



OAKLAND PARKS Coalition

OPC 2014 Community Report Card on the State of Maintenance in Oakland Parks



Oakland Parks Coalition Board of Directors

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Annual Survey of Oakland Parks

The annual Oakland Parks Coalition survey, *Love Your Parks Day*, rates all aspects of park amenities and points out prevailing problems found at the time of the survey. This year's survey identified these top three problem areas in need of restorative attention: *Greenery, Litter, and Outdoor Children's Play Areas*. While we don't see dramatic differences between the category ratings for this year and last, our surveys through the years reveal a thread of persistent problems which management has yet to satisfactorily resolve. In most cases these conditions are reversible but, in others, parks have been so damaged that they are no longer assets to their communities. The current Oakland Public Works approach to park maintenance is to focus limited resources on the larger, well-used parks. We will explore the pros and cons of this policy later in this report.

The OPC *Love Your Parks Day* (LYPD) survey premiered in 2006 in response to declining conditions in Oakland Parks. At that time we had no idea that 2006 would actually be a banner year for maintenance staffing (120 full-time employees of which 57 were skilled gardeners) and that it would be downhill from there. Today only 27 gardeners and 32.5 park attendants maintain over 650 acres of developed park property, plus another estimated 60-70 acres of landscaped medians and streetscapes. That translates to 27 acres per gardener, double the amount just eight short years ago. This report will scope out the problems identified in this year's survey that surely originate from reduced maintenance resources.

During the month of September this year (2014), OPC stewards and board members completed 87 advance surveys of conditions in Oakland parks and green space. On Saturday, September 27, twenty-four additional volunteers arrived at the Garden Center to be trained to survey the remaining 29 parks. By the end of the day, a total of 116 parks had been surveyed for conditions relating to such things as presence of litter, homeless in our parks, graffiti, irrigation malfunctions and conditions of play equipment and ball fields. This is the 9th year of our survey, known as *Love Your Parks Day* and it is the only all-city park-user survey on park conditions. Its intrinsic value lies not only in its being unique but also because the surveyors are park users and know what's important to the success of a park. Additionally, those surveyors who are park stewards have a personal investment in their parks and, thus, high standards regarding the maintenance of their parks.

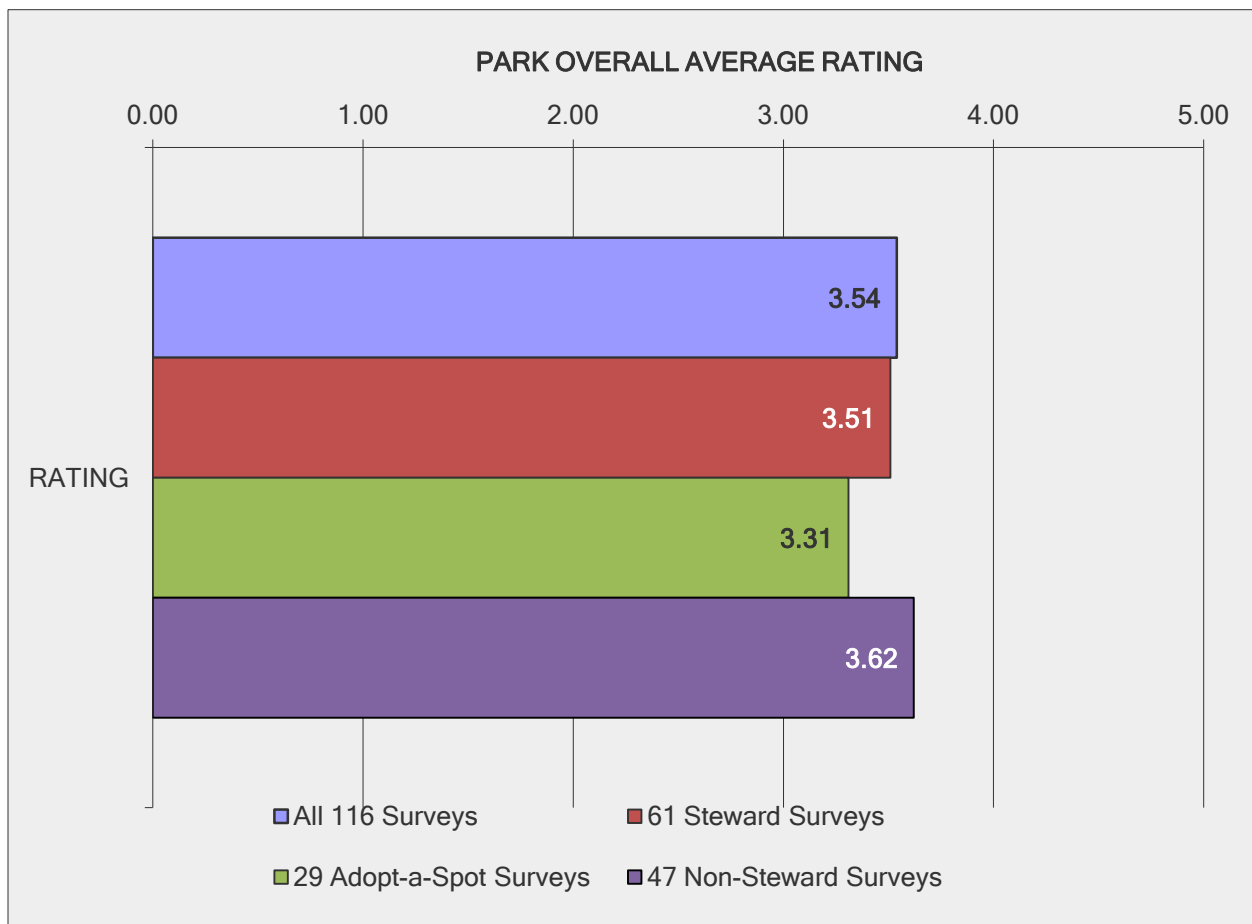
OPC Park Stewards

Who are OPC Park Stewards? They are a dedicated band of park enthusiasts who have pledged to care for their parks in a variety of ways: monitoring their parks and reporting problems; picking up litter and/or weeding; organizing group workdays; completing the annual park survey.

