

**MARICOPA COUNTY PARKS AND RECREATION DEPARTMENT**  
**PARKS AND RECREATION COMMISSION MEETING**  
Regular Meeting of August 15, 2023

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**LOCATION:** Usery Regional Park, Nature Center, 3939 N. Usery Pass Rd. Mesa, AZ 85207.

**COMMISSION MEMBERS PRESENT:** Eric Mears, John Crane, Robert Branch, Shelby Scharbach, and Isabel Chavez

**COMMISSION MEMBERS ABSENT:** Megha Budruk, Jack Stapley

**STAFF PRESENT:** R.J. Cardin, Director; Donna Southard and Priscella Luera, Recorders; Jennifer Waller, Assistant Director; Aimee Upton, Administrator; and Betsy Pregulman, Deputy Maricopa County Attorney

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The official correspondence and staff recommendations contained in this Commission folder are hereby entered as supportive material to the official minutes of the August 15, 2023, Parks and Recreation Commission regular meeting.

**PARKS AND RECREATION COMMISSION REGULAR MEETING**

**ITEM #1 – CALL TO ORDER – Shelby Scharbach, Chair, Maricopa County Parks and Recreation Commission**

- The regular meeting was called to order at 10:03 a.m.

**ITEM #2 – ROLL CALL – Roll Call taken - a quorum was present**

**ITEM #3 – PLEDGE OF ALLEGIANCE**

**ITEM #4 – Employee Service Awards – R.J. Cardin, Director, Maricopa County Parks and Recreation Department**

- Brian Clancy (10 years) received his employee service award.

**ITEM #5 – CONSULTATION FOR LEGAL ADVICE REGARDING PROPOSED COMMISSION BYLAWS AMENDMENT. THE COMMISSION MAY VOTE TO CONVENE IN EXECUTIVE SESSION TO DISCUSS THIS MATTER PURSUANT TO A.R.S. § 38-431.03(A)93) – Shelby Scharbach, Chair, Maricopa County Parks and Recreation Commission**

- Commissioner Branch made a motion to move into an Executive Session to receive legal advice. Seconded by Commissioner Mears. With all in favor, none opposed, the motion passed. The regular meeting convened at 10:06 a.m.

Commissioner Chavez arrived at 10:10 a.m.

The regular meeting convened at 10:16 a.m.

**ITEM #6 – DIRECTOR’S SUMMARY OF CURRENT EVENTS – R.J. Cardin, Director, Maricopa County Parks and Recreation Department**

- Director Cardin informed the Commission that Maricopa County Parks and Recreation received two awards from the National Association of County Park and Recreation Officials (NACPRO): Outstanding Volunteer for Gayland Lockridge’s 28 years of service at Estrella Regional Park; and the Spur Cross Ranch Conservation Area Land Acquisition Conservation Award. An award was also received from NACo for the Greater Gila River Corridor Project at Estrella Regional Park.
- Director Cardin informed the Commission that total visitation numbers for Fiscal Year 2023 reached nearly 3 million visitors including park visitation and concessionaire visitors.

- Commissioner Mears thanked the Parks team and encouraged them to go after more awards. The awards are a great public recognition for the team and further justifies expenses for the Parks.
- Commissioner Chavez gave recognition to the individual staff at the parks for their foresight to what the public needs and for their hard work.

**ITEM #7 – Review and Discussion of the Proposal to Amend Maricopa County Parks and Recreation Advisory Commission Bylaws – Betsy Pregulman, Deputy Maricopa County Attorney, Maricopa County Attorney’s Office and R.J. Cardin, Director, Maricopa County Parks and Recreation Department**

- Ms. Pregulman briefly reviewed the changes to sections 5 and 6 under Article III regarding attendance and the new concept of “Commissioner Emeritus” to recognize those serving 10 or more years as a Commissioner. After a member is no longer active, they would retain this title and be able to serve on committees as well as attend and provide input at all public Commission meetings.
- Director Cardin recognized Mr. Mears for leading the subcommittee, and Dr. Branch, Mr. Crane, and Ms. Pregulman for their hard work and dedication to update the bylaws.

