

# COUNTY PARKS STRATEGIC PLAN NEEDS STATEMENT

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July 27, 2017

This Needs Statement includes a summary of the engagement process for the Santa Cruz County Parks Strategic Plan process and a summary of the results from that engagement process.

## I. HOW NEEDS HAVE BEEN IDENTIFIED

In order to identify needs for the County Parks Department, staff conducted an internal assessment, a community outreach process, and reviewed other data and outreach efforts.

### A. Internal Assessment of Department Needs

#### *Staff meetings*

All staff in the County Parks Department was given the opportunity to give input into the strategic planning process through a series of three staff meetings. Each meeting had a mix of different attendees from various sections of the Parks Department. The meeting facilitator led staff at each meeting through a series of visioning and brainstorming exercises aimed at gathering priorities and ideas for how the Department could improve and evolve to meet the needs of the community. In total, 48 staff members attended these meetings, and these meetings provided the basis for the Department Needs section in the end of this chapter.

#### *Strategic Plan Working Group*

The Strategic Plan Working Group is composed of 12 members representing a variety of perspectives on parks and programs and the County Parks Department. The Working Group has met periodically throughout the strategic planning process to give input into project materials, and to assist with the outreach process and publicity and implementation of the public meetings.

### B. Community Outreach Process

Almost 1,000 people participated in some way in the Strategic Planning public engagement process, through attending meetings or filling out the online survey. The following sections describe the components of the community engagement process.

#### *Stakeholder Engagement*

County Parks staff and Working Group members identified and sent individual letters and emails to over 200 stakeholders. These stakeholders included community groups, advocacy organizations, partnering agencies, park user groups, and business and civic organizations. Letters encouraged these groups to publicize the meetings to their membership, and encourage attendance at the public meetings. Letters

also encouraged people to complete the online survey and contact parks staff directly for pertinent conversations related to County Parks programs and facilities. Letters and outreach materials were provided in both English and Spanish.

### *Board of Supervisors Input*

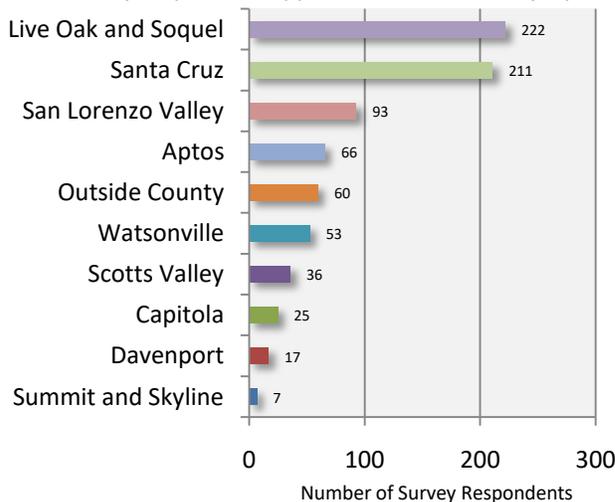
Each Board of Supervisor shared ideas of needs they heard at the meetings and things that they have heard from their constituents related to the County Parks Department.

### *Online Survey*

The Parks Department created an open online survey for anyone interested in giving input into the strategic planning process. The survey was available in both English and Spanish and was open for responses from April 8 through June 2, 2017. In that time, 802 people responded to the survey. Some of these respondents only completed the name and email sections. 676 respondents completed meaningful portions of the survey.

The survey was not intended to be scientific or to statistically represent the county. Since the respondents are self-selected and do not represent a random sample, the results of the survey do not necessarily represent the entire county population. Staff decided to make the survey available to anyone who wanted to complete it to ensure that there was a way for anyone who wanted to participate to do so. Survey responses were completed from all parts of the County, as shown in Figure 1.

*Figure 1: Survey respondent approximate locations by zip code*



### *Community Meetings*

The Parks Department held a series of five community meetings to get community input on vision and priorities for the Department for the Strategic Plan. Over 190 people participated in these meetings, and participants shared a variety of perspectives on their vision, values and goals for the department.