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Many OPC stewards were engaged in their parks before they signed on with OPC. Here are just a few examples: For years, Don Hamilton has been making a daily visit to Allendale Park¹ to pick up litter; Lisa Lemus organizes regular workdays at William Wood and Shelagh Brodersen at Garber Park; Ruth Tretbar works with the Oakland Public Works (OPW) gardener at the Veteran's Center planted beds and Joyce Stanick monitors and reports problems at Fruitvale Bridge Park. There are scores more of generous volunteers and neighborhood groups who work in their parks, helping to keep them clean and safe.

Sixty-one OPC Park Stewards, 29 of whom were also Adopt-a-Spotters (the City stewardship program), surveyed their parks this year. Both groups evaluate conditions in their parks with a more critical eye than other surveyors. This year, the lowest (and harshest) Park Overall Average Rating was recorded by the Adopt-a-Spotters and the highest (best) by non-stewards. There is crossover between OPC Stewards and Adopt-a-Spotters because OPC encourages its stewards to sign up with the Adopt-a-Spot program for additional on-site support from the City.



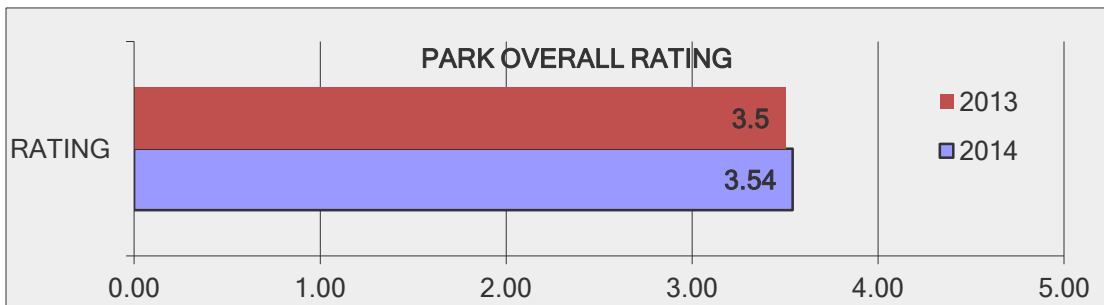
¹ All parks cited in this report will be listed in the Index with their location.

Love Your Parks Day Survey Ratings, Comparisons, Analysis

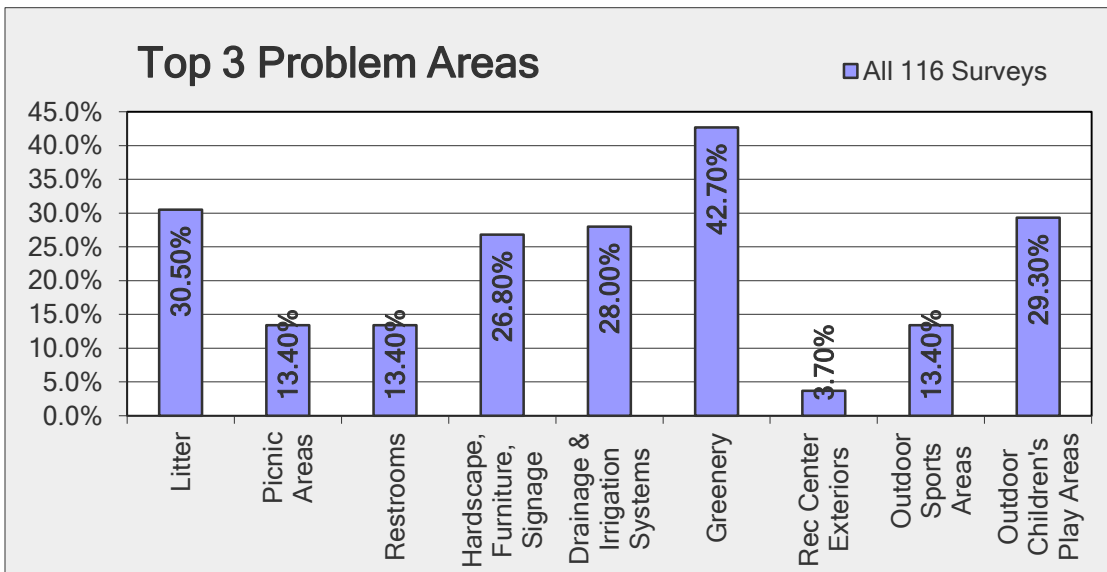
Our survey covers nine categories of park amenities: *Litter, Picnic Areas, Restrooms, Hardscape (includes Furniture & Signage) Drainage & Irrigation Systems, Greenery, Recreation Center Exteriors, Outdoor Sports Areas and Outdoor Children’s Play Areas*. Each category has from two to ten questions which are rated by the surveyor on a scale from 1-5 where 1=worst and 5=best. Following each category is space for a comment and we will be quoting many of those comments in the body of this report.

