

Item 25-0068: Grounds 2024 Annual Report

Parks and Recreation Committee

Mon, Feb 10, 2025 6:15PM

Aldersperson Katie Van Zeeland (District 5) 05:37

All right, we do have some information items this evening. We'll start with 25-0068, the Grounds 2024 Annual report. Do I—should I go ahead and hit the button for this one? The click share button? Yes? Okay, and then I'm sorry, which microphone do you have? District Four. I'll put you back on. There you go. Director Gazza.

Director Dean Gazza (Parks, Recreation, and Facilities) 06:06

I'll say, just a reminder that after the year ends, we come through, we talk—you know, we do our annual report every year about this time, and we like to bring the managers in that oversee the divisions within Park and Recreation. So, Greg Hoekstra starting is the grounds division, and then we have Nikki at recreation and Jeff with the golf course. So yeah, we're excited. This is always a fun time, and they enjoy sharing the successes they had throughout the year. So.

Aldersperson Katie Van Zeeland (District 5) 06:34

We always have such good news. I know we're going to have more tonight.

Director Dean Gazza (Parks, Recreation, and Facilities) 06:37

I would have brought popcorn, but I forgot. Sit back and enjoy.

Aldersperson Katie Van Zeeland (District 5) 06:41

Excellent Go ahead.

Grounds Manager Greg Hoekstra 06:42

Alright, I'm going to start out with the grounds division. We started out the 2024—

Aldersperson Katie Van Zeeland (District 5) 06:47

If you wouldn't mind, can you just put your mic a little closer for the recording?

Grounds Manager Greg Hoekstra 06:51

Alright.

Aldersperson Katie Van Zeeland (District 5) 06:51

Thank you.

Grounds Manager Greg Hoekstra 06:52

Better?

Aldersperson Katie Van Zeeland (District 5) 06:52

Yes.

Grounds Manager Greg Hoekstra 06:53

Alright.

Alderperson Katie Van Zeeland (District 5) 06:53

Thank you.

Grounds Manager Greg Hoekstra 06:54

We started out the 2024 season with three staff vacancies. We had a grounds technician retire. We had a grounds coordinator interested in the position. We interviewed that coordinator. He was a good—we thought he was a good fit for the position, so we promoted him to grounds technician. And we had another grounds coordinator retire and a grounds a grounds coordinator quit. So, we were short three grounds coordinators at the beginning of the season. Interviewed—er posted the positions. Did not get the candidates like we have in the past—the 70-80 applicants—but we did find three good applicants, and they're working out really well. So, we're back up to full strength.

Grounds Manager Greg Hoekstra 07:39

I'm just going to run down some of our projects for the 2024 season. Going to start out with some playgrounds. Lundgaard Park as it continues, the playground went in this season. Also, Green Meadows got a new playground. And Highview Park got a new playground. The playgrounds are kind of a joint job between contractors and my staff. My staff removes the existing playgrounds, excavates the site, put in drain tile, the install—the contractor installs the playground, and then we put in the mulch, timbers around the perimeter, landscaping, stuff like that. So, it's kind of a joint project.

Grounds Manager Greg Hoekstra 08:23

Hardscapes, the Peabody Park roadway was removed and completely repaved this year. Also, some additional some new sidewalk connections to the playground and the pavilion were put in, and a new sidewalk connection to the Pacific Street stairs, which was a nice addition. We also had the Highview trail repaved this year from Brookshire to Mead Street. Another, really, another good project. The rain held it up, stretched it out a little longer than we had hoped, but it ended up being really, really nice results when it was finished.

Grounds Manager Greg Hoekstra 08:57

The lower Telulah trail had some settling on it from a previous paving job. We brought in a contractor to address the big bird bath it was holding in the middle was really a hazard in the winter for ice. They did come and make it smaller, but they created two more bird baths in the process, so we're having them back this spring to address that.

Grounds Manager Greg Hoekstra 09:19

In diamonds six and seven, my staff removed—on diamond six, my staff removed the dugouts and did some excavating around six and seven, and then a contractor came in and poured new dugout slabs for six, new bleacher slabs for six, new bleacher slabs for seven, and a connecting walkway, connecting those that new concrete to the asphalt path that runs through the park, that runs through the ball diamond complex. And we also had concrete raisers in to raise numerous slabs throughout the system.

