June 27, 2025

Subject: City of Austin Parks and Recreation Funding

Dear Mayor Watson, Mayor Pro Fuentes, Council Members, and City Manager T.C. Broadnax,

My name is Rich DePalma and I am fortunate enough to call many of you friends and I appreciate the work that every single one of you do for our city.

Over the past 17 years, I have had the privilege of serving our community as a member of the Austin Parks Foundation Board, TreeFolks Board, and the City's Parks and Recreation Board. On the parks board I served for seven and a half years as former Mayor Steve Adler's appointment. I currently serve on the legislative committee for the Texas Recreation and Parks Society and have presented on parks funding at both the state and national level. In the past, I have also testified to the State Legislature on behalf of our park system when it was under attack. Throughout my service, I've been deeply engaged in exploring long-term, sustainable funding strategies for the Austin Parks and Recreation Department (PARD) and that is why I am emailing you today.

The Utility Fee Proposal

I understand there is current consideration of a parks maintenance utility fee. I support this effort, and all initiatives to bolster funding for parks and recreation but urge you not to view it as a comprehensive solution. A utility fee was explored in prior years, and while helpful, the revenue it would generate is unlikely to even cover annual inflationary increases. Doing quick projections, it seems like it would raise an amount comparable to what Barton Springs and Deep Eddy Pool contribute annually through swim fees, helpful, but modest. It would not be a systemic solution. I'm sure that it was not intended to be so but I want reinforce that message.

Austin's Longstanding Parks Funding Deficit

During the past 35 to 40 years, Austin's investment in its parks system has consistently lagged behind the pace of population growth, aging infrastructure, and growing community needs. While annual funding has nominally increased, it has not kept pace with the true cost of service.

Having reviewed decades of City budget data, the pattern is clear: Parks and recreation, though beloved by residents, are among the first areas to be trimmed when budgets tighten, with promises to "catch up" following the next economic recovery, bond measure, or major capital project. A past regression analysis of City budgets over time, included variables such as inflation and population growth, showed a persistent reduction that was only exacerbated during specific times of rising costs and land values or lower tax collections.

In 2021, I presented to the PARD Finance Committee a long-term solution involving a dedicated parks district, originally discussed in the context of the fiscal constraints introduced by Senate Bill 2 (2019). At the time, I believed such a district would not become politically viable for roughly 20 years, when underfunding would became critical. However, with the passage of House Bill 1526 (2023), coupled with declining sales tax revenues and slowing land appraisal growth, has dramatically accelerated that timeline.

The Funding Gap: Quantified

A recent consultant analysis confirms that PARD has operated with a persistent structural deficit. For FY2026, PARD faces a 5% ($5.7 million) reduction in general fund support, an immediate hole

just to maintain current service levels. PARD has requested an additional $28.2 million for ongoing and one-time operating expenses, and $8 million in deferred maintenance funds, totaling $36.2 million. Over the past five years, PARD has requested an average of $17.5 million annually in additional support, but typically receives just $3.8 million, leaving an average annual deficit of $13.8 million.

Further, a 2024 Council-commissioned maintenance staffing report revealed a service-level shortfall equivalent to 2014 staffing, with a current gap of 16 full-time employees (FTEs) just to maintain that decade-old level of service. Servicing today's expanded park inventory at a higher level would require 57 additional FTEs, at a cost of roughly $4.8 million in recurring expenses.

All told, the department's annual operating funding gap now stands at approximately $46.7 million.

How Austin Compares

According to the Trust for Public Land's (TPL) 2025 PARKscore, Austin spends $229 per capita on parks—about average for the 100 largest U.S. cities. Yet our PARKscore ranking dropped from 44th to 54th between 2024 and 2025. To eventually align with top-tier cities, Austin would need to spend between $324 and $666 per capita to catch up before being able to reduce spending to match current funding of top-tier cities. With a population of 1,025,668, this means our parks system would require $332 million to $683 million annually in combined capital and operating funding—far beyond current levels and indicating a gap of $120 million to $471 million per year.

Realistically, to begin closing this gap and align more closely with peer cities, Austin must increase annual operating funding by $30 to $60 million and capital funding by $40 to $60 million. Under our current limitations brought on by the state, only a park district may have the political ability to generate funding to meet our City's park and recreation needs. You may wish to also consult with national park and recreation funding expert, Dr. John Crompton of Texas A&M, I believe he will come to the same conclusion.