Two questions complete the survey:

- **Park Overall Rating.** This year’s average Overall Rating for all 116 surveys was **3.54**, a slight improvement over the 2013 Overall Rating.

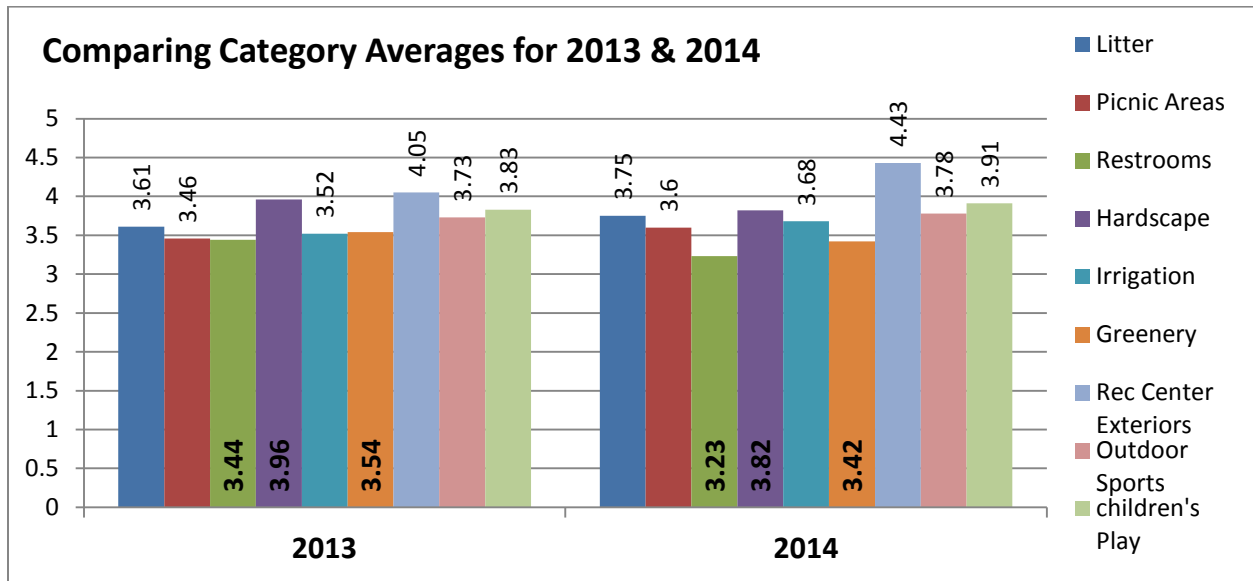


- **Top Three Problem Areas in need of Restorative Attention:** *Greenery, Litter, and Outdoor Children’s Play Areas* were the three top choices. We will look closely at the questions for these categories later in the report to understand why they were deemed the most “in need of restorative attention”.



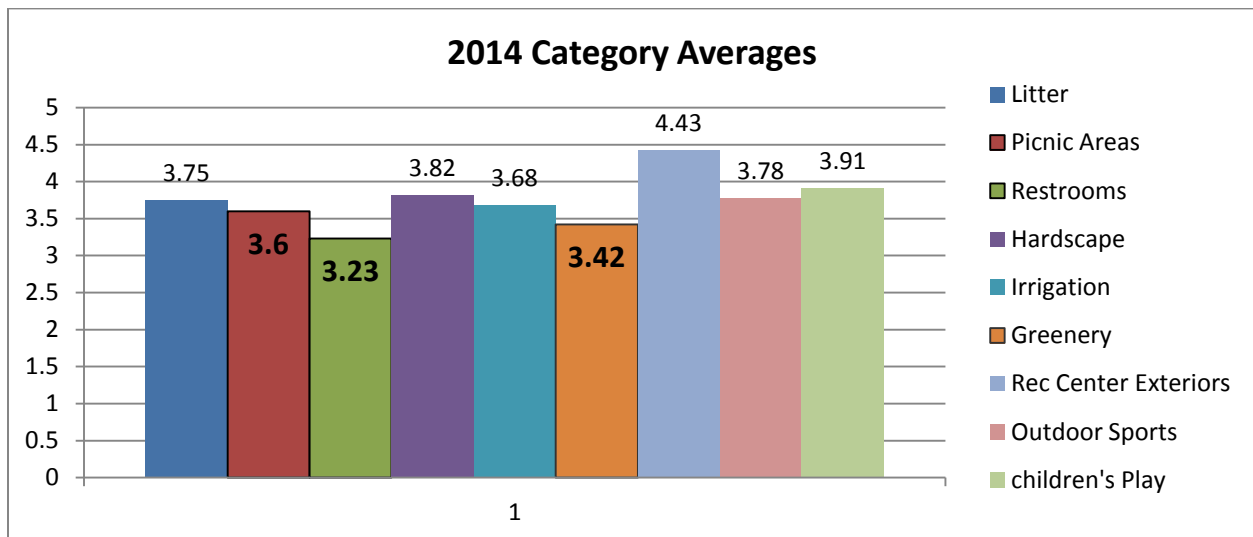
Comparing 2013 to 2014

Category averages in 2014 were generally somewhat better than in 2013, but the exceptions are worrying: *Restrooms* fell by .21, *Hardscape* by .14 and *Greenery* by .12. As equipment and infrastructure age we can expect a natural decline in conditions which would explain, in part, the lower ratings for *Restrooms* and *Hardscape*. An even more important factor in restroom conditions is frequency of scheduled maintenance and ability of crews to pivot when emergencies arise. Is OPW able to meet this challenge? Greenery needs skilled gardeners to keep it vital; yet gardener positions have been cut steadily in the last decade.

