of color that we serve. The curtailments also eliminated recreation programs and community events at 104 local parks and ten Nature Centers, closed park buildings on Sundays, Mondays, and County holidays, and reduced the daily hours of operations. In many of the high and very high need areas, DPR is the sole provider of affordable and accessible youth recreation and after school programs. Having to provide recreation programs at full cost recovery will eliminate accessible programming in the most vulnerable, low-income, and communities of color communities further exacerbating existing inequities.

These significant budget reductions eliminated the aquatics program at our 42 swimming pools that provide a variety of programs from the lifesaving Learn to Swim program to important recreational and fitness activities such as recreation swim and water exercise classes. The Los Angeles County swimming pools are enjoyed by approximately 759,335 visitors annually. Los Angeles County pool lifeguards, in addition to employing over 700 youth and young adults part-time annually, provide approximately 10,000 swimming lessons annually to children of all ages.

Lake Lifeguards are critical to the overall safety of the lake and swim beach operation. Swim beaches at Castaic Lake Recreation Area and Santa Fe Dam provide a critical recreation amenity with over 380,000 park users a year and many of them are youth. The curtailment of lake lifeguard positions has reduced the days the lakes can be open from seven days a week to four days a week. This severely limits access during our summer season and should be restored. Additionally, Lake Lifeguards documented over 45,000 preventative actions and 200 aquatic rescues at our lakes which is essential for the public's safety.

While the unprecedented public health crisis and budget curtailment resulted in the closures of swimming pools and indoor park facilities during the Summer of 2020, DPR is planning and preparing to kick-off Spring and Summer 2021 programming at our County parks and pools, with continued adherence to the required Public Health safety protocols.

Restoring the aquatics program at the County's pools would help to create access for children, youth, and families that otherwise do not have access to swimming pools and amenities, allow children to remain active and fit, provide life-saving water safety, swimming, social, and leadership skills that may lead to a summer job in County pools or eventually lead to a full-time career in County Beaches and Lakes or a college scholarship. For older adults and seniors, water aerobics provides low impact exercise and recreation, as well as socializing and mental health benefits like uplifting their spirits.

The cost of restoring the aquatics program with standard hours and consistent programming at our Aquatic Centers and seasonal pool facilities for the Summer Season is \$3,539,000 in Fiscal Year (FY) 2020-2021 and \$12,715,000 of ongoing cost beginning in FY 2021-2022. The 2021 Summer pool season would begin the second week of June.

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Restoring staffing for recreation programming at our local parks and nature centers will provide the critical affordable and accessible programming that is the safety net for our most vulnerable communities, especially our youth. DPR's local parks and nature centers have received unprecedented numbers of park visitors, with most of our local parks and nature centers having one staff to provide park coverage leaving a significant gap for park management, visitor usage, health and safety and customer service.

Restoration of recreation programs will help address the devastating impact from COVID-19 and provide the much-needed healing and community connection. The physical and mental health benefits as well as the positive social cohesion impact of providing programs in our highest need parks is well documented and would provide a critical lifeline to many youths needing this level of support.

The cost of restoring recreation programming to provide affordable and accessible programs is \$2,120,000 in FY 2020-2021 and \$8,586,000 of on-going cost beginning in FY 2021-2022. The 2021 Spring recreation programming would begin in April.

Restoring the lake swim beaches to seven days per week during the Summer season will provide swimming activities to youth and families as access to the ocean beach can be a significant transportation barrier for many low-income communities. The cost of restoring swimming days at Santa Fe Dam and Castaic Lake Recreation Area is \$243,000 in FY 2020-2021 and \$580,000 of ongoing cost beginning in FY 2021-2022. The 2021 Summer lake season would start Memorial Day weekend.

In addition, we would like the Department of Parks and Recreation to prioritize the Parks After Dark (PAD) program especially given the increase in crime and mental health stresses. This is an essential program which should be funded and should operate as allowed by the Public Health Safety protocols. Pre-COVID, the cost to implement countywide the PAD program was \$6,832,000 at 33 parks. Other County Departments have previously provided funding for PAD, including Mental Health, Children and Family Services, Public Health, Probation, and Public and Social Services.

WE, THEREFORE, MOVE that the Board of Supervisors:

1. Direct the Chief Executive Officer, in collaboration with the DPR and with consideration to the required Public Health safety protocols, to provide funding in FY 2020-2021 for mobilizing staff recruitment, hiring, and training as well as facility inspection and maintenance, to allow the Summer and Spring aquatics, recreation, and lakes programs to kick-off in FY 2020-2021, as described above.
2. Direct the Chief Executive Officer, in collaboration with the DPR and with consideration to the required Public Health safety protocols, to allocate funding during Final Changes the amount of ongoing funding needed in FY 2021-2022 to address the restoration of park recreation programming, pools, and lakes staffing as described above, and at the same level of service provided in FY 2020-2021.

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3. Direct the Director of Parks and Recreation and the Chief Executive Officer, in collaboration with other Departments, and with consideration of the required Public Health safety protocols, to identify and allocate funding as a priority during Final Changes the amount of ongoing funding needed in FY 2021-2022 to address the restoration of Parks After Dark program for summer 2021.

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