



MEMORANDUM

TO: Mayor and City Council Members

THRU: Shannon Jones, Interim Assistant City Manager

FROM: Kimberly A. McNeeley, M.Ed., CPRP, Director
Austin Parks and Recreation Department 

DATE: February 22, 2021

SUBJECT: Budget Rider 14 Park Rangers Update

This memo serves as a report specific to the City Council's Budget Rider 14 direction. As you will recall, Budget Rider 14 directed the Parks and Recreation Department to reimagine the roles and responsibilities for Park Rangers. While the Parks and Recreation Department's work was directed to occur separately, it was also simultaneous to City staff reimagining public safety efforts to align with the Fiscal Year 2021 budget. City Council directed Parks and Recreation staff to consider:

- A plan to transition from a "parks police" to a "park rangers" model.
- What additional citation authority rangers can be granted to ensure public compliance with city ordinances.
- Training for de-escalation methods in interacting with the public.
- Other training and responsibility considerations as necessary.

Recommendations

In context with the summary details provided in this memo and in cooperation with park stakeholders, the following recommendations are made in response to Budget Rider 14 to address public safety while ensuring a welcoming, educational atmosphere within the park system.

1. Transitioning from Parks Police to a Park Ranger model has effectively been completed. The Police Department re-allocated its Park Police Unit to general patrol in January 2021. Park Rangers and the Police Department will no longer be connected via radio channel or shared office space. Park Rangers are to call 911 for needed assistance. The loss of connection to public safety authorities was a concern when evaluating providing ticketing authority to the Park Rangers. Any safety focused illegal activity will need to stay with the Police Department.
2. In lieu of increased citation authority, the Department recommends a Notification Process. A Notification Process is defined as issuing a warning document notifying which ordinance or park rule needs to be followed accompanied by an educational conversation. Notifications will not be an increase in authority but allow for increased data collection related to non-compliance. A Notification Process will not require an individual to give identifying information and is not punitive in nature but rather educational. *Should this recommendation not be accepted, the requirements to increase Park Ranger citation authority is outlined below.*

3. Park Ranger de-escalation training and other recommended applicable Park Ranger specific training will be completed by April 30, 2021.
4. Improve data tracking and analysis of park non-compliance behaviors to consider park use opportunities. For instance, dog off-leash data can help inform future off-leash park need discussions both internally and with the public.
5. Consider increase in the number of Park Rangers to facilitate success. This can be through eliminating an existing program or service currently offered by the Parks and Recreation Department or authorizing an increase in general fund budget. Currently 21 Park Rangers provide coverage seven days a week for 303 parks comprised of 17,000 acres across 271.8 square miles with highly visible responsibilities including:
 - a. Voluntary compliance with general park regulations throughout parks, trail systems and remote greenbelt spaces,
 - b. Addressing the needs of individuals experiencing homelessness and associated encampments,
 - c. Addressing parking violations,
 - d. Park system interpretive programming and
 - e. Year-round Park Ranger Cadet program/training.

The Parks and Recreation Department recognizes reimagining public safety involves many facets of City operations and engagement with the community. This memo completes the response related to Budget Rider 14. With that said, the Department will continue to engage in the reimagining public safety conversation as it relates to operations within the City's park system. The Parks and Recreation Department is currently working with the Reimagining Public Safety Taskforce on a potential pilot notification effort to improve the process.

Summary details related to the recommendations are outlined below. Should you have any questions, please contact my office at (512) 974-6717.

Park Ranger History

In November 1968, the first Park Ranger was added to Parks and Recreation Department. This Ranger was hired to promote the enjoyment of all City parks and facilities, to offer park visitors a sense of security and tranquility, and to enforce all policies, rules, and regulations pertaining to the City-owned land and facilities under Department jurisdiction. By May 1970, the Park Rangers had 10 total full-time rangers. This group patrolled Lake Austin Park, Town Lake, Decker Lake, Zilker Park, and all other PARD neighborhood parks, playgrounds, recreation centers, and golf courses. In these patrol areas the Park Rangers had the same authority as the Austin Police Department. The job title of Park Ranger transitioned to Park Police.