Meetings were held in Ben Lomond, Watsonville, Davenport, Aptos and Live Oak. The meetings were publicized extensively through individual letters and emails to over 200 stakeholder groups, publishing in each of the Board of Supervisors' newsletters, posting on both the County's and the Parks Department's website and social media, posting on Next Door, posting in the Parks Activity Guide, posting flyers at parks and community bulletins, distributing flyers to school districts where feasible, and a distributing a press release which generated several articles in local media. Publicity materials were provided in English and Spanish.

Community meetings included about an hour and fifteen minutes for public comments. Participants were split into four groups for the comment period, and each group rotated through a series of four stations. Each station was facilitated by staff and/or volunteers and focused on one of four topics, including vision and values, parks and facilities, programs and events, and priorities. Facilitators asked a series of prompts or lead a series of exercises with each small group, and all comments were recorded on a large note pad. Spanish translation services were available at each meeting.

### **C. Review of other recent outreach efforts**

In assessing park needs in the county, staff has also reviewed summaries of other related outreach efforts in the county in the last ten years, including the following:

- ***Draft City of Santa Cruz Parks Master Plan 2030*** (2017): This project included extensive outreach within the City of Santa Cruz about park needs for the city parks department, and includes results of two statistically valid polls related to parks issues.
- ***City of Watsonville Trails & Bicycle Master Plan*** (2012): This project included community input and identifies needs for trails in the southern part of the county.
- ***City of Watsonville Parks and Recreation Facilities Master Plan*** (2009): This plan includes a needs assessment for Watsonville parks, recreation, and trails, and was developed with extensive community meetings, focus groups and surveys.
- ***Monterey Bay Sanctuary Scenic Trail Network Master Plan*** (2013): The Santa Cruz County Regional Transportation Commission (RTC) developed this master plan with community input to guide the implementation of the rail trail, which will be an off-street trail from Davenport to Watsonville along the Santa Cruz Branch rail line.
- ***Sustainable Santa Cruz County Plan*** (2014): The County Planning Department created this plan to describe the vision, guiding principles, and strategies that can lead to a more sustainable development pattern in Santa Cruz County within the planning area of Live Oak, Soquel and Aptos, including policies related to trails and parks in the Plan's policies for open space and the bicycle and pedestrian network.
- ***Conservation Blueprint*** (2011) by the Land Trust of Santa Cruz County: This project included extensive countywide outreach related to needs for open space and conservation.

## II. KEY FINDINGS

This section includes a summary of what staff heard through the various components of the outreach process.

### Online Survey Findings

The online survey had a broad reach as it was easily accessible to people throughout the county who were interested in providing input into the Strategic Plan. Survey respondents also learned about the Parks Department, the parks system and gained more of an understanding of the parks system as a whole. Some findings from the survey include the following things:

- **County Parks Brand:** Santa Cruz County residents do not have a strong association with county parks as being distinct from city parks, state parks, or other parks. When asked which county park you use the most, the most common answer (8.7%) was “other,” where respondents generally listed parks that were not county parks.
- **Popular Recreational Activities:** County residents value a variety of recreational opportunities in their parks. Based on survey responses, walking and going to the beach are the most common activities, but all types of recreation listed, plus many types not listed, were important.
- **Travel to Parks:** Most respondents (61%) typically drive to the parks, but a significant number typically walk (22%) and bike (15%).
- **Opinion of Parks Department:** Most respondents have a favorable or very favorable opinion of Santa Cruz County Parks (75%), while only 5% have an unfavorable or very unfavorable opinion.
- **Comments:** The survey had four open ended questions where respondents could type answers in long answer format. General themes that were included in these open-ended responses are included in the Community Needs section of this report. Figure 3 shows words were most commonly used.



## Community Meetings Comments

In each of the five community meetings, participants expressed common themes that were repeated by many participants and stood out as key themes to that community. Region-specific themes from these meetings are summarized by geographic area in Table 1.