There are hard decisions to be made but you are today's stewards of our park and recreation system. A system built on the investments of generations before us.

Thank you for your leadership and commitment to a more livable Austin.

Sincerely,

Rich DePalma
District 8 Resident and Austin Parks Geek

Additional Information That May be Helpful

What is the purpose of Austin's Park and Recreation System?

Is the purpose to accommodate the loudest voices and highest hands at a community meeting who want more of what they already have, generate economic activity, address needs of community members that are not being met within the park and recreation system, and/or move the needle on community wellness?

Is Austin really behind?

We are behind when compared to top cities. We are behind in both access to facilities and programming.

Here is a limited example showing the difference of access to facilties between Cincinnati, OH (TPL Rank #4) against Austin (TPL Rank #54). To create the access to recreation facilities like Cincinnati or any of the top ranked cities, would require massive capital improvement funding.

.	Cinncinatti	Austin
Basketball Hoops	9.1 per 10,000 people	2.3 per 10,000 people
Dog Parks	1.6 per 100,000 people	1.3 per 100,000 people
Playgrounds	47.6 per 10,000 children	10.1 per 10,000 people
Bathrooms	3.1 per 10,000 people	1.1 per 10,000 people
Rec & Senior Centers	1.5 per 20,000 people	.5 per 20,000 people
Sports Fields	6.1 per 10,000 people	1 per 10,000 people
Spashpads	21.8 per 100,000 children	5.1 per 100,000 children
Persons Under 5	6.3%	5.4%
Persons under 18	20.8%	18.3%
Persons over 65	13.2%	10.1%

Improving our access to programming. There are over 120 types of programming that focuses on community wellness, some are traditional programs and some are more holistic. Traditional programming is what you expect - summer camps, after-school programs, art and photography, dance, barre, spin, row, kickboxing, yoga, other types of exercise, gardening, and some support groups.

Additional recreation/wellness programming has expanded in recent years to include sound therapy, diabetes management, cooking classes, smoking cessation programs, health coaching, senior balance and strength training, mindfulness and meditation training, financial planning, debt/sleep/time management, and many other programs to impact the mental, physical, social, and financial wellness of the community.

Here is an example of where we stack up on programming and overall spend against some of the top 100 cities. I've intentionally left out cities with extremely high spending (such as Washington DC, San Francisco, Boulder) knowing that it isn't reasonable for Austin. However, you will notice the cities below are different sizes, different percentage

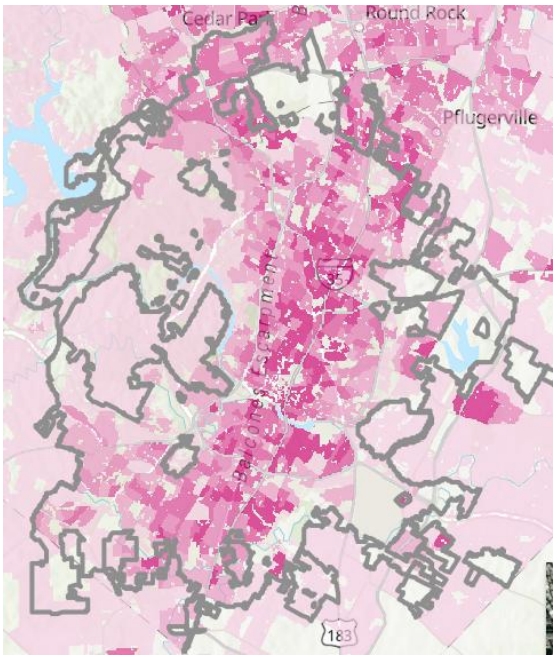
of parkland and different way they spend their dollars. The common theme - they make an investment in programming and/ spaces.

City	TPL Rank	% of City that is Parkland	Total Per Resident Spending	Programming Spend Per Resident	Maintenance/Admin Spend Per Resident	CIP Spend Per Resident
Chicago, IL	11	9%	$261	$46	$181	$34
Cinncinnati, OH	4	17%	$257	$124	$66	$67
St Paul	5	16%	$262	$60	$120	$82
Portland, OR	9	16%	$281	$68	$148	$65
Minneapolis, MN	3	15%	$331	$119	$146	$66
Seattle, WA	8	13%	$406	$86	$191	$129
Frisco, TX	37	5%	$257	$41	$70	$146
Austin	54	9%	$229	$80	$83	$66

Why are Investments Needed?

