

## NEWPORT TREE AND OPEN SPACE COMMISSION

June 30, 2022

Mayor Jeanne-Marie Napolitano  
City Council Members  
City of Newport  
43 Broadway  
Newport, RI 02840

Dear Mayor Napolitano and City Councilors:

With the cover letter I am forwarding the report from the Tree and Open Space Commission on park safety in the Newport park system. Per the resolution on April 27, the commission has conducted the workshop and interviews asked of it by the Council. Our report outlines our process, covers our workshop proceedings, includes recommendations, and has a conclusion.

At the June 29, 2022, meeting of the commission members voted to approve the report and forward to the Council for their review. We are available for questions at your convenience.

Thank you for the opportunity to contribute to this important work on behalf of our park system.

Best,



Maureen Cronin Marosits  
Chair  
Newport Tree and Open Space Commission

## **Newport Tree and Open Space Commission**

### **Newport Park Safety Report**

### **Findings and Recommendations**

**Submitted June 30, 2022**

#### **OVERVIEW and PROCESS**

The Newport City Council (Council) requested that the Newport Tree and Open Space Commission (Commission) study and conduct a public workshop on the topic of safety in Newport's network of 30+ parks, to wit:

*"that the City Council forward a copy of this resolution to the Tree and Open Space Commission and request they hold a workshop with the public to discuss providing a safe environment for all city parks to eliminate or control unsafe behavior and report back to the Council by the beginning of June."*

The Commission was charged with advancing recommendations for Council consideration.

The process included:

- A review of the Newport Tree, Parks and Open Space Master Plan (Master Plan).
- A review and collation of the many City of Newport ordinances (Ordinances) that have a bearing on unsafe behavior in parks.
- Review of police and fire logs.
- Individual interviews with City officials (Parks, Police, Fire).
- A public hearing conducted June 8, 2022, from 5:00 pm to 6:30 pm in the Program Room of the Newport Public Library. The meeting was widely promoted. The workshop was attended by ten commission members including ex officio member Scott Wheeler, sixteen members of the public associating themselves with either all parks or specific parks, and Fire Chief Harp Donnelly.
- A basic online review of the literature and practices of other parks related to promotion of positive behavior and environments.

## WORKSHOP PROCEEDINGS

The process was facilitated by Commission chair Maureen Cronin. She established the purpose of the meeting by reading the charge from Council and stated that the result would be a report to the Council outlining issues and recommendations.

- A specific nominal group process was employed to ensure that all those members of the public in attendance had the opportunity to express their interests and opinions.
- The first step was to invite anyone who wanted to speak to initially do so by sharing their specific safety concern(s) and whether their concern pertained to a specific park or parks.
- The second step was to group the concerns as captured on a flip chart into specific categories and engage in dialogue among the public and Commission regarding each.
- The third step was to express appreciation for all those who have engaged in the process so far, and state that the Commission would hold a working meeting on June 29, 2022, to prepare a report for Council.

The following is a summary of safety issues as offered by members of the public attending the workshop.

A member of the public initiated comment by stating that the Commission should be mindful of inclusion and respect for Newport's diverse community when advancing recommendations. Avoiding racial bias, being mindful of citizen's varied working hours and living arrangements were all noted.

The importance of parks as inclusive recreational outlets for all was noted by the Commission as an important guiding principal.

The round robin solicitation of concerns yielded the following alphabetical list, nearly all of which were cited as relevant to all parks, with some park-specific personal experiences noted. (The park for which a specific example was cited noted in parentheses).

- Alcohol and Drug Use
- Dogs Unleashed (Morton)
- Encampments (Miantonomi)
- Enforcement
- Grilling (Storer)
- Hours of Operation
- Inclusion and Respect
- Lighting (King)
- Loud Music (Storer)
- (Metal Detectors/Treasure Digging)
- Pavement Maintenance (Harbor walk)
- Profanity (Storer)
- Swim Safety (All parks with water access)
- Waste Pickup (Braga/Storer)

After soliciting this input, the Chair shared with those present the research that the Commission had done in preparation for the workshop. This included:

- Review of the Master Plan.
- Review of all relevant ordinances.
- Meeting with Fire Chief Harp Donnelly
- Meeting with Police Chief Gary Silva and 5 community policing officers.
- Review of police and fire logs related to parks.

It was noted by the Chair that virtually all the safety concerns voiced were governed by one or more existing City ordinances.

General discussion followed on specific topics, and suggestions for improvement were gathered. The following is a topical summary.

**Alcohol and Drug Use.** Ordinances currently exist. The challenges of enforcement were discussed. It was noted that the police state that unless substances are in plain sight and/or a specific individual is identified by a complainant, this behavior is difficult for them to address. Public perception was that the police did not respond to calls about public drinking when informed that alcohol was in plain sight.