**ITEM #8 – Parks Vision 2030 System Master Plan Update – R.J. Cardin, Director, Maricopa County Parks and Recreation Department**

- Director Cardin provided an overview of chapter five (findings and recommendations) of the draft Master Plan. Five priority areas were identified with each containing goals, objects, and a series of strategies to meet the goals. In addition, the Executive Summary will be ready within the next couple of weeks to provide a high-level overview of the plan.
- Priority 1: Enhance community health and well-being by promoting the Regional Park system. There are three goals: promoting the park system; expanding open space and trail experiences for underserved communities; and improving physical fitness and mental health programs and amenities.
- Priority 2: Reinvest, protect, and continue to improve the existing park system. There are five goals: expand visitor capacity and recreational opportunities through new and revised park master plans; continue to develop, maintain, and renovate park infrastructure and facilities; promote and expand the trail system as a nature-based recreation opportunity and alternative regional transportation system; refine and standardize park operations using best practices and models; and attract and retain quality staff to ensure a high level of park programming, preservation, and management.
- Priority 3: Acquire and manage new parklands and wildlife corridors to stay ahead of growth. This priority is an important part of looking out for the next 50 and 100 years by identifying what we have and what we need for future generations. The two goals identified are to protect critical open space and expand the park and trail system proportionately with the population growth; and refine and prioritize linear parks and connected landscapes. In the next 10 years, Parks will work with the Bureau of Land Management and the Forest Service to acquire new park sites (Verde River, New River Mesa, Buckeye Hills expansion, and Saddle Mountain). Commissioner Mears inquired if urban parks should also be included. Director Cardin stated that Parks have left the cities to plan and care for urban area parks and the County has focused on the outer open spaces. Commissioner Mears expressed his concern that won’t happen and that the master plan is focusing on access to connect the people to parks. Director Cardin said that Parks will focus on the river corridors as a means of access. This will be done through partnerships with the cities. Commissioner Chavez inquired about what authority does the County have over river bottom areas. Director Cardin stated that if it is within an incorporated area, Parks has no jurisdiction over it. Opportunities to partner with Maricopa County Flood Control District on lands they own to develop amenities much like Adobe Dam Park are the best option. Park staff also participates in city master plan updates to connect resources such as the Maricopa Trail with their future plans. Chair Scharbach inquired if any partnerships with area cities are already in place with Parks. Director Cardin said that there are intergovernmental agreements already in place with the Town of Cave Creek, the cities of Phoenix, Peoria, Buckeye, Goodyear, and Avondale for the Maricopa Trail access/maintenance and for the cities to utilize our parks for their programming. Future agreements may come with the Town of Queen Creek and the City of Surprise. Further into the future, other areas identified include Horseshoe Lake, Seven Springs, Verde River, and Painted Rocks, along with the Table Mesa Area, the Harquahala, Hummingbird Springs, and the Big Horn Mountains. Commissioner Mears appreciated the high-level plan containing

specific identified areas. Director Cardin stated that “planting a flag in the ground” and naming the sites helps to build synergy and identify the area in future plans. Commissioner Chavez asked to also identify river corridor areas in the plan to help hold partners accountable for cleaning up and maintaining these areas. Commissioner Branch inquired if Parks could use the same concept as the Maricopa Trail in developing committees/groups in the development of the river corridors. Director Cardin informed the Commission that a couple of groups have already been started; the Rio Reimagined group is meeting to reestablish the Gila River Corridor. Commissioner Chavez asked for a future update on the Rio Reimagined group’s work. Director Cardin will add a presentation to a future meeting agenda.