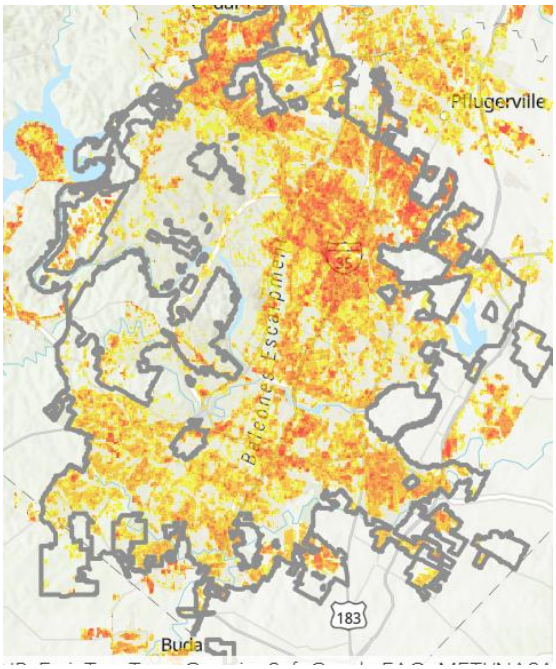
Other important data points for you on Austin's Park and Recreation System and our residents. The spatial analysis was done using the Trust for Public Land's ParkServe spatial analysis tool.

Population Density - Highest % the Darker the Pink

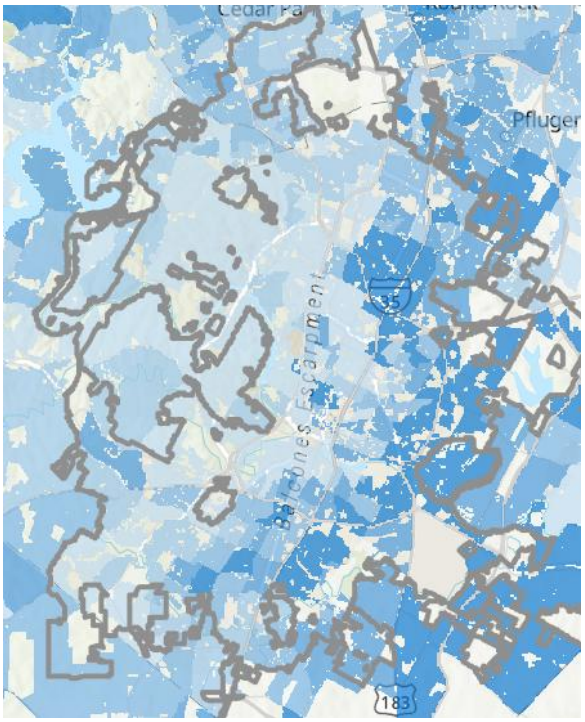


Low-Income Households – Highest % the Darker the Pink

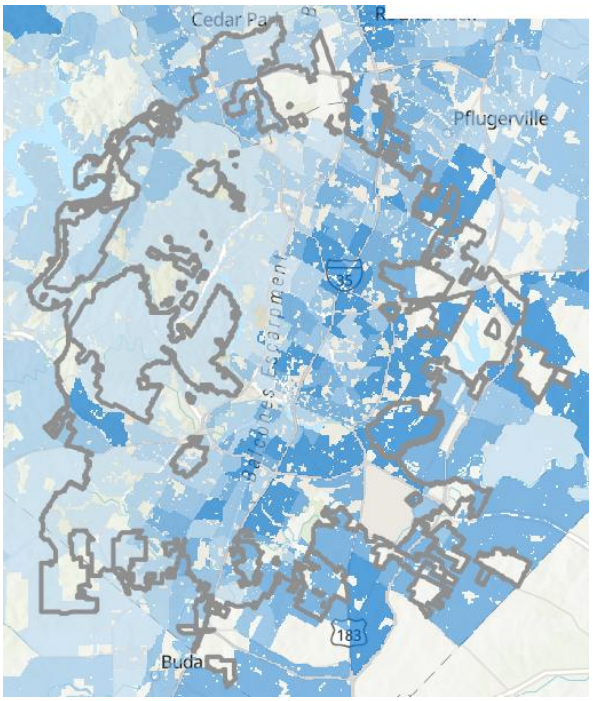
Heat Island - Highest % the Darker the Orange