**Dogs Unleashed.** Ordinances currently exist. One member of the public stated her repeated concerns about unleashed dogs and dog parties were not responded to. Others cited dogs running loose in parks and cemeteries as well. Public perceptions are that unleashed dogs are not an enforcement priority.

**Encampments.** Ordinances currently exist that prohibit sleeping in public places. Recurring encampments in Miantonomi Park were cited, as was general concern about tent use in parks as a shelter for illegal behavior. It was noted that there is an existing ordinance stating that tents must have an unobstructed view from the outside. Enforcement concerns were expressed.

**Enforcement.** As is evidenced with most of the topics cited here, many members of the community voiced their perceptions/concerns about lack of police response and enforcement of the issues raised. In the absence of a police department representative at the workshop, the Chair noted that the police shared response and arrest statistics, and that they had noted challenges of enforcement when there is no specific complainant. Negative public perception remains at issue.

**Grilling.** Ordinances currently exist. Concern was expressed about fire danger from grilling. Chief Donnelly commented that the fire danger from gas and charcoal grills is very low. Ordinances exist that prohibit open fires and prohibit wood as a fuel source. Personal grilling is allowed by ordinance if the fuel source is gas or charcoal. It was noted that as an added safety measure, some of the city's parks provide braziers, and among those, some provide charcoal disposal bins. The option of providing charcoal braziers in all parks was discussed. The Chief also reiterated that if anyone observes unsafe grilling practices or grilling in a manner to cause concern, they should contact the Fire Department immediately and the Fire Department will respond. Additionally safe grilling instructions should be posted in any area where grilling will occur.

**Hours of Operation.** It was noted that hours of operation vary significantly by park. Many cited that consistency of hours would be desirable and helpful to enforcement. The challenges of consistency were noted, as parks have different functions and uses. It was also noted that people have varied working hours, transit parks at different hours to and from work, walk dogs at different times of the day, or simply have different day parts off work. The need for further study was noted.

**Lighting.** The absence of walkway lighting was noted as a specific issue for an area in King Park. A brief discussion was also held about whether night lighting encourages or discourages negative behavior after-hours.

**Loud Music.** An ordinance currently exists. Specific decibel levels are defined by ordinance. Enforcement was noted as a concern.

**Metal Detectors/Treasure Digging.** A Commission member noted that there has been a significant increase in this behavior. The Commission recommends that it be considered a prohibited behavior under vandalism ordinance and enforced as such.

**Pavement.** Maintenance issues with parts of the Harbor walk pavement were mentioned by one member of the public, citing that all paved surfaces should be safely maintained.

**Profanity.** One member of the public representing Storer Park cited being offended by profanities heard in music. The city's Public Peace and Decency ordinance bans "indecent...language" in such instances when the intent of such language is to "induce anguish...or injury"

**Swim Safety.** This topic was cited for parks with swimming. It was noted that there are no emergency telephones at these locations and that access to personal devices cannot always be relied upon.

**Waste Pickup and Litter.** Ordinances exist for littering and contracts exist for waste pickup. Inadequate receptacles/waste accumulation were specifically noted as issues for Storer and Braga Parks. Receptacles appear inadequate for the higher demands of the "outdoor" season and/or pickup schedules are inadequate. Options such as pack-in pack-out, more receptacles and/or more pick up were briefly discussed. Further evaluation needs to be made of how well Waste Management is performing relative to the contract and if modifications are needed.

## RECOMMENDATIONS

The Commission offers these recommendations both to address immediate and specific concerns as well as to elevate stewardship of the City's exceptional network of parks to a higher level.

The overarching principle is to ensure that our public parks provide for the enjoyment and safety of all, recognizing the diversity of living and work styles in our community.

The overarching goal is to articulate as clear and consistent policies and practices as possible for the city's network of parks, fostering both public understanding and simplifying enforcement.