In the decades between 1970 and 2008, the Park Police supervisory structure transitioned between City Departments and ultimately became a part of the Austin Police Department (APD) organizational structure. As a part of APD, Park police officers are commissioned peace officers with duties and responsibilities consistent with APD police officers. In 2008, Austin City Council authorized the creation of Parks and Recreation Department Park Rangers to supplement the duties and responsibilities of the Park Police. Park Rangers are not commissioned peace officers.

Current Park Rangers

The Park Rangers serve as ambassadors for the park system by cultivating stewardship, promoting responsible recreation, and preserving Austin’s cultural, natural, and historic resources. There are currently 21 Park Rangers. The Park Ranger Team works seven days a week. Currently Park Rangers do not have ticketing authority, with the exception of issuing parking tickets.

All Park Rangers receive training as certified interpretive guides and at least 60 hours of additional training in safety, de-escalation, GIS, park rules, and visitor interactions.

Park Rangers visit parks to walk trails, speak with visitors, ask for voluntary compliance and in response to concerns raised by the public. Fiscal Year 2020 included assisting with park closures due to COVID-19. Over the last three years, one of the most common requests for voluntary compliance by the Park Rangers was regarding dogs off-leash. Park Rangers are also the main support infrastructure in working with people experiencing homelessness on parkland. They work to connect individuals to services, educate about fire safety and trash, and seek voluntary compliance when appropriate for individuals to find a legal place to camp.

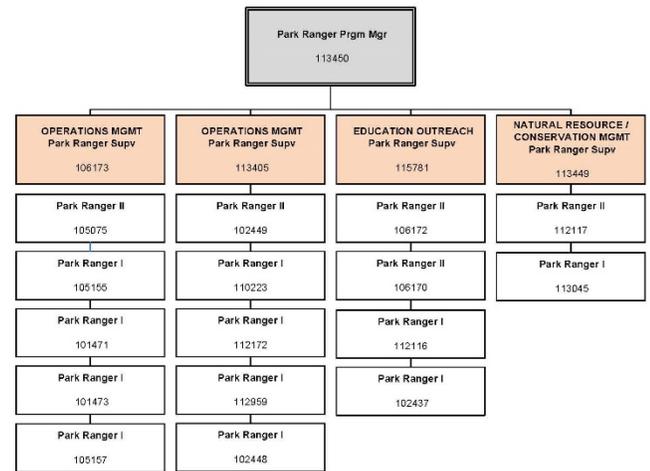
The Parks and Recreation Department has had partnership agreements with APD since 2011 that clarify roles, resources, and responsibilities. In 2017, Park Rangers made efforts to look at their overall mission and focus on the educational side of voluntary compliance and ultimately behavior change. These efforts included softening the uniform to have a patch with nature elements including a trail and river focus and a badge with a nature focus while shifting pants and jackets to green tan in color. There was also a training shift away from Police Department instructors. Pepper spray training was made optional, curriculum was standardized, and the training program was formalized. Park Rangers can carry pepper spray if they complete the voluntary pepper spray training.

Research

The Parks and Recreation Department conducted extensive research related to rule compliance methodology, inclusive of the effectiveness of citations. As summary of the research is below.

A literature analysis – focused on rule compliance, enforcement efforts and Park Ranger programs in other municipalities – found that a variety of different methods are needed to be effective. Overall, the research suggests that **no one method will be effective on its own. A combination of multiple methods, combined with an adaptive management approach, is needed to have a significant effect on changing people’s beliefs and behaviors.**

Seeking voluntary **rule compliance is dependent on a cost and benefits assessment.** The economics of crime paradigm (Becker, 1968) states that human behaviors are driven in large part by their overall assessment of costs and benefits. Leave No Trace, a methodology currently used by Park Rangers, teaches the cost and benefits of behaviors to gain voluntary compliance. Speaking to individuals and providing an explanation that focuses on the resource (trees, water, wildlife, flowers, etc.) and the effects of the observed behavior on the natural resource itself helps patrons understand the cost and benefit of their behavior on the precious resource.