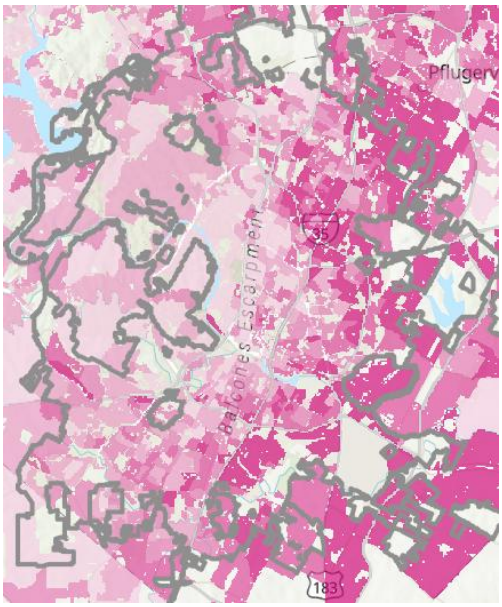
Physical Inactivity - Highest % the Darker the Blue



Poor Mental Health - Highest % the Darker the Blue

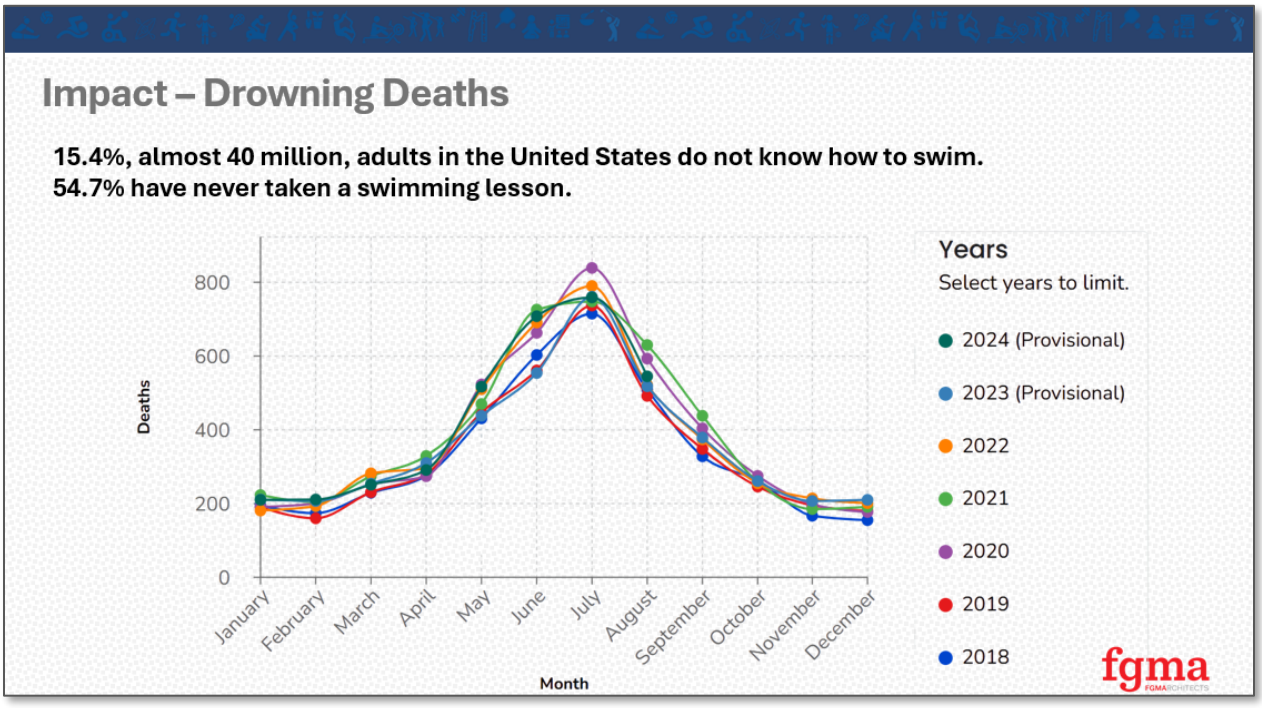


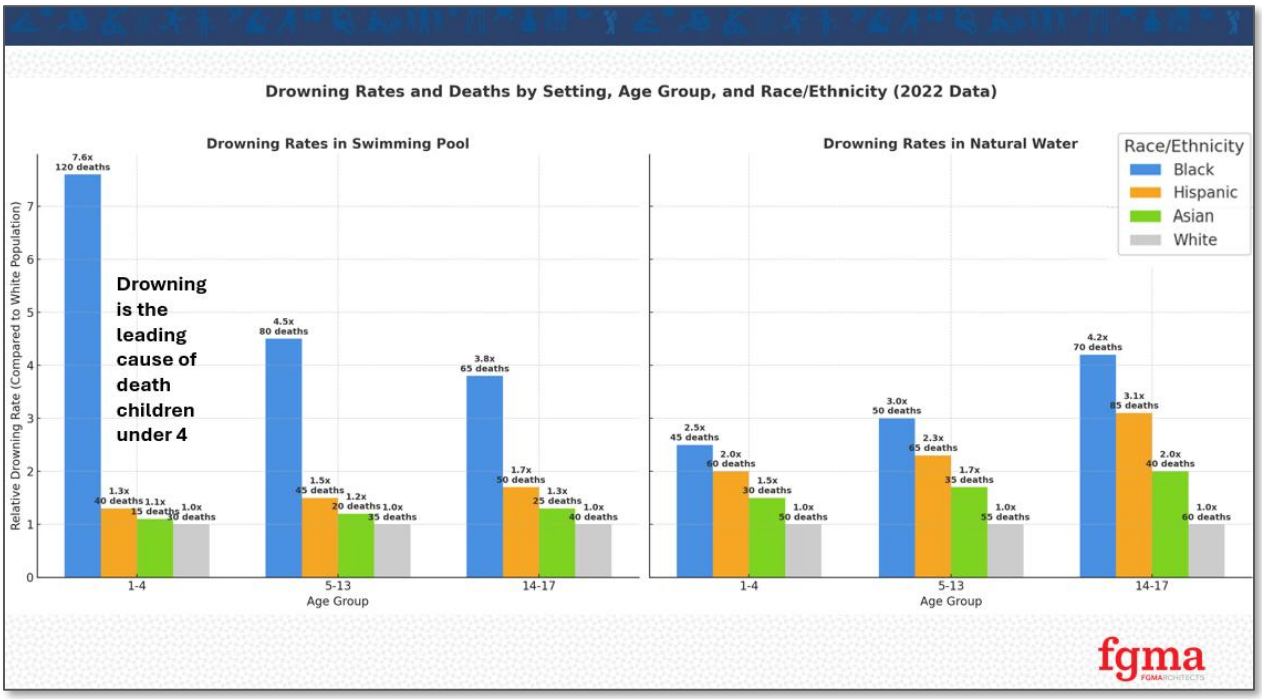
People of Color – Highest % the Darker the Pink



The Need for Pools

Fact - no one has ever really learned how to swim at a splash pad. Here are two slides I prepared as part of a recent presentation to the National Recreation and Park Ethnic Minority Society conference. I'm happy to send a link to both the presentations I did at the conference.




Drowning Rates and Deaths by Setting, Age Group, and Race/Ethnicity (2022 Data)
Drowning Rates in Swimming Pool
Drowning Rates in Natural Water
Relative Drowning Rate (Compared to White Population)
Drowning is the leading cause of death children under 4
Race/Ethnicity
Black
Hispanic
Asian
White
7.6x 120 deaths
1.3x 40 deaths
1.1x 15 deaths
1.0x 30 deaths
4.5x 80 deaths
1.5x 45 deaths
1.2x 20 deaths
1.0x 35 deaths
3.8x 65 deaths
1.7x 50 deaths
1.3x 25 deaths
1.0x 40 deaths
2.5x 45 deaths
2.0x 60 deaths
1.5x 30 deaths
1.0x 50 deaths
3.0x 50 deaths
2.3x 65 deaths
1.7x 35 deaths
1.0x 55 deaths
4.2x 70 deaths
3.1x 85 deaths
2.0x 40 deaths
1.0x 60 deaths
1-4
5-13
14-17
Age Group
fgma