Table 1: Community Meeting Themes by Area

Area	Prominent Themes from Community Meetings
<b>San Lorenzo Valley</b>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• More trails and trail connections between parks</li> <li>• Improvements to access Miller Property</li> <li>• Opportunities for dogs and a dog park in SLV</li> <li>• Places to mountain bike and a bike pump track in SLV</li> <li>• More interpretive programs and features</li> </ul>
<b>Watsonville Area</b>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Additional uses at Pinto Lake such as sports facilities, aquatics, boating, interpretive materials, exercise equipment and facilities for youth programming</li> <li>• Increase in active youth recreation facilities and youth programming</li> <li>• Creation of additional beach access points and improved connections to existing beach access points in south county</li> <li>• Access to Bert Scott Estate and Freedom Lake</li> <li>• More sports facilities</li> <li>• A public pool or water feature and aquatics programs accessible to south county</li> <li>• Trail connections and coordination with City of Watsonville trail plans</li> </ul>
<b>North Coast</b>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Increased patrol, management and maintenance of north coast county beaches</li> <li>• Improved restrooms, parking, trash removal and amenities at all county beaches to accommodate increasing visitorship</li> <li>• Creating a biking and walking trail along the rail corridor between Davenport and Santa Cruz</li> <li>• Coordinated planning with State Parks and more planned and patrolled parking areas for beaches along north coast</li> <li>• County ownership, management, patrol and access improvements to Davenport main beach</li> </ul>
<b>Aptos</b>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• More local neighborhood parks in Aptos to serve the local population without traveling to other parts of the County</li> <li>• Addition of uses at existing parks and completion of parks master plans at undeveloped parks such as Polo Grounds, Aptos Village and Seacliff Village</li> <li>• More coastal access points and improvements to existing points in Aptos area</li> </ul>
<b>Live Oak and Soquel</b>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Safety and enforcement of rules on Live Oak beaches</li> <li>• More off-leash dog facilities</li> <li>• Interpretive signage, facilities and programs at county beaches</li> <li>• Improved park infrastructure and amenities at county beaches</li> <li>• Improvements to Moran Lake park such as trail improvements and connections, tree safety and interpretive signage</li> <li>• More active sports facilities such as all-weather fields for soccer, additional pickleball and tennis courts, basketball, and other sports facilities</li> <li>• More neighborhood parks</li> </ul>

## Priority Ranking Results

Both the survey and the public meetings included a section on priorities where respondents and participants were required to rank various topics in order of importance to them. Results of the highest-ranking choices in these exercises are shown in Tables 2 through 4. These tables include the three choices that were ranked the highest (1), second highest (2) and third highest (3) summarized by each meeting, all the meetings combined, the online survey responses, and a combination of the five meetings and the online survey responses (overall total). The rankings are calculated through a weighted average of responses, where respondents' first choices are weighted the most, and last choices are weighted the least.

In the "Overall Total" column, meetings with more responses have more weight. For example, the online survey had many more responses than all of the meetings combined, so in the "Overall Total" column, the online survey is weighted more heavily than the public meetings. The following numbers of responses are represented in each category:

- Ben Lomond Public Meeting: 45 responses
- Watsonville Public Meeting: 20 responses
- Davenport Public Meeting: 24 responses
- Aptos Public Meeting: 24 responses
- Live Oak Public Meeting: 50 responses
- Total Public Meetings: 163 responses
- Online Survey: 616 responses
- Overall Total: 779 responses

In regards to the existing parks system (see Table 2) improving general maintenance ranked the highest overall. At the public meetings, improving public safety ranked the highest. Improving management and conservation of natural resources ranked high in all meetings and in the online survey as well. Integrating public art was consistently ranked lower than other options.

In regards to improving the parks system (see Table 3) creating and improving trail connections between parks ranked the highest overall. Providing access to County-owned open spaces ranked the highest at the public meetings. Since meeting participants learned a lot more about the parks system and had more introduction to the Strategic Plan than the online survey respondents did, they may have been more likely to notice open spaces owned by the County that do not currently have public access. Adding new uses to parks, and creating new neighborhood parks were also important to a lot of respondents. Creating new large regional parks consistently ranked lower than other options, indicating a perception that there is currently sufficient acreage of large regional open space in public ownership in the county or at least that acquiring new large parks is not as high a priority as other things.

In regards to park programming (see Table 4) increasing interpretive programs ranked the highest overall, followed very closely by increasing kids' after-school programs. All possible answers were

ranked highly by some respondents, indicating that all of the options are important to some types of people.