Grounds Manager Greg Hoekstra 09:53

We had sports courts. We had Peabody, Colony Oaks basketball some cracks filled, some lines touched up. Erb basketball—er Erb tennis, the north court had some moisture problems. My staff installed the drain tile, and we had a contractor come in this summer and repaint the areas that we had to cut the cut open on the court. We did some fencing work at—every year we do a lot of fencing work at various ball diamonds, stuff like that. We had a car drive through the number—field two outfield and lodge itself in the backstop this year. So that was—

Aldersperson Katie Van Zeeland (District 5) 10:31

Was that a new thing?

Grounds Manager Greg Hoekstra 10:33

Yeah that's—

Grounds Manager Greg Hoekstra 10:37

Actually, some car damage at Jones too. A car drove up the ramp and damaged the railing. That was earlier in the year. And just, I think last week, there was a car in the ramp again, but he didn't damage—he didn't damage the rail.

Aldersperson Katie Van Zeeland (District 5) 10:51

Alright.

Grounds Manager Greg Hoekstra 10:51

So, we put, we put up some no vehicle signs.

Aldersperson Katie Van Zeeland (District 5) 10:55

Cut you can tell all those new applicants: every day is an adventure in the grounds department.

Grounds Manager Greg Hoekstra 11:01

Yep. Yeah. So quite a bit of fencing projects in many different places. The Miracle League had an all-new outfield fence put on it, and then the Miracle League also had a new surface put on it this year—the Miracle League diamond.

Grounds Manager Greg Hoekstra 11:19

Police department had some landscaping done on the south side, various striping in different parking lots, some courts touched up with striping. The directional signs in Memorial Park were updated with the new city seal and some new verbiage on those signs.

Grounds Manager Greg Hoekstra 11:35

Operation projects, these would be projects that just my staff did in house. We poured, excavated and poured, a slab down at lower Telulah for the new kia—kayak kiosk down there. We excavated and poured a new a slab in Erb Park for a new fitness station, which now puts a fitness—at least one fitness station in every community park in the city. Some of them have multiple, multiple fitness stations. Again, the work around Memorial Park field six and seven. We also purchased two new dugout covers for those field six dugout that match the dugouts from one through five. Those will be installed yet this year.

Grounds Manager Greg Hoekstra 12:22

Wastewater had a bit of a—they had an intruder earlier in the year, so we, they asked us to come through and really do a lot of clearing of their fence, their perimeter fencing, and then we also did a lot of repairs on their perimeter fencing, and then just a bunch of other smaller jobs.

Grounds Manager Greg Hoekstra 12:42

All in all, we had a I feel we had a really good year. I think vandalism was down this year. Graffiti probably about the same. Homelessness is still an issue for us, just the messiness, the messiness of when they decide to claim a pavilion for their own, and then the fact that a lot of times my staff is finding them asleep in the pavilions or in the bathrooms in the morning, and that's an issue. The younger seasonals and staff, they're scared to interact

with them. So, I would say that's one of our challenges to deal with in the summer, but otherwise we've had 2024 was good year for the grounds department.

Aldersperson Katie Van Zeeland (District 5) 13:26

Let me ask you, what is the project you're proudest of, or is there something that was, like, really innovative that your staff did, that you wanted to share?

Grounds Manager Greg Hoekstra 13:36

I don't know about this year, but I would say of all the projects that I've done for the city, the probably the one I'm the most proud of is the pickleball court at Telulah. That was really a nice project and turned out really nice.

Aldersperson Katie Van Zeeland (District 5) 13:46

Excellent. Thank you. Any questions? Alder Schultz.

Aldersperson Alex Schultz (District 9) 13:51

Thanks. Thanks for the report. I know you guys are doing a lot of good work. My district contains three pretty significant parks, one of which seems to be—seems to get a lot of trash over busy weekends. In years past, there's been some pretty significant events where what's left behind is like mind blowing in some senses. I'm curious to know what—experience in 2024 felt like that was a little bit more under control. What's the with grounds experience is it essentially the same? You feel like there's some improvements there on—

Grounds Manager Greg Hoekstra 14:23

I think it—

Aldersperson Alex Schultz (District 9) 14:24

—on the public taking care.