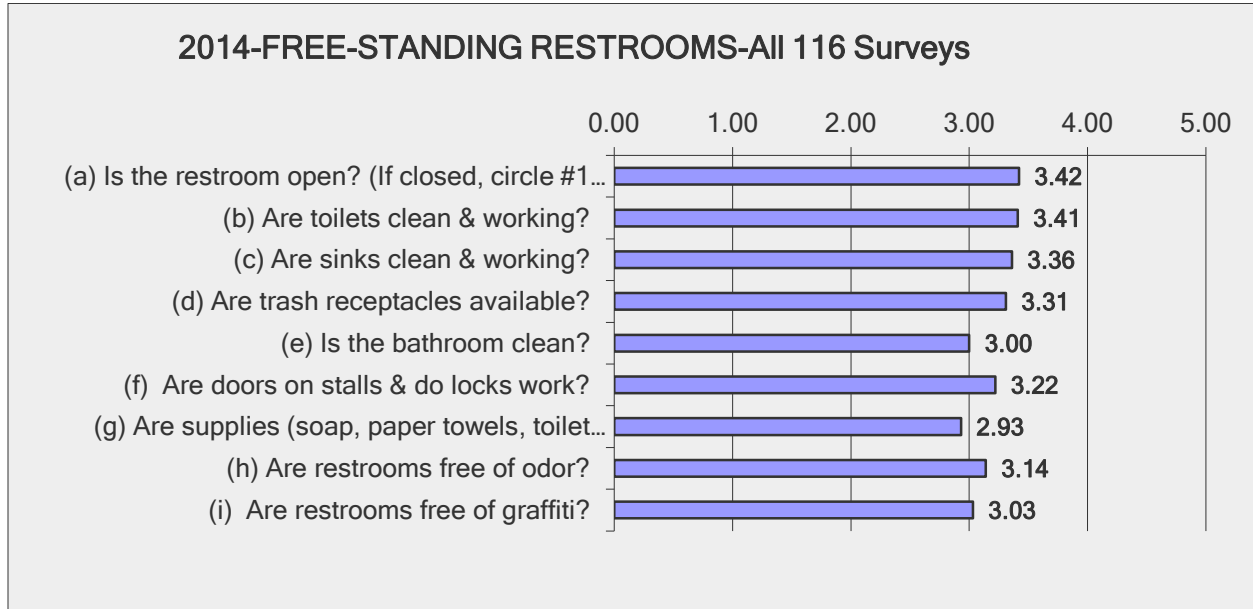


2014 Lowest Category Averages: Restrooms, Greenery and Picnic Areas

We averaged the ratings for the questions in each of the nine categories for all 116 surveys. The three lowest rated categories are: • Restrooms: 3.23 • Greenery: 3.42 • Picnic Areas: 3.6



Restrooms



This question received the lowest rating in the category: **(g) Are supplies (soap, paper towels, toilet paper) available?** Better by just .07 was the average for: **(e) Is the bathroom clean?**

OPC personally visited several of these free-standing restrooms and noted that supplies were, more often than not, unavailable and bathroom conditions were not acceptable.

Keeping toilets functional and restrooms clean and well-supplied is a challenging task, especially during high use in summer and on weekends. OPW locks restrooms that have broken essential equipment until they can be repaired which may take a restroom off line for a considerable amount of time, The restrooms located at Raimondi are so heavily used on weekends that some leagues have hired a private company to keep them clean when games are scheduled. (photo at rt.)



Surveyors' Comments: Restrooms

Bella Vista: "There are two self contained ADA stalls, and each has broken toilet seats, soap dispensers, faucets, and all stainless steel is rusted and the cleaning is minimal." **–Dawn Hawk Raimondi Restroom**

Pine Knoll: "Urinal in men's bathroom overflows." **–Judith Johnson**

Raimondi: "very unsanitary: floors overflowing with water; toilet stopped; no toilet paper, soap or trash containers. graffiti on men's walls." **–Ellen Wyrick Parkinson**

Montclair: "Bathrooms near baseball field are locked on the weekend." **–Jill Broadhurst**

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Shepherd Canyon: “Women’s: one door lock does not work; one stall has no toilet paper. Mens: 1 urinal needs repair or replacement same as last year.” –**Adrienne Bryant/**

Dimond: “Bathrooms are grotesque! In all ways. sexually inappropriate graffiti in women's RR. Paint!” –**Kalliope Bellises**



The restroom at Pine Knoll was clean and equipped at the time of the survey.



The Women’s restroom at Lowell was clean but missing toilet paper.