Research suggests that **rule compliance is motivated through peer pressure and trust**. “A lack of trust in the governing agency has been shown to lead to higher rates of non-compliance and, in relation, if the agency’s enforcement ability and/or practices are viewed as ineffective or weak, non-compliance is also more likely” (Pendleton, Michael R. December 1, 1998). An important tool to gain voluntary compliance is social pressure. Shame in the eyes of one’s peers has been shown to encourage greater compliance than pride. For example, “feeling that you’ve gone against social norms is a stronger driving factor for gaining voluntary compliance than feeling good about protecting the environment or one’s shared natural resources” (Barrett, D. W., Wosinska, W., Butner, J., Petrova, P., Gornik-Durose, M., & Cialdini, R. B. July, 2004) Any path forward to encouraging rule compliance will need to have a foundation in trust.

Research also suggests, persuasion may be an effective tool to gain rule compliance. By way of example, interpretive signs stating a behavior is harmful may be more effective than signs simply stating that the behavior is not allowed (O’Keefe, Daniel J. January 26, 2013).

Research of six cities similar to Austin found that the majority with Park Ranger programs did provide the ability for Park Rangers to issue citations. By way of example, the City of Portland takes a multiple method approach related to dogs off-leash.

- Based upon non-compliance data, specific low compliance parks are selected for targeted intervention.
- Build trust through one on one interactions to educate cost and benefits of behavior.
- Build trust through leash giveaways to ensure patron has needed equipment to comply.
- Write citations if needed.

(Dietsch, A., Gavin, M., Teel, T., Leong, K. M., & Clarke, M. M. February, 2016).

While there is not any single effort that has been proven effective in parks, research does show that a variety of regular and consistent actions are needed to be effective in the long-term. **The research suggests an effective approach to rule compliance is rooted in education and trust building**

Citation Authority

Currently, Park Rangers have not been designated the authority to issue citations other than parking tickets on parkland. Parking tickets are issued by ticketing a vehicle not an individual. Ticketing an individual comes with safety concerns. Park Rangers could be put in a dangerous situation when asking for park visitors to provide identification, as required for citation issuance. Examples of dangerous situations from January 2020 to January 2021 include physical attacks, threats of assault with a weapon, verbal abuse, and general disorderly conduct. Commissioned APD Officers are empowered with additional enforcement tools beyond citation authority that would not be afforded to Parks Rangers.

To date citation efforts have been coordinated with the Police Department for dog off-leash violations and other illegal activity.

Park Rangers are employees of the City of Austin and act under the direction of the Parks and Recreation Director. Accordingly, Park Rangers do not have any of the special arrest authorities afforded to peace officers under the Code of Criminal Procedure (e.g., peace officers may make warrantless arrests of any person who commits virtually any offense in their view or presence). Any authority Park Rangers have to issue citations is derived from their status as City employees and from the City Code.

- Section 1-3-2 of the City Code gives department directors the ability to issue citations requiring recipients to appear in Municipal Court.
 - A director may issue a citation if the director reasonably believes that the person has engaged in conduct that violates “a law or ordinance the director is responsible for enforcing.”

- Section 1-3-3 permits a director to designate the authority to issue citations to employees who:
 - 1) are in the director's department; and
 - 2) complete a training program approved by the director.

If proposed code amendments focused specifically on parks, the director would be responsible for enforcing them, and could delegate authority to Park Rangers to issue citations for violations.

While Park Ranger safety is essential, also central to the role of Park Rangers is applying the lens of racial justice/racial equity. Implicit biases are real, and any ticketing authority must consider the impacts to the whole community. Ticketing is a punitive approach and can be an intimidation tactic in contrast to efforts to make parks welcoming to all.

Current Park Ranger Training

A review of Park Ranger training was completed in Fiscal Year 2020 to determine needs and improvements. The following topics are part of the training curriculum:

- 60 hours of job specific orientation training,
- Monthly real-life scenario review to discuss mental health considerations/best practices, situational awareness and how to apply a community-equity driven approach.
- De-escalation techniques, and
- Mental health first aid.

In addition, Park Rangers attended the Undoing Racism training in the past year.

cc: Spencer Cronk, City Manager
Nuria Rivera-Vandermyde, Deputy City Manager
Rey Arellano, Assistant City Manager
Chief Brian Manley, Austin Police Chief

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