*Table 2: Highest Ranked Responses\* to Question “What needs/deserves the most focus in our existing parks?”*

	Public Meetings						Survey	Overall
	Ben Lomond	Watsonville	Davenport	Aptos	Live Oak	Mtgs Total	Online Survey	Overall Total
Integrate Art in Public Spaces								
Increase cleanliness							3	3
Increase Safety	1	1	2	1	3	1		
Increase number of programs and events		3		3	2	3		
Improve Management and conservation of natural resources	2		1	2	1	2	2	2
Improve general maintenance	3	2	3				1	1

\*Numbers represent summary rankings where 1 is the highest, 2 is the second highest, and 3 is the third highest. Total columns represent a weighted average where meetings with more attendees were weighted proportionally more.

*Table 3: Highest Ranked Responses\* to Question “What’s needed to best serve county residents and visitors?”*

	Public Meetings						Survey	Overall
	Ben Lomond	Watsonville	Davenport	Aptos	Live Oak	Mtgs Total	Online Survey	Overall Total
Create More Large Regional Parks								
Add New Uses and Improvements	2	1		2			2	2
Provide Access to County-Owned Open Spaces	3	2	2	1	3	1	3	3
Improve and Add Amenities to Beaches and Coastal Access Points	3		1			2		
Create and Improve trail connections between Parks	1			2	2		1	1
Create Additional Neighborhood Parks		3	3	2	1	3		

\*Numbers represent summary rankings where 1 is the highest, 2 is the second highest, and 3 is the third highest. Total columns represent a weighted average where meetings with more attendees were weighted proportionally more.

*Table 4: Highest Ranked Responses\* to Question “What parks programming is most wanted/should be pursued?”*

	Public Meetings						Survey	Overall
	Ben Lomond	Watsonville	Davenport	Aptos	Live Oak	Mtgs Total	Online Survey	Overall Total
Increase Kids' After-School Programs			2	3	1	1	2	2
Increase Summer Programs for Kids and Teens		3					3	3
Increase Interpretive Programs	2		3		2	2	1	1
Increase Recreation Programs and trips for Adults and Seniors	3	1		2		3		
Increase Classes		2		1				
Increase Aquatics Programs					3			
Increase Family-Focused Special Events	1		1					

\*Numbers represent summary rankings where 1 is the highest, 2 is the second highest, and 3 is the third highest. Total columns represent a weighted average where meetings with more attendees were weighted proportionally more.

Overall, people care a lot about improving their parks and programs. While the highest-ranked choices vary by meeting versus survey, and by geographic area, the highest ranked choices are sometimes not significantly higher than other choices. All of the possible choices were highest priority to some respondents and attendees. The forced ranking exercise is useful for respondents to get a sense of a need to prioritize some things over other things, and to have to make choices since resources are finite. However, the final summary of the results shows that each of these general priorities is important to someone.

## Staff Meetings Findings and Department Needs

Table 5 shows key themes have been identified by parks staff as being important for the Department’s ability to provide services that meet community needs.

Table 5: Key Department Needs

Theme	Key Needs
<b>Departmental Organizational</b>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Development of a recent guiding planning document such as a strategic plan, and vision statement</li> <li>• More consistent County Parks branding and publicity for the distinct facilities and programs in the County Parks system</li> <li>• A comprehensive strategy for improved staff communication, including technological upgrades to staff communication systems, especially in remote locations</li> </ul>
<b>Park Development</b>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• An updated inventory of existing park master plans, CEQA documents and permits approved for each park property, listing planned park improvements that have not yet been developed for each park</li> <li>• A revised list of County Parks projects in the County CIP to reflect current park projects and priorities</li> <li>• Filling the vacant supervising position to lead the Planning and Development Section in the Department, and to provide more capacity for managing additional capital projects</li> </ul>
<b>Park Operations and Maintenance</b>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Improved working space and equipment storage facilities, and communications infrastructure</li> <li>• Increased staff levels that match the acreage and facilities to be maintained in the existing extensive County Parks system to provide clean and safe parks</li> <li>• Enforcement of rules and regulations at County Parks, including the addition of park rangers</li> <li>• An updated list of deferred maintenance projects that are needed and will be needed in the next ten years</li> </ul>
<b>Recreation Programs and Cultural Services</b>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Administration of more programs in underserved areas</li> <li>• More extensive marketing and publicity of existing programs</li> <li>• More special events and programs that offer safe and fun activities for teens</li> </ul>
<b>Funding</b>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Increased levels of staffing to match the extensive parks system and programming</li> <li>• A sustainable source of funding that is dedicated specifically to County Parks that matches the needs of the Department and the County Parks system</li> <li>• Incremental increases to maintenance staff levels and deferred maintenance budget as parks and facilities are added to the County Parks system</li> <li>• Increased funding for projects identified in the CIP</li> <li>• Increased funding for identified deferred maintenance projects</li> </ul>