Joaquin Miller—no soap or towels

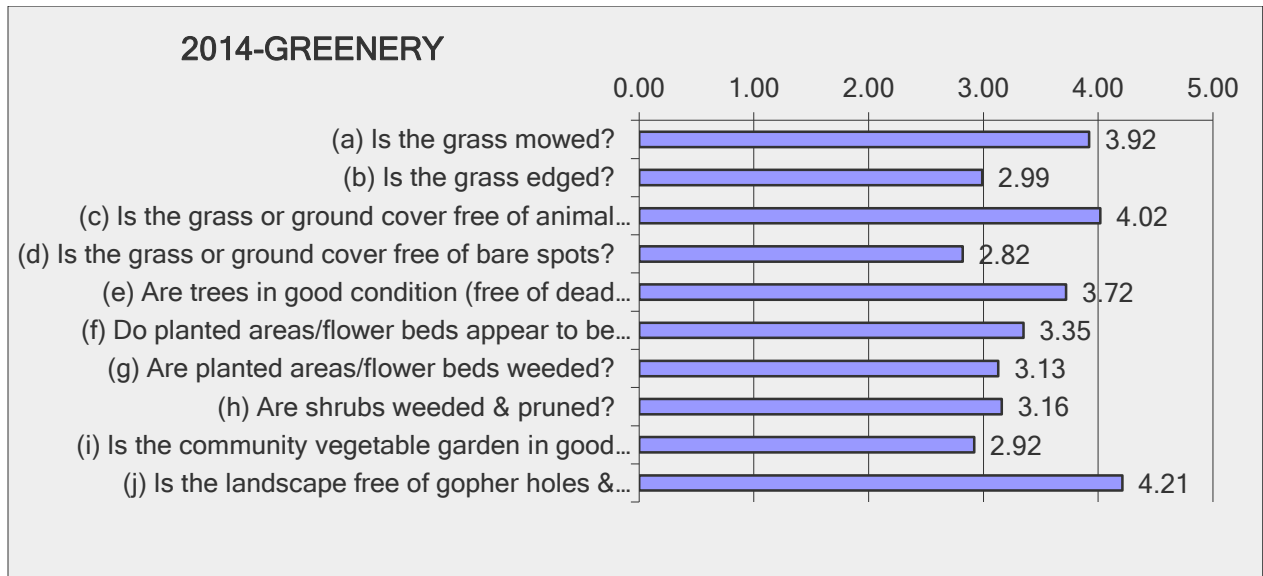


North Oakland Regional Sports Center—clogged toilet



Willow—hole in wall

Greenery



In the Greenery section the lowest rated questions are the following, in order: **(i) Is the community vegetable garden in good condition?** **(d) Is the grass or ground cover free of bare spots?** **(b) Is the grass edged?** Questions **(f)** and **(g)**, also low, relate to weeding and pruning.

Community Gardens: Regrettably, the low ratings for this survey question do not reflect the true state of these gardens. We apologize for a lapse in our volunteer survey training because OPC’s assessment of these gardens is, generally, very positive. There are 23 community gardens in Oakland, many in areas deemed food deserts. Dan Hernandez, Coordinator of the program, talks about the positive effect these gardens can have on a park and the park community. He says that just seeing people gardening and producing healthy food for their own consumption may be an incentive to others to use their parks in a more constructive way. The wait list for plots, according to Community Gardens Supervisor Mark Hall, is “years deep”. The key to success of these gardens is good management, usually by a non-profit group or a Recreation Center Director, or a firm commitment from a neighborhood group or a non-profit partner. Verdese Carter, below, did not have either of those elements.

Community Gardens



Gardens at Lakeside Park



Verdese Carter garden appears abandoned.



Concordia



Tassafaronga

Edging: Given the mounting demands facing maintenance crews, edging is a low priority. Regrettably, park paths pay the price when it is not done

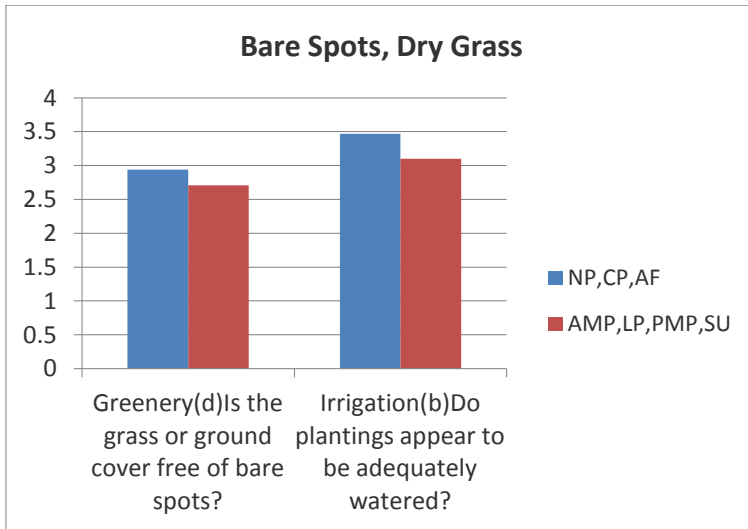


regularly. Where edging is not consistently performed grass and weeds encroach on the path and break up the asphalt or concrete surface. Edging is not just an esthetic improvement; it is also an economically sound one. The grass around the picnic areas in Verdese Carter (*photo at rt*) is neatly edged while weeds are invading the Raimondi walkway (*at left*) and already breaking the concrete.



Dry Grass, Bare Spots: At survey time there had been no rainfall for months and dry grass and bare spots were ubiquitous. The drought dictated the amount of water that could be used by the whole system but not where it would be used so OPW made judicious decisions about which parks should get water. Generally, grass and shrubbery in the smaller or less-used parks were dryer while better conditions prevailed in sports fields and larger parks. However, wherever broken irrigation equipment could not be quickly repaired, it was shut down, adding to the water problems.

OPW has reduced watering by 20% to conform to the state guidelines for water conservation. Leaky pipes in old infrastructure add to the problem. Galvanized pipes in Lakeside Park frequently leak and replacement of irrigation pipes in that park will require a large sum of money. Incrementally, new technology, which saves on water usage, is being installed system-wide. As old pipes are replaced, water-saving Calsense controllers--they monitor and report breaks electronically to supervisors--and new, smarter sprinkler heads are installed.



