Volunteers in Madison Parks

The Madison Parks system of today would not be possible without private support, and more specifically that of volunteers, who have been and continue to be essential in the upkeep, development, and community engagement within the system. Going beyond merely maintaining green spaces, volunteers foster community, promote environmental stewardship, and enhance the well-being of Madison area residents. The deep history of volunteering in Madison's Parks has greatly benefitted and positioned the City to give the program the structure and support it deserves. Recognizing the significance of these contributions is crucial for the sustained growth of the volunteer program and vitality of our public spaces.

Commented [VJ1]: Reword

As with all resources, there must be coordination behind volunteer time and talent to optimize the benefits of these efforts for both the volunteers as individuals and the park system. Nearly 30 years ago, decision-makers recognized a need for a dedicated Volunteer Coordinator at Olbrich Botanical Gardens. Under this well-established model, volunteers are recruited, onboarded and their skills are aligned with tasks at hand, while staff at the gardens support and recognize the vital role the volunteers play in growing and sustaining the gardens. From the smiling faces that greet guests, to the muddy boots that grow the gardens, these volunteers are ingrained in every aspect of the Gardens. Today, Olbrich continues to sustain over 21,000 hours of volunteer service each year. Meanwhile, until recently volunteer coordination for the rest of Madison Parks was a small part of assigned duties for multiple staff members, with the Parks Division reporting just under 5,000 hours of volunteer service in 2019, a number significantly lower than what is believed to be occurring without a robust central coordination system.

After years of advocating, a Parks Volunteer Coordinator position was authorized in the 2023 Operating Budget. This was a pivotal moment, as policymakers recognized the opportunity for substantial improvements in volunteer coordination, along with how volunteer time and talent can supplement the City's resources to create a phenomenal park system. While Olbrich's volunteer program continues to grow and sustain, the dedicated Parks Volunteer Coordinator now champions system-wide efforts across Madison Parks, including the golf program, through community programming, land management activities and the advancement of sustainability practices. The ongoing development of the system-wide volunteer coordination program marks a significant step towards enhancing support for volunteer initiatives and strengthening community connections across diverse park landscapes.

Today, Madison Parks volunteers contribute to the system in various capacities such as youth engagement, special events, group initiatives, long-term commitments and short-term projects. Long-term volunteers offer sustained support generally to specific parks or programs, such by leading Bird & Nature walks or participating in ongoing restoration efforts in their neighborhood park. Short-term volunteers, including those fulfilling specific requirements or mandates, contribute to targeted assignments that are usually short in duration, such as citizen science projects, park plantings and wildlife monitoring. Special event volunteers lend their efforts to one-day events, such as Earth Day Challenge or Ride the Drive, enhancing the community spirit without the commitment to ongoing assignments. Youth volunteers, ages 14 to 17, also partake in volunteer programs with caretaker release, and younger volunteers may participate alongside a guardian, ensuring a safe and inclusive environment for all ages. Lastly, group volunteers, such as families, clubs, and organizations may be part of long-standing Friends groups,

participate in one day events or schedule individual work party days. Each category is crucial to the Madison Parks success, as we aim to refine and expand these opportunities, fostering a deeper connection between the community and the parks, while ensuring a rewarding experience for all. s

The newly invigorated Madison Parks Volunteer Program is working towards a vision for a thriving park system with a robust volunteer program deeply integrated into its core functions. Major areas of focus for the Madison Parks Volunteer Program over the next five years as follows:

1. Develop and Implement Volunteer Management Software: Parks has selected a program-specific software that will be used to increase volunteer engagement capacity by enhancing recruitment, onboarding, training, and retention as well as increase staff's reporting ability. This comprehensive, user-friendly platform for volunteer registrations, ongoing training opportunities, and communication will increase collaboration with local schools, businesses, and community groups to ensure a diverse volunteer pool that represents the entire Madison community.
2. Develop and Foster a Culture of Volunteerism Among Staff: Maintain a safe and inclusive environment among all staff that acknowledges and values volunteers as essential contributors to all aspects of park operations, events, and initiatives. A critical first step is engaging with staff in formalizing policies for project approval and volunteer group formation. Parks staff will understand the benefits of volunteerism and its potential to transform Madison's parks into community hubs. Staff will be adept at managing volunteers efficiently, ensuring they feel welcomed and valued from the start and that their work aligns with the mission of Madison Parks. A critical aspect of enhancing volunteer involvement is refining the onboarding process for volunteer recruitment. This process must be designed to be seamless and informative, ensuring potential volunteers fully understand their roles, responsibilities, and the impact of their work. Staff must be equipped to guide volunteers through the initial steps, from expressing interest to becoming actively engaged, making the transition as smooth as possible. This aids in recruitment and builds a stronger relationship between staff and volunteers from the beginning.
3. Enhance Volunteer Recognition: Establish a robust volunteer recognition program, including annual awards, regular appreciation events, and public acknowledgments, to show volunteers how much their contributions are valued. Policymakers will see volunteer engagement as an investment in community well-being, by facilitating a supportive environment for volunteers and establishing clear metrics to measure the success of volunteer programs. Additionally, it's important to recognize volunteer contributions allow Parks to do more than what would be possible within the constraints of the budgeted resources.
4. Expand Volunteer Base: Increase the total volunteer hours from 15,000 to 20,000 by accurately reporting hours worked, actively recruiting new volunteers and engaging existing volunteers more effectively. Staff will leverage technology for outreach and communication to build stronger connections with volunteers.
5. Strengthen Community Partnerships: Build and nurture partnerships with local businesses, schools, and organizations to support volunteer recruitment and collaborative projects, fostering a strong sense of community involvement and support. One key goal is working with Madison Parks Foundation to build private funding support for volunteerism, including seeking corporate support to further enhance volunteer initiatives and expand their impact

within the community. Existing partnerships with organizations such as the Sierra Club, Clean Lakes Alliance, and various school groups help to broaden and enhance the quality and impact of volunteer efforts. These partnerships offer unique opportunities for volunteers to engage in specialized projects, such as environmental conservation, educational programs, community cleanup projects and park programs that align with Madison Parks' mission, while fostering a sense of community, solidarity and shared responsibility for our natural spaces. Strengthening these relationships and exploring new partnerships will ensure that the volunteer program continues to grow and adapt to the needs of Madison's parks and the community. By doing so, we aim to create a more inclusive, effective and interconnected network of volunteers and community partners, further embedding the park system into the fabric of our city and ensuring its sustainability and vibrancy for future generations.

A successful volunteer program can be gauged through increased participation, improved park conditions, positive community feedback, and higher volunteer retention rates. reflecting a shared commitment to fostering vibrant and engaging park experiences through dedicated volunteer efforts. Madison Parks is committed to maintaining an inclusive volunteer culture, which recognize the connection between a thriving volunteer program and overall park success.