1. **Recommendation: Inclusion.** As with all city policies and practices, those applied to parks should be mindful of the diversity of Newport, demographically as well as in terms of working hours, living arrangements (apartments vs. homes) and more.
2. **Recommendation: Clarity and Consistency.** While there will always be need for some variations and exceptions, clarity and consistency in policy and practice will make it easier for both the public and enforcement agencies to ensure park safety.
3. **Recommendation: Communication.** It is recommended that the city communicate about the parks and their rules consistently and across communication channels. This would include:
  - Clear and consistent signage in all parks highlighting major rules.
  - A published Guide to Parks/Park Rules that both the public and enforcement can reference.
  - Periodic/seasonal updates across media channels reminding of park rules.
4. **Recommendation: Hours of Operation.** It is recommended that a taxonomy of park types be created, and hours of operation made consistent by park type. Hours of operation should allow for transit and dog-walking at any hour. Group gatherings and loitering should be defined and hours restricted.
5. **Recommendation: Grilling.** Grilling is an allowable activity in all parks if permitted grill type and fuel type are used. It is recommended that the city install braziers in all relevant parks at locations approved by the fire department and that a plan for charcoal disposal bins at those locations be included.
6. **Recommendation: Lighting.** The Commission recommends that the city evaluate and develop park lighting policies based on park type and best safety practices in terms of hours of illumination.
7. **Recommendation: Swim Safety in parks.** The Commission recommends that the appropriate city departments evaluate and implement if appropriate additional safety measures should be taken. (Example: life rings, call boxes, etc)

8. **Recommendation: Waste Pickup.** It is recommended that waste accumulation issues be addressed immediately where chronic waste accumulation problems have been noted. The appropriate city department should recommend the correct combination of receptacles, pick up schedules and monitoring that will resolve ongoing issues. Review of pack in/out should be done to see if it is a feasible option.
9. **Recommendation: Enforcement.** The vast majority of issues identified by the public (alcohol and drug use, dogs, encampments and sleeping in the park, and noise) relate to the enforcement of ordinances governing a range of personal behavior. There is significant public perception that there is a lack of police concern and/or police response about these issues.

The Commission recognizes that while there are bona fide challenges to enforcement as noted by the police department related to the transient nature of some offenses, lack of specific complainants, etc., public concern is significant and broad enough to merit further immediate actions. These include:

--The police department conduct a public workshop on park policing, in conjunction with the Commission. In this meeting, the police would hear and respond to public concern firsthand, share data about park policing, address patrol capacity, share challenges about enforcement and engage with the public in identifying ways that the public and they can most effectively work together on enforcement and safety promotion.

--The city immediately find a way to increase a positive, on the ground presence in the city's parks. Police bike patrols are recommended as an initial step, with a focus on a positive presence and relationship building with park users. In the longer term, see the Conclusion section about instituting a Park Ranger program modeled after other highly successful programs.

## CONCLUSION

The Newport Tree and Open Space Commission shares the widely held public view that our city's network of 30+ parks is among our community's most valued and treasured assets. They are thoroughly enjoyed by residents and visitors alike, provide vast opportunities for outdoor recreation, and make an essential contribution to the mental and physical health and well-being of all.

While the parks are generally well maintained and cared for, and there are short-term issues to address as described in the preceding narrative, there is also an important opportunity for the City of Newport to make a bold statement about our parks and their essential role in our quality of life.

This opportunity is to elevate the status of our parks to **an essential building block of city infrastructure**, and declaring them *a system* worthy of a dedicated supportive infrastructure, e.g. the *Newport Park System*.

A number of cities throughout the United States, including Salt Lake City, Utah and Austin, Texas have exemplary city park systems, including-among other features- robust Park Ranger programs.

The Commission encourages the Council to consider the future of Newport's parks as an indispensable system and to consider initiating one or more features of such city park systems around the country, especially a park ranger program. Such a program, employing a combination of seasonal and volunteer staffing, with support of year-round city departmental staff, could deliver, as Austin's and Salt Lake City does, cited below:

### Salt Lake City Park Ranger Program

*From directing inquiring visitors to where public restrooms are located to educating users about dog leash rules, Salt Lake City's Park Rangers will be available seven days a week to help provide educational services and added safety in the City's many parks, urban trails, and natural areas.*

*Park Rangers will not enforce the City's municipal code with citations or arrests but will instead promote voluntary compliance by educating the public of the City code and park rules. They will support positive use of the parks and open space.*

*Park Rangers will have home stations at five different park locations throughout the city. They will hike, bike and walk to neighboring parks in their assigned areas and will have a direct line of communication with the Salt Lake City Police Department should code enforcement be required.*

### Austin Park Ranger Program Mission

*Park Rangers are ambassadors for Austin's park system that promote responsible recreation, cultivate stewardship, and conserve parks' cultural and natural resources for the benefit of our entire community.*

*The City of Austin Park Ranger program was created to provide educational services, safety, and security in Austin's parks and recreational facilities. Equally important is our aim to protect and foster stewardship of the natural world. To accomplish this, the Park Rangers have been trained with a focus on emergency medical response, education, and public safety.*

In conclusion, the Commission hopes that this report will be a catalyst for further action, some immediate, by city departments and with public engagement as noted herein. We look forward to next steps and the priorities as may be defined by the city council going forward.