We see from these survey ratings that the larger parks (NP=Neighborhood Park, CP=Community Park, AF=Athletic Field) score higher than the smaller parks (AMP=Active Mini Park, LP=Linear Park, PMP=Passive Mini Park, SU=Special Use Park) on these two questions in the Greenery and Irrigation sections of the survey.

Parched Lawns

Raimondi



Lakeside Park



Clinton Square



Green Lawns

Sports fields and playing fields in heavily used parks generally had greener lawns.



Lowell



Tassafaronga



Defremery

From green to brown. What a difference a few short years at South Prescott make!



South Prescott in 2008



South Prescott in 2014

Surveyors' Comments: Dry Grass, Irrigation

North Oakland Regional Sports Center: "Entry gardens on both sides of parking lot aren't getting enough water and 5 trees have died, in spite of request for increasing water. No access by stewards to irrigation controller is a problem. Sports fields get plenty of water." —**Gordon Piper**

San Antonio: "Irrigation is an ongoing problem because the system is so old, and the sprinkler heads are often broken off by the mowing equipment. The drought has only added to the challenge." —**Wendy Jung**

FM Smith: "The water irrigation system for our new butterfly garden is broke. All watering needs to be done by hand." —**Stephen Cunningham**

Veteran's Center: "On Grand Ave, several spray nozzles do not spray, they flood the ground; need to be repaired. In continuing drought this area needs low-water plants, not the annuals we were given. They barely survive." –**Ruth Tretbar**

Willow: "Many bare spots and existing grass un-mowed." –**Cathi & Ed Sweeney**

Weeding and Pruning: Hand weeding is labor intensive and, therefore, not practical when maintenance personnel are limited. Since herbicides or pesticides are not permitted in parks (Roundup, on the other hand is used in medians) weed-whacking is the fallback method. Sadly, this method does not get to the root problem and weeds abound in our parks.

A particularly egregious example of weed invasion is at Cypress Freeway Memorial Park which was dedicated in 2005. At that time the special long grass that was planted on the undulating landscape artfully mimicked the waves of the earthquake. No longer--it has been replaced by weeds.

As important as pruning is to the healthy growth of trees and management of shrubbery it, too, is postponed more often than practiced. In many parks, that task is consigned to individual volunteers and workday volunteers, sometimes administered by gardeners and sometimes not.



Cypress Freeway Memorial Park grass in 2011



Cypress Memorial in 2014--No grass left here, just weeds.



Lion's Creek Crossing--Hard to tell the shrubbery from the weeds.

Surveyors' Comments: Weeding and Pruning

Allendale: "Grass mowed too high. Shrubbery is not maintained at all." –**Don Hamilton**

Raimondi: "Shrubbery & flowers in front of building need attention." –**Ellen Wyrick-Parkinson**

Veteran's Center: "Volunteer Larry Biggir has pruned shrubs and lower branches of trees. I weed weekly." –**Ruth Tretbar**

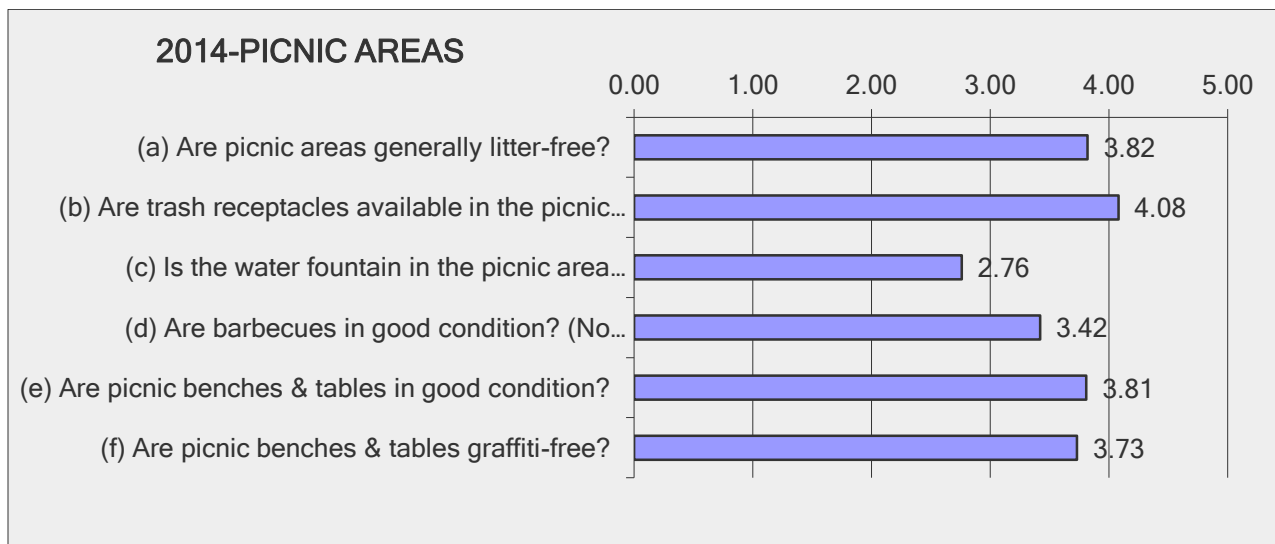
Franklin: Shrubs around perimeter could be trimmed. –**Judith Johnson**

Bella Vista: “There is a lot of weeding needed, and I hope that our volunteer group can schedule a spruce up soon, as this is an area we can help with.” –**Dawn Hawk**

Morcom Rose Garden: “The Dedicated Deadheaders do their best to weed the beds and deadhead, but this is a VERY labor-intensive garden to maintain, so its condition varies according to volunteer hours.” –**Nancy Friedman**

Picnic Areas

One question in Picnic category was greatly responsible for pulling down the average: **(c) Is the water fountain in the picnic area working?** It is unusual to find a water fountain that is not plugged. Children enjoy filling the basins with sand and falling leaves also contribute to the problem. But, this question asks if the fountain is working and on visits to many parks over the years, more often than not, we have found the fountains broken.