- Priority 4: Leadership in conservation and preservation for our future. The two goals include the development and implementation of the Natural Resources Plan and to provide leadership in balanced, economically efficient land use patterns and infrastructure to promote long-term growth while maintaining a high quality of life. This includes developing individual park natural resource plans and continued work with the White Tank Mountain Conservancy and the City of Scottsdale in establishing wildlife corridors. Commissioner Branch inquired if additional access points will be made available to the parks as growth surrounds the park borders. Director Cardin affirmed that will be included in the updated individual park master plans similar to the newly updated White Tank Park master plan.
- Priority 5: Developing sustainable and diversified funding sources is critical. There are seven goals listed: identify and promote a diversified and sustainable funding portfolio to acquire, develop, and renovate existing and new parklands, corridors, and trails; continue to conduct quality research and visitor surveys to ensure quality control of the park’s efforts to attract new and maintain current visitors; update Park User Fees to cover 100% of park operations; develop sustainable funding sources for natural resources restoration, cultural protection, and conservation both in the parks and at a regional level; contribute to the regional economy by promoting recreational opportunities that support economic development and tourism; evaluate operations and cost containments, and; evaluate Parks’ opportunities to develop revenue-generating business opportunities. A menu of funding source options has been developed for the Board of Supervisors to consider. Parks’ operation budget is currently operating in a self-sustaining manner through user and concession fees. Another budgeted area, conservation, is a future budget item to take care of land and resources. The plan is proposing that this future budget would not be funded through user fees, but through County funding as a long-term investment similar to capital improvement funding. Non-preservation or passive recreational parklands may provide opportunities to grow revenue streams that supports the long-term financial stability of park operations.
- Director Cardin reviewed the tentative schedule to approve and adopt the master plan.
- Chair Scharbach inquired how long ago was the last master plan updated. Director Cardin informed the commissioners that the last plan was approved in 2009 and before that was 1965 with a plan to have regular updates every ten to fifteen years. Commissioner Chavez thanked everyone who worked on the plan update by making sure that the community’s needs were put first for future generations. Commissioner Crane appreciated the efforts to obtain the public and stakeholders’ input.

**ITEM #9 – Diamond Fire Briefing and Mitigation Plan – Steven Heinsma, McDowell Park Supervisor, and Juanita Armstrong, Natural Resource Specialist, Maricopa County Parks and Recreation Department**

- Director Cardin recognized staff for their quick action and thanked them for their proactiveness during and after the Diamond Fire within McDowell Park.
- Mr. Heinsma informed the commission that the Diamond fire started around 5 p.m. on June 27 in a development adjacent to the McDowell Sonoran Preserve. The fire burned fast and hot to the east with a multi-agency response led by the City of Scottsdale. Staff was on site shortly to assess the situation and initiate the Wildland Fire Plan; Scottsdale and the Maricopa County Sheriff’s (MCSO) ordered the park to be evacuated. Mr. Heinsma states that five campers were displaced and relocated to other Parks. MCSO secured the main park entrance; all remote entrances were closed; Rangers Steve and Eric responded to the park to evacuate all critters; and moveable assets were relocated to 4 Peaks.
- State Fire took over Tuesday night and Hot Shot crews secured the fire’s perimeter overnight. Park access and service roads greatly assisted the firefighters. The fire burned 1,960 acres most of which were within the park. The park reopened on July 5 and trails within the burn area were cleared of hazards and reopened on July 6.

- Ms. Armstrong did an overview of the effects the fire had and the protocols they used to assess the damage. A team from Maricopa County's Office of Enterprise Technology/Geographical Information Systems (GIS) Department, the City of Scottsdale, and Parks used the post-fire assessment protocols established in 2020 to develop a strategy for monitoring. She explained the type of monitoring they completed called Transect Monitoring which included drone imaging and photo plots. Ms. Armstrong went over invasive species and their effect on how the fire burns. She emphasized the importance of removing invasive species to protect the Sonoran Desert native species.
- Commissioner Mears questioned if they would just come back when trying to get rid of the invasive species. Ms. Armstrong responded that treating them with a preemergent will prevent the plants from being able to reproduce.
- Chair Scharbach inquired when the last fire within McDowell Park had occurred. Ms. Armstrong replied that the Rio Fire occurred in 1995 and some of that burn area was also part of the Diamond Fire burn area.
- Commissioner Crane asked if the technology used in the Cave Creek Park fire in 2020 was used for the Diamond Fire or if this is all new technology. Ms. Armstrong explained that monitoring is still occurring at Cave Creek and that additional use of drones has since been added.
- Commissioner Branch asked what experience or training staff has when a fire occurs to ensure their safety. Director Cardin responded that after the Diamond Fire, staff held a post-fire assessment meeting to review the events. Each park already has its own fire plan protocols and after those are implemented in the event of a fire, Parks takes directions from the fire department who takes the lead in emergency operations. Parks is also working with the Maricopa County Department of Transportation (MCDOT) to identify a secondary exit from each park.
- Commissioner Mears questioned if there was an insurance file claimed to recoup costs incurred by Parks and the County. Director Cardin responded that a claim had been filed the day after the fire was put out and the County's Risk Management has taken over. Data collected from the post-fire assessment will be used to quantify the losses.

