



Madison Parks Division

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**MADISON
PARKS**

DATE: August 7, 2024

TO: All Alders
Board of Park Commissioners

FR: Eric Knepp, Parks Superintendent *EMK*

RE: 2025 Parks Division Operating Budget Service Reduction Plan

The Parks Division's 2025 Operating Budget Request includes funding for a continuation of all services for next year. The services we provide add value to our community and have a positive impact on the lives of residents. It is, therefore, exceedingly difficult to develop and prioritize a reduction of services that does not have a negative impact on anyone in our community. Due to the combination of State imposed levy limits and limited State shared revenue, the City is facing a significant structural deficit in 2025 and beyond. Given this negative budgetary outlook, the Parks Division was directed to provide a plan that could reduce services and funding by 5 percent, or \$888,067, as a tool that could be used to partially address these structural budget issues.

Madison's parks system is a significant value add to our residents' and visitors' quality of life. We offer a wide range of services, facilities, and amenities across our city. The Trust for Public Land annually ranks the park systems of the top 100 cities in the United States using a comparative score that includes consideration of acreage, access, amenities, equity, and investment. The parks system has rated between #9 and #18 over the past decade, we are currently 18th. Our system is far above average as it relates to access with over 95% of Madisonians living within a 10-minute walk from a park. We are also significantly above average on amenities and equity scores. We are close to the median average on parks acreage and are below average on investment per capita. We have a very walkable and accessible system for our residents that is equitably distributed and offers significantly more than average amenities. We are taking care of that distributed system with a below average investment, which creates significant strain on resources, especially staffing, to keep up with system growth and our community's needs.

In recognition of a system that is stretched thin and still growing with the City, the service reduction plan focuses on eliminating, reducing, or restructuring services in a manner that can achieve the necessary budgetary savings. The service reduction plan is an integrated approach to achieve those required budgetary savings without making remaining services untenable.

The 5% reduction plan would:

- Eliminate all City operating support for Outdoor Ice-Skating Rinks
- Eliminate City operating funding for the Aquatics Program including the Goodman Pool, all beaches, and splash pads.
- Significantly reduce Drinking Fountains and Restrooms
- Reformat Recreation Services to a Cost Recovery and Revenue Generation Model
- Eliminate Decorative Fountain Operation and Maintenance at the Mall Concourse
- Reduce Staffing at Forest Hill Cemetery
- Reduce Parks Planning and Development Staffing

The primary budgetary savings from this plan would be from a significant reduction in our work force. The reductions total 5.75 FTE permanent staff and approximately 120 seasonal staff. This equates to 4% of permanent staff positions and approximately 25% of seasonal/hourly funding.

- Eliminate 1 Parks Program Coordinator (18-04)
- Eliminate 1 Maintenance Mechanic
- Eliminate 2 Park Workers (1.75 FTE, 16-04)
- Eliminate 1 Park Maintenance Worker (16-09)
- Eliminate 1 Landscape Architect
- Eliminate All Aquatics seasonal staffing
- Eliminate All Winter recreation seasonal staffing
- Reduce seasonal staffing in Operations

The Parks Division is a seasonally dependent operational organization, and we pivot across the year to different tasks and services. Very few of the things we do are the same across the year and therefore a reduction in funding that impacts staffing levels will invariably impact multiple services in an interconnected way. This is especially true as it relates to the service reduction plan. Almost all of the reductions are tied to other reductions across the year to accommodate the remaining work and services can be performed with the remaining staff resources. For example, the Maintenance Mechanic position is housed within our Facilities Maintenance section and works on a variety of tasks across a year. The reduction in support of the Aquatics program would significantly reduce the workload of the Facilities team between May and September, while the elimination of winter ice skating locations would reduce the workload between November and March. The remaining “shoulder” seasons of March-April and October-November have a workload reduction by eliminating drinking fountains and restrooms. Similarly, core staffing resources that support the Aquatics program also support the winter recreation concessions and rental operations. By eliminating both services, a corresponding reduction in force is possible. For Park Operations, the combination of service reductions would allow for a reduced workload and the corresponding reduction in force of one permanent position in each section across the year for each of our three main maintenance sections. The reduced workload would come through a reduction in restroom, beach, and ice rink maintenance. The reduction in force in our Planning and Development section of one Landscape Architect would also be a significant year-round impact that would have effects on the Capital Budget and project management. Though this is a reduction of 20% of our project management staff, it would likely create a need to reduce projects for parks by closer to 30% given the mandated non-project work this team must do (e.g. development review work).