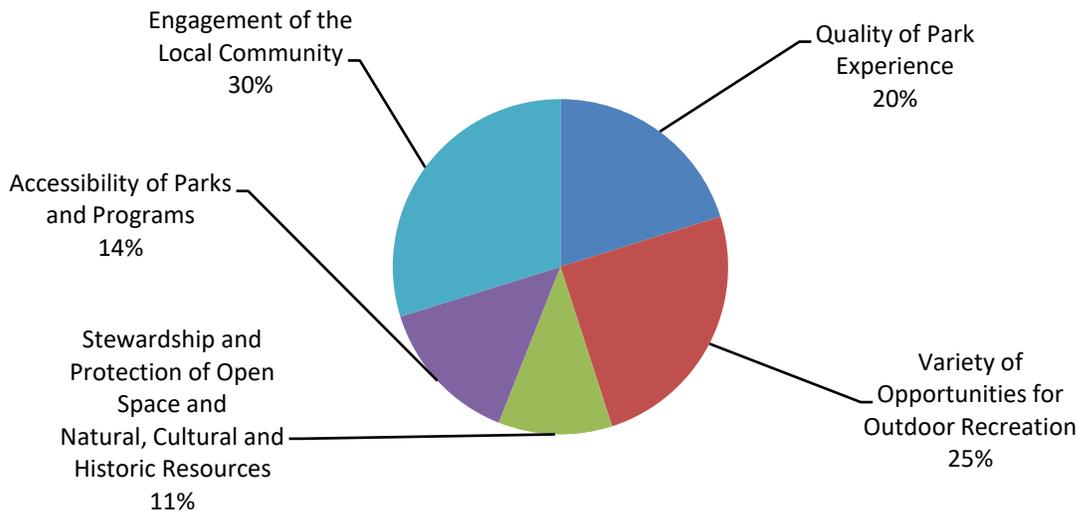
## I. NEEDS SUMMARY

The outreach process identified valuable insight into community needs from the County Parks Department, including priorities and hopes for the future of parks in the county. Based on the findings described above, results are summarized in this section based on key themes and needs.

### Key Themes

Five general themes emerged as being important to community members including 1) the quality of park experience; 2) opportunities for outdoor recreation; 3) stewardship and protection of open space and natural, cultural and historical resources; 4) accessibility of parks and programs; and 5) engagement of the local community. Generally, these themes are well represented by number of comments, as shown in Figure 4. However, the most common theme overall was engagement of the local community, including topics such as programs, outreach, volunteers, events and educational opportunities. Themes are explained below.

Figure 4: Percent of topics raised in comments during public meetings



#### *Quality of Park Experience*

A primary need expressed by the community is to provide for basic needs of park visitors in order to improve and maintain the quality of the existing park experience. These basic needs include things like improving safety for park users, improving the cleanliness and availability of restrooms, and maintaining aging parks infrastructure. Community members also consistently expressed a need for allocating additional and consistent levels of resources to the parks system to allow improvements and consistent levels of service in times of economic downturn.

#### *Variety of Opportunities for Outdoor Recreation*

The Parks Department serves the local community and the parks system needs to provide adequate and appropriate opportunities for outdoor recreation. Community members expressed a variety of desired activities and needed facilities within the parks system. These activity types range from active sports

facilities, to trails, to community centers, to natural open areas, to places to take dogs, to additional youth activities, to additional other specific new types of park uses. These types of opportunities are important to the community to provide for healthy lifestyles and improved quality of life.

#### *Stewardship and Protection of Open Space and Natural, Cultural and Historic Resources*

Santa Cruz County residents feel strongly about the importance of protecting the natural environment. Particularly, in the parks system, there is a need to preserve natural open space and to balance the development of recreational facilities with the protection of the environment. There also is a need to improve the management of natural areas and to restore and enhance natural habitats within the parks system.