South Prescott—Plugged fountain



Verdese Carter—Sand plugging drain



Poplar-leaves plugging drain.

Surveyors’ Comments: Drinking Fountains

Dimond Park: “Both drinking fountains have leaking water at their base. The drinking function (push button) does not work.”-- **Kalliope Bellesis**

Lions Creek Crossing: “Both fountains broken due to drain having been blocked by foreign matter.”—**Nancy Karigaca & Margaret Pinter**

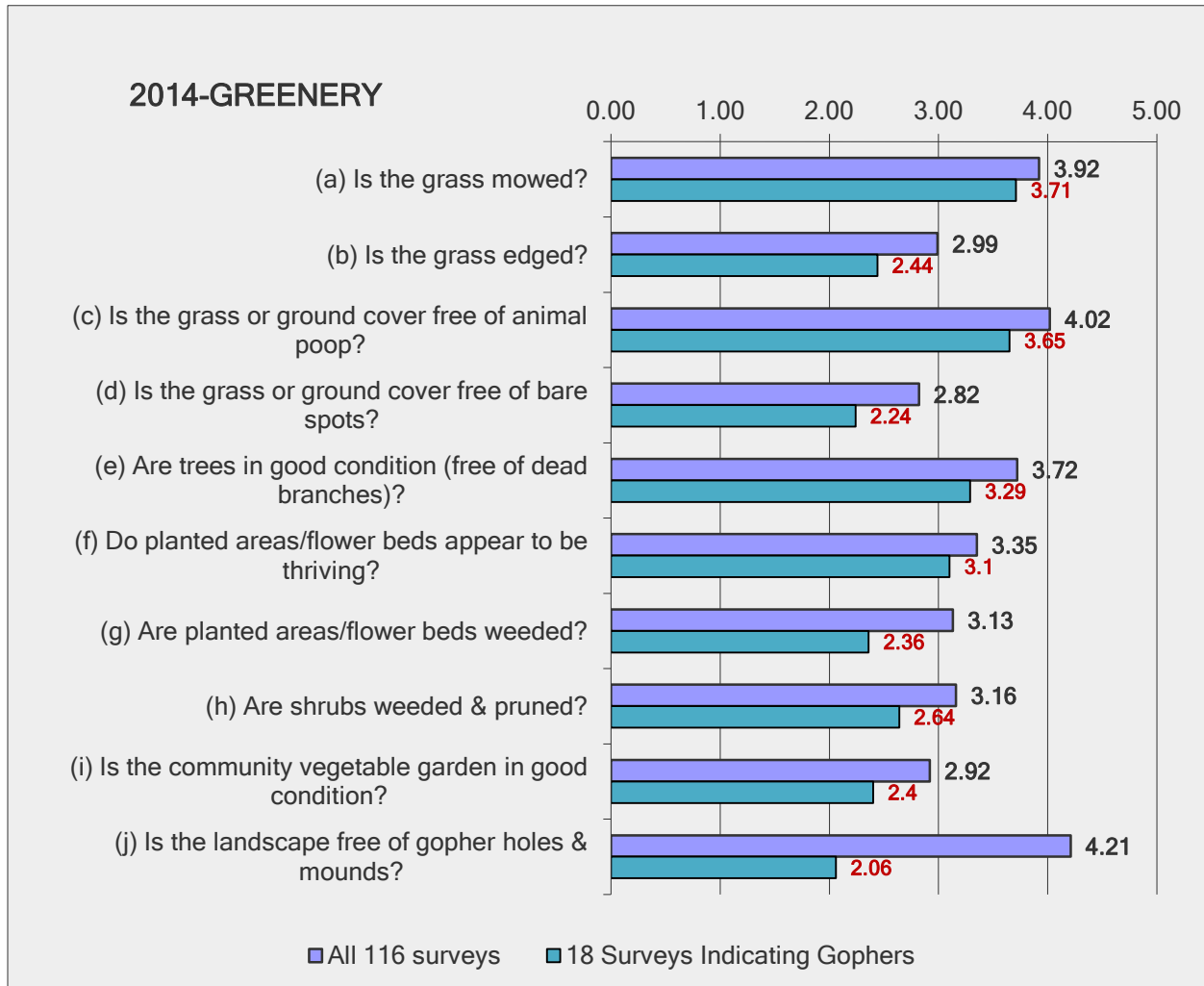
Cesar Chavez: “Drinking fountain works but shoots water too far and pools on pavement.” -- **Julie Larwood & Joyce Stanek**

Poplar: “Water fountain not working & plugged.” —**Barry Weiss & Myra Redman**

Joaquin Miller: “Water fountain not working, but is dripping. —**Merle Boese**

Gophers in Our Parks

We filtered the Greenery Category (Question 16) for low ratings of 1, 2 or 3 on one question: **(d) Is the landscape free of gopher holes and mounds?**



Eighteen surveys rated (j) as a problem. In averaging those 18 surveys we see that every question in the category is given a lower rating average than the averages for all parks together. It's clear from the graph above that a gopher-pockmarked landscape negatively colors all other perceptions about the conditions of greenery at the park.