Grounds Manager Greg Hoekstra 14:25

It depends a lot on the events the events, and, again, you get a group that takes a couple picnic tables and doesn't pick up anything when they leave, that can make a big mess. And you have other groups that pick up very well after themselves. I think it's just a matter of what event it is, or what group you get in there. We do have people in, you know, every morning in the week, we're doing Park runs, and on the weekends too. We have people in every Saturday, Sunday morning, hitting all those parks so, but yeah, I do know that there are some of them that, yeah, there's some big messes left behind.

Aldersperson Alex Schultz (District 9) 14:26

Do you have a sense that it's generally the same year over year, or is it getting better worse? Probably don't have much sense of it.

Grounds Manager Greg Hoekstra 15:04

I would say it probably varies along with the vandalism. If you get a group that is constantly coming back and making that same mess, and then if they finally move along, it can get a lot better for a while.

Aldersperson Alex Schultz (District 9) 15:16

Mind if I throw a few more questions?

Aldersperson Katie Van Zeeland (District 5) 15:18

Go ahead.

Alderson Alex Schultz (District 9) 15:18

Softball some. As far as the homeless encampments and sort of your responsibilities parks and staff having to sort of manage that situation, would you have any suggestions or staff have any suggestions on are there, are there things that we can do better as a city or as staff to manage those situations? Is there something that would help us empower staff to be able to deal with it in a little bit more timely manner, or is it simply just something we have to manage in the confines of what we're allowed to do right now?

Alderson Katie Van Zeeland (District 5) 15:18

Thank you for that question. I just want to jump in quick, because I also was going to ask a similar question. You know, perhaps having, you know, our social worker, or someone from—I know we have the community—I forget the name of the title of the person who works with the PD and the health department. So, thank you for that.

Grounds Manager Greg Hoekstra 16:16

Sure. Yeah, I think we're kind of stuck working in the confines we're in. When we do work with the police, they've kind of taken more of a, like if we do find an encampment of instead of just picking it up and disposing of it, that we have to post and leave a notice on it for so long, stuff like that. So again, that makes it a little more complicated, and it's—you know, you're basically saying, if you put a note on attempt that says you have 24 hours to vacate, you're saying you have 24 hours to stay in the in the park early. So, it would be nice to be able to, when you came across an encampment, to just dispose of it right away, rather than having to wait. Other than that, I really don't know what else, what else to do.

Alderson Katie Van Zeeland (District 5) 17:03

It sounds like Director Gazza has some feedback here. Go ahead.

Director Dean Gazza (Parks, Recreation, and Facilities) 17:06

Yeah. We've been meeting as a group with police department, fire department, community development, and so forth, just talking about things that the community can do on a broader scale, knowing that it is so challenging. But there is discussion about utilizing the new resources, you know, social resource resources. One of the things that Greg mentioned is, you know, if you're full time an employee, you become accustomed. You get to know these people. They get to start talking to you. Really where we really have more problems when it comes to people, is just your seasonals, you know. It's sometimes it's a little bit hard for them to approach. You know, some of these are, can be younger girls. Some can be, you know, younger guys. You know, it just, it just your comfort level.

Director Dean Gazza (Parks, Recreation, and Facilities) 17:18

But, yeah, I think as a city, I think we do everything and try to be accommodating, like you say, allow them to be down there for 24 hours. Tom is working on a policy and been working with the police department on some different measures in that in Valley Transit they can, you know, have a person removed from the park for 24 hours—or from the Transit Center for 24 hours, versus just giving them an eviction notice of, say, three months or six months, and that give them an eviction of 24 hours and stuff. So, they're trying to think of different tools, but, yeah, it just, it just seems like—and it's different people, different years. Like Greg'll get a park one day, all of a sudden, somebody out of nowhere, you know, we don't know specifically, they'll drop off bags of clothes, and in some years, tons of food. And it just—there's animals all over and stuff, and they're, they're scrambling. They understand what the intent is. But they got—they're like, "We got to get this stuff out of here." Some of it is perishable that they drop off and it—people are thinking they're doing a good thing when they're actually doing—they won't go through the bags and look for clothes. It's strange. They're pretty picky. They like the

clothes they got. A lot of times they don't, they don't go through it and look like they're like they're going shopping. It pretty much, it just sits there. So.