Another significant component of the service reduction plan is the closure of 16 public restrooms and 53 drinking fountains (i.e. bubblers). Most of the restroom closures are tied directly to the reduction in services at the beaches. This reduction reduces the daily workload for operations staff given the corresponding reduction in staffing for each section. Both the restrooms and the drinking fountains are also an important part of the service reduction plan in that they reduce workload on the Facilities team in those shoulder seasons. The Facilities team is responsible for getting the restrooms ready for use each spring and for winterizing them in the fall. This is a particularly notable task in the era of climate change as the demands for earlier start and later closing times for facilities is already creating a significant hurdle for our teams managing this work. The drinking fountain reductions were focused on non-park locations and/or locations that created the least negative impact on service area radius for an alternative.

The Aquatics budget reductions will have a significant impact on the public as it relates to the City no longer supporting the operations of the splash pads, beaches, and the Goodman Pool. As stewards of the City's only public pool (which is in good overall condition), to mitigate the impact of this service loss to the community, we have proposed that the pool be managed in partnership with another organization through a lease or use agreement. As owners of this critical public asset, we will set the standard that any external entity that is to run the pool maintain certain levels of public access and times for reduced fees for entry, while recognizing that the entity will need to generate revenue to offset the costs of running the facility. It is not possible to project how this process would unfold exactly, but if we need to conduct such a process, we will work diligently to identify a community-based organization that shares the same values of health, safety, and equity that lead to a welcoming space for our community to enjoy. We would also explore partnership models for other service reductions to see if there is a potential for reducing the negative impacts on the community from the City's reduction in operational support.

Another component of the service reduction plan is to refocus our Community Recreation Services section towards a cost recovery model of programming and a revenue generation for the Parks Division. Our Recreation Services team currently provides an array of free or low-cost programs for the community, including Ride the Drive, Sina Davis Movie Nights, Learning Series, Trucks & Treasures, Hayrides, Groove & Glide, Family Dances, and other special recreational events. As a part of the service reduction plan, the Recreation Coordinator position would be refocused towards providing programs that are fully self-funded. This could include fee-based programs as well as developing sponsorships and partnerships. In addition, the Recreation Coordinator would be tasked with developing revenue generation opportunities to support the Parks Division's budget. For 2025, the revenue target would be \$65,000, with the aim to grow this number annually. This is a significant departure from our longstanding approach to managing the system to maximize positive community outcomes and focus on provision of affordable and accessible services. This pivot would necessitate a review of our mission as it would conflict with the prioritization we currently place on affordability over cost recovery. For 2025, the initial plan would be to work towards allowing and charging for Badger football game day parking at specific parks. The most likely locations would be Vilas, Klief, and Brittingham. This would mean allowing people to pay to park at these locations for Badger games, which would impact other park users by taking up parking spaces or even the park itself.

It is my hope that we can find a path forward together that preserves as many valuable park services as possible. I recognize that there are significant challenges ahead and the Parks Division is committed to evaluating all options to provide our services. We have continued to grow as a system, adding or expanding 18 parks in the last decade, with limited growth in staffing resources to serve that growth over the past decade. Unfortunately, due to the sustained growth and current resourcing of a system with a lot of amenities, I do not think there is a path forward to reduce property tax levy support by 5% in one year without significant reductions in services. I am looking forward to continuing to have a dialogue about how to provide the best possible park system to our residents and visitors, as I firmly believe it makes a significant impact on the quality of life for the community. I am optimistic that by working with our community we can find a way to appropriately fund our amazing park system for 2025 and beyond.