**ITEM #10 – Parks Volunteer Program Briefing – Bill Klewer, Volunteer Coordinator, Maricopa County Parks and Recreation Department**

- Mr. Klewer provided an overview of the goals of the volunteer program, the different types of positions available, and the requirements and benefits of volunteering. Mr. Klewer shared the various ways the department recruits and advertises volunteer opportunities through the Park's website and social media accounts. Contacts have been developed with various community partners in both the corporate and public sectors for company events and special days of service. One innovative way to support Parks is through the Community Restitution Program which provided 3,461 hours of service completed in 716 shifts by probationers in FY23.
- Mr. Klewer gave an overview of the volunteer statistics which showed a total of 98,035 recorded hours for fiscal year 2023 with a financial impact of over \$2.9M. He explained that Park Host hours make up 90% of the total hours worked. Mr. Klewer invited the Commissioners to the volunteer appreciation luncheons held at the end of the season.
- Commissioner Chavez supports partnering with the juvenile program and suggests including some kind of educational program to teach participants why their efforts are important. Commissioner Branch inquired if more volunteers are needed. Mr. Klewer responded that if there were more host sites available, he would have enough applications to fill those spots. Additional Community Volunteers are needed to help cover the entry stations. Director Cardin informed the Commission that an additional six host sites are being built.

**ITEM #11 – Desert Defenders Program Update – Juanita Armstrong, Natural Resource Specialist, Maricopa County Parks and Recreation Department**

- Ms. Armstrong informed the Commissioners that more volunteers are needed for the Desert Defenders Program.
- Ms. Armstrong explained that the Desert Defender Program works under the umbrella of the Central Arizona Conservation Alliance (CAZCA). The program consists of invasive species mapping and removal, native seed harvest collection, Seed Bomb workshops, and deployment events. Mapping data is mostly collected through interns from local universities. The Stewardship Program is a new opportunity this year

to lead volunteers in invasive species removal and seed harvest events. In 2023, over 1.3 million invasive plants were removed totaling 5,600 pounds. Steps are being developed to use herbicide in cleared areas to prevent regrowth of invasive species. Ms. Armstrong provided samples of the seed bombs made at a recent workshop. Over 7,000 seed bombs were made using harvested native seeds, clay, and compost. Desert Defenders teamed up with the University of Arizona Cooperative Extension to create the seed bombs. The seed bombs have been deployed in six parks including the burn areas in McDowell, Cave Creek, and White Tank parks. Ms. Armstrong emphasized the importance of getting rid of the Stinknet before it destroys all the native plants.

**ITEM #12 – Set September 19, 2023, Parks Commission Meeting Location – Shelby Scharbach, Chair, Maricopa County Parks and Recreation Commission**

- Commissioner Branch motioned to hold the September meeting at the Desert Outdoor Center, seconded by Commissioner Crane. With all in favor, none opposed, the motion passed.

**ITEM #13 – CALL TO THE PUBLIC**

- None.

**ITEM #14 – CALL TO THE COMMISSION**

- None.

**ITEM #15– ADJOURNMENT**

- There being no further business, Commissioner Mears motioned to adjourn at 12:33 p.m., seconded by Commissioner Chavez. With all in favor, none opposed, the motion passed.

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