Aldersperson Katie Van Zeeland (District 5) 17:57

Yeah, I mean, I think it's a very delicate balance. Your job is to clean up, so you're there to clean up. You know, we want to make sure these folks are treated with dignity. We—parks are for everyone, but we also don't want people causing problems in the park. It's a very difficult situation, and I'm glad that everyone's meeting together to try to figure out a way forward.

Aldersperson Alex Schultz (District 9) 19:42

Yeah, I want to echo that. I'm heartened to hear that there's more conversations happening internally, because I feel like it's been a it's been an issue forever constant, but it feels like there's some slight acceleration. The numbers might be different, but certainly the present seems to be more—it just seems to be a little bit more prevalent, and I don't anticipate that going away anytime soon. So, the more the staff has conversations and trying to figure out ways to remediate, you know, help those individuals find different places. And sometimes it is just matter of moving them from one place to another, and that's typically a starter solution. Doesn't get to the solution solutions, but at least it helps make those spaces available. I mean, think about Pierce Park. There's open pavilions. You want those clean and don't have anyone hanging around. But there's also a lot of shady, hidden places where the person can put up a tent and that can go for three or four days and no one even notice. So.

Director Dean Gazza (Parks, Recreation, and Facilities) 20:35

And a police department has just reached out again. They—you know, they evaluate, and they'll request some things from us. And so, you've got that—was it this morning or yesterday, Chief Olson had sent over some requests that her team—is it Sergeant Beach? Yes. Sergeant, yes, put together some evaluations, you know, bringing up the some taking out some of the branches under trees so they can see underneath them some of the places that they're hiding, and see if some of that stuff helps. But, you know, you move them from one place, they just they go to another, and that's what's difficult, you know, and, and....

Aldersperson Alex Schultz (District 9) 21:17

Yeah, and I think there's much broader conversation [indecipherable] solutions there. I mean, and this isn't the place for that conversation, but it's good to know that all the departments communication, because obviously everyone has to deal with it in some way, shape or form. So good to know.

Aldersperson Alex Schultz (District 9) 21:30

There was a couple other questions I had. Oh—impact of No Mow May and Lo Mow mowing stuff, and I guess my open question, would be, giving what we've done in the past few years and some, you know, conversations happening internally, what do you think the department might be considering or doing? And when you look at that, what are the things that you could maybe consider doing in the parks to do what you, you know, accelerate that a little bit more? I know there's been some efforts to look at some of the spaces that don't get a lot of traffic and let those go a little longer, open up the mowing schedules a little bit, and I think that's been successful, but I guess I'd just like to hear a little bit of feedback from what you guys are talking about internally, to kind of accelerate a little bit of that sort of attitude about spaces that don't get utilized a lot, and maybe they could be left alone.

Grounds Manager Greg Hoekstra 22:20

So, I don't know if you had been working, talk to Steve Schrage about this, but we did do the test plot of that No Mow or Low Mow. So, we did, we did that, and then I guess we'll see once—that was kind of late in the fall—how that turns out. But I think we're looking at trying to incorporate that into some spots once—

Alderson Alex Schultz (District 9) 22:40

Okay.

Grounds Manager Greg Hoekstra 22:41

—once we find if that's going to be successful or not, so that would be probably one of the first things we're going to do try to incorporate that. That would be a No Mow mix. Steve had talked about putting it on islands, you know, like on OO. I don't know if that's where we want them or not, but—

Alderson Alex Schultz (District 9) 22:58

Okay.

Grounds Manager Greg Hoekstra 22:58

—that would be kind of the discussion we'd have to have is what sites? Those are kind of high vis sites. I don't know if that's necessarily where we want No Mow, but....

Alderson Alex Schultz (District 9) 23:07

Yeah, if they didn't grow very tall, they might be a good solution where you don't have to go out there and maintain them very often, but they're still green and yeah, they look decent. Tom, did you have anything to add to that question at all?