#### *Accessibility of Parks and Programs*

People find accessibility of parks and programs to all people and geographic areas in the county to be a key need. Many comments related to increasing equity in park and program distribution and access. Another consistent topic is universal access to facilities for people with various types of disabilities and abilities. Improving connections between and to parks to make them more accessible to local neighborhoods is another key need.

#### *Engagement of the Local Community*

There is a need for locals to increase engagement with the Parks Department, the parks system and parks programs. The Department needs to increase outreach about offerings, and especially increase outreach to underrepresented communities. People would like to see more programs, events and volunteer opportunities in the parks to increase the use and connection of the parks system. Educational opportunities and particularly interpretive programs and facilities are needed throughout the parks system.

### **Key Needs**

Overall, the most prominent themes, topics, and comments are summarized in Table 6. This summary is based on review of all the comments, findings and other outreach efforts.

Table 6: Key Community Needs Summary

Theme	Prominent Topics	Other Frequent Comments
<b><u>Quality of Park Experience</u></b>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Safety of park users</li> <li>• Cleanliness of park restrooms and facilities</li> <li>• Local stewardship of parks</li> <li>• Updating and maintaining aging park infrastructure</li> <li>• Adequate and sustainable funding for parks system</li> <li>• Working with other park agencies to provide consistent facilities, hours and regulations</li> </ul>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Keeping park facilities operational</li> <li>• Upgrading park facilities to accommodate increases in use</li> <li>• Enforcing park rules</li> <li>• Appropriate resources for maintenance and operations of existing facilities</li> <li>• Consistent park funds that are not significantly reduced in times of economic downturn such as the recession of 2008</li> </ul>
<b><u>Variety of Opportunities for Outdoor Recreation</u></b>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Providing a variety of types of community-serving park amenities</li> <li>• Adapting to provide opportunities for current and future trends in recreation</li> <li>• Opportunities for active and healthy lifestyles</li> <li>• Adding new uses and improvements to existing park properties</li> <li>• Opportunities for people to access open spaces and natural landscapes in the parks system</li> <li>• Partnering with other parks agencies to provide new facilities</li> </ul>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Additional sports facilities such as soccer, baseball and softball fields, and basketball, tennis and pickleball courts</li> <li>• Additional pool facilities and programs in underserved areas</li> <li>• Additional trail connections for all types of trail users</li> <li>• Spaces to take dogs</li> <li>• Community centers for programs and events</li> <li>• Youth facilities such as bike jumps and pump tracks, skate parks, adventure courses and climbing walls</li> <li>• Joint use agreements with schools and other agencies to provide public access to park-like facilities during off hours</li> </ul>
<b><u>Stewardship and Protection of Open Space and Natural, Cultural and Historic Resources</u></b>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Balancing the development of recreational facilities with protection and enhancement of natural, cultural and historic resources</li> <li>• Functional habitat for native flora and fauna</li> <li>• Protecting sensitive biological communities</li> <li>• Protecting natural open spaces in parks</li> </ul>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Connectivity between open spaces and natural areas to maximize benefits to wildlife</li> <li>• Conserving long-term viability of the variety of ecosystems within the county</li> <li>• Allowing natural biological processes to occur and biological systems to adapt to future conditions</li> </ul>
<b><u>Accessibility of Parks and Programs</u></b>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Equitable opportunities for access to parks and programs for all county residents and people with varying economic resources</li> <li>• Universal accessibility to built infrastructure for people of all abilities</li> <li>• Additional neighborhood parks within walking distance of people’s homes, especially in underserved areas</li> <li>• Increasing youth programs and bringing them to new locations</li> </ul>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Safe pedestrian and bicycle routes to access parks</li> <li>• Public transportation to parks and programs</li> <li>• Signs and materials in both English and Spanish</li> <li>• Shuttle services or other forms of transportation to people who need it to access parks and programs</li> </ul>
<b><u>Engagement of the Local Community</u></b>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Outreach to all demographics, particularly underrepresented communities</li> <li>• Opportunities for parks volunteers</li> <li>• Additional programs and events</li> <li>• Partnering with community organizations and local cities</li> <li>• Educational opportunities</li> </ul>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Relevant publicity of parks, programs and events</li> <li>• Coordination with school districts in publicizing parks and programs</li> <li>• Events for families with activities for multiple age groups</li> <li>• Interpretive programs</li> <li>• Working with neighbors and being respectful to local residents</li> </ul>