Deputy Director Tom Flick (Parks and Rec) 23:18

I would just add, we are looking at some areas for larger plots that would be more like a habitat restoration/pollenabler habitat. And right now, we're identifying Ellen Kort Park. We have some slope, some like, I'd say, more increased slopes that are of concern with our guys mowing, and at the same time, we can reduce mowing and the impacts and the emissions, hours, labor, money, etc. So, Ellen Kort is our number one site right now, and I would say we're very optimistic that that will happen this spring. We received a couple grants from the Community Foundation to turn about a half an acre, three quarters of an acre, into this No Mow, and we've also identified Lundgaard park on the north side between the park and fire station six. So, it'd be like the gas line easement area. That's a much larger area, but would really save us a lot of time and money with the mowing. Again, the financial end of it, to turn it into this type of habitat, we don't have that finance financing right now, so we'll continue to look for grants and see if we can piece it together like we did with Ellen Kort, and we'll make improvements as we can.

Alderson Alex Schultz (District 9) 24:40

Excellent. Thank you guys for your work on that.

Alderson Katie Van Zeeland (District 5) 24:43

Good?

Alderson Alex Schultz (District 9) 24:44

For now.

Aldersperson Katie Van Zeeland (District 5) 24:45

Okay. Alder Smith, you did have some questions?

Aldersperson Martyn Smith (District 4) 24:48

Yes, yes, I did. I just want to say the pickleball court in Telulah, this is in my district, and that is extremely popular. I see people in there all the time. So, congratulations on that. Also, the—it's impressive how much is being done by the grounds crew, by people, so we're not bringing in—paying for extra outside services. And so, I think that's really impressive.

Aldersperson Martyn Smith (District 4) 25:12

I wanted to go back to the homelessness in the parks question. City Park is in my district, and I've gotten last year a couple of calls about from people who are in that right around there and who felt like they couldn't send their children to city park, and—because of what they called an encampment. I think these things come and go and disappear fairly quickly, but I definitely have people around City Park who have registered a problem there. And I think it's—to me, it's really important that we keep these parks as neighborhood parks, so treating people with dignity who need a, you know, who don't have a home and who need a place, but I would be, you know, really in favor of making sure that these are we keep these as city parks. And do you feel like that's—I just wanted to get some response on that, as how does homelessness, in your view, kind of impact the use of these parks?

Grounds Manager Greg Hoekstra 26:12

Yeah, I guess the problem I have is getting the work done. Coming in the city—City Park started out in 2024 not with a real big issue, but it steadily as the summer progressed, it steadily got worse. And then that was one of the parks where, a Saturday morning, at 6:30 in the morning, I get a call from one of our colleges seasonals "Hey, there's three guys sleeping on the floor in the bathroom here. What am I supposed to do?"

Aldersperson Katie Van Zeeland (District 5) 26:38

Yeah, yeah.

Aldersperson Katie Van Zeeland (District 5) 26:39

I was gonna say that might be a question that's better for Director Gazza, just because it's more than just—

Aldersperson Martyn Smith (District 4) 26:46

Yeah, the grounds. Yeah.

Aldersperson Katie Van Zeeland (District 5) 26:47

Yeah.

Director Dean Gazza (Parks, Recreation, and Facilities) 26:48

Exactly, because it's a grounds issue for him, in the aspect he's out there trying to, you know, maintain a property. But in most parks, that's a, you know, a policing issue where, if the police people are there and they're not committing a particular crime or violating a park ordinance, they're allowed to be there. And so, what it becomes for a lot of people is a perception that people are there and they feel uncomfortable, and that's the hardest thing to break is they're allowed to be there by law and by ordinance. They can sit there all day in the pavilion as a group, talk. As long as they're not drinking alcohol, smoking illegal or illicit, you know, materials, they're allowed to be there. And so, yeah, how do you, how do you break that perception? You know? So, I don't really have an answer, but it's more of a police issue. So, what we do is they—if they see anything illegal, they are calling the front desk at the police department to report it as fast as they can. And then also, we always,

when people are asking us, "Why ain't you doing more?" you know, we go say that, well, please report stuff, you know. But, yeah, that perception is hard.

Alderson Martyn Smith (District 4) 28:04

And in that case, like, if there are tents—so if there's tents that go up, like, where do we, where does that—?

Director Dean Gazza (Parks, Recreation, and Facilities) 28:11

That's illegal. That's against an ordinance. A tent would have to come down.

Alderson Martyn Smith (District 4) 28:15

Okay. And then is there a time when, like, the parks close at 11?

Director Dean Gazza (Parks, Recreation, and Facilities) 28:18

Yes, yep.

Alderson Martyn Smith (District 4) 28:19

So, the presence of anybody in the park after 11 would be—so people have to, theoretically, have to do something with themselves after 11. That's the that's the rule, at least.

Alderson Martyn Smith (District 4) 28:30

Yep, yeah.

Alderson Martyn Smith (District 4) 28:31

Okay.

Alderson Katie Van Zeeland (District 5) 28:32

Thank you for clarifying that, because I think it's important we—we recognize that if someone is being unruly in the park or not breaking the rules in the park, you know, they're not allowed to be in the park, then. You know, we have people who can deal with that. But if it's just someone sitting there who happens to be unhoused and they're not bothering anyone, you know, we want to just make sure those are separated.

Alderson Martyn Smith (District 4) 28:55

Yeah, absolutely.

Alderson Katie Van Zeeland (District 5) 28:57

Anyone else for the grounds crew? Alder Schultz.

Alderson Alex Schultz (District 9) 29:00

I have one more that I was going to ask before. Curious how we're doing on invasive species removals, you know, sort of what's the tact with things like buckthorn on slopes along the Fox, the properties we manage? How we doing with it? Are we keeping up?

Grounds Manager Greg Hoekstra 29:15

I don't know if you can ever keep up, but I think we're doing pretty good. We haven't had a lot of snow this year so that the guys have been—this time they would be used doing snow removal they're out doing that. If you go look at the Jones Park hillside, they've done a lot of cutting there. They've done some cutting along the shoreline at Ellen Kort. Like I say, the guys have been doing a lot of cutting at wastewater. We just did a ton of cutting out,

kind of behind the Scheig there by our prairie. There was a big thing of buckthorn there. So, yeah, there—we continue to go at it. We treat all the stem. So, but again, it's a never ending, it's just a never-ending process. There's so much seed in the ground. But again, if you look. I think we've done the Pierce hillside. You know, they've—those guys have done a good job on keeping that cleared out, and they go after it every year. So, yeah, we're, we're continuing it with it every year.

Alderson Alex Schultz (District 9) 30:09

Seems like you're hammering it. That's good. Speaking of seasonal changes, how did the ice rinks do this year? I mean, how, with all of this sort of crazy fluctuation, where—

Grounds Manager Greg Hoekstra 30:19

Other than the hockey rink at Pierce, they all are in actually in good shape.

Alderson Alex Schultz (District 9) 30:25

Okay.

Alderson Katie Van Zeeland (District 5) 30:26

Excellent. Director Gazza.

Director Dean Gazza (Parks, Recreation, and Facilities) 30:29

We should add, this Thursday, Jones park will be recognized on Small Towns America. I forget what station— Small Towns in America, for channel two of ABC, for the hockey event. So yeah, they do that little side episode. So yeah, Jones will be recognized and the—

Alderson Katie Van Zeeland (District 5) 30:50

Excellent.

Alderson Alex Schultz (District 9) 30:51

Nice.

Alderson Katie Van Zeeland (District 5) 30:51

Anyone else? Alright. We'll, go ahead. Thank you very much. Um, we'll go ahead and move on to 25-0066, the recreation division 2024 annual report. Which microphone? Four? Oh, sorry, there you go.

Recreation Manager Niki Wendt (Parks And Recreation) 31:09

I do not want to elaborate a whole lot about the homelessness thing, but just a quick note on that, that maybe Greg isn't aware either, but my marketing communications coordinator and I had a meeting with Brianna from the Health Department and the Basic Needs Team, the two from the police department, just talking about, because we are out in the parks with our seasonal staff for recreation and for parks, what can we do? And part of that is just educating some of these individuals of the resources in the community. So, we're working on, you know, how do we hang flyers, whether it's on the backs of the bathroom stalls, or they were giving us magnets that people—we can give out to people our business cards. So, we're, we're starting to try to, you know, just at least educate the community of some of the great resources that we have. So.

Alderson Katie Van Zeeland (District 5) 31:56

As I said before and as everyone agreed, we're really glad that you're all working together. Thank you.