Some sports fields, in fact, are so festooned with gopher holes and mounds that players' safety is precarious. The soccer backfield at Raimondi is one of those. Four West Oakland parks have been especially hard hit by these pests: Raimondi, Willow, DeFremery and South Prescott. In the spring, one field at Bushrod was the subject of a letter to city officials from Trent Rohrer, who coaches the city's Little League: "Two weeks ago, the grass in the outfield (at Bushrod) was so long that we were losing balls during the course of play, and the outfield was so cratered that balls were bad hopping into my players' faces." OPW has been working with Alameda County to combat the infestation and short term elimination has been achieved in some cases but a long-term solution has not been found.



North Oakland Regional Sports



South Prescott Park

Surveyors' Comments: Gopher Holes

DeFremery: "The gophers are back with their new babies. They [PWA] started getting rid of them but they stopped too soon." –**Phyllis Lun**

South Prescott: "Bad gopher problem." –**Cathi & Ed Sweeney**

Cypress Freeway Memorial: "Sadly neglected park. One area has gopher holes." -- **Cathi & Ed Sweeney**

Raimondi: "Gopher holes abundant." –**Ellen Wyrick Parkinson**

Top Three Problem Areas

The last survey question asked the surveyor to name up to Three Top Problem Areas. They were, in order:

- Greenery: 42.7%
- Litter: 30.5%
- Outdoor Children's Play Areas: 29.3%

This list does not exactly match the three lowest rated categories—Restrooms, Greenery and Picnic Areas but this is not surprising. While all parks have greenery, most parks do not have restrooms and many do not have picnic areas.

Since we have already examined the problems in the Greenery category let us now look at the second and third places in the Top Problems Areas: Litter and Children's Play Areas.

Surveyors' Comments: Litter

Scattered papers and other debris may offend the senses more than other park problems. Overflowing receptacles, often on weekends or in summer when park activity increases, contribute greatly to the accumulation of litter. The comments tell the story best.

Park Boulevard Plaza: "The park steward picks up trash in the park every day. People use the park as a dumping ground for used furniture and appliances - but OPW picks up when called." –
David Lechtaler

Eastshore: "Lots of trash on Monday from heavy use over the weekend. Need to empty the cans every Monday. –**Michael Udkow**

Willow: "Huge piles of litter and litter along fence. Overflowing trash cans. Homeless in evidence. " –**Cathi & Ed Sweeney**

Mosswood: "The big homeless encampment between the dog play area and Webster St has been cleared, but there is a lot of trash remaining from the occupation that should be cleared." –
Mary McAllister

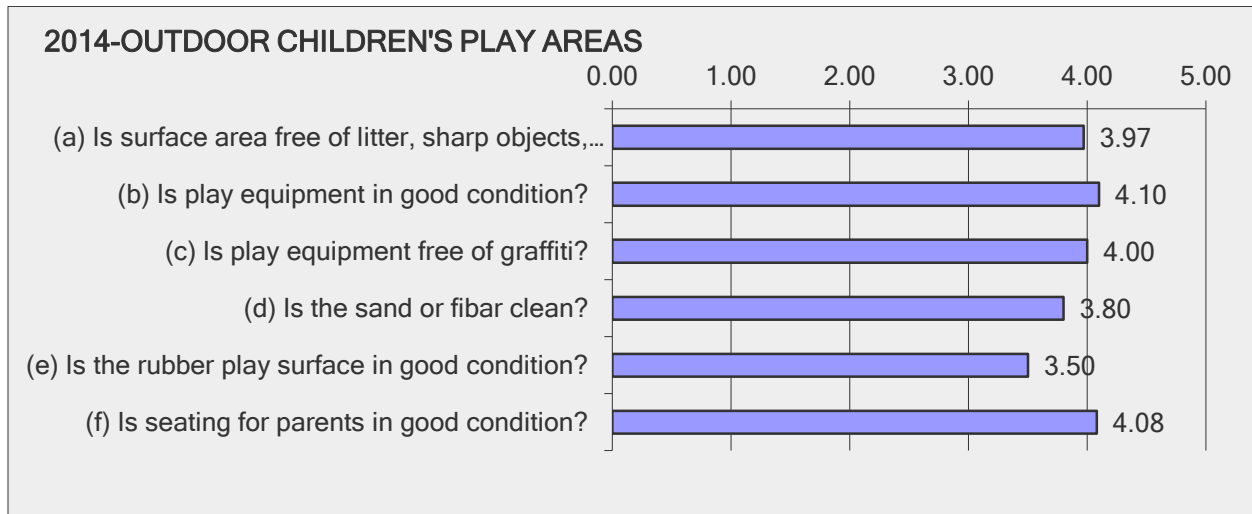
Cesar Chavez: "litter everywhere even though trash cans are present. hot ash cans are filled with litter. Unsafe." –**Joyce Stanek and & Julie Larwood**

Surveyors’ Comments: Children’s Play Areas

Surveyors gave their lowest ratings to the question about resilient play surfaces in the children’s play areas. In Oakland, three materials are used for play surfaces: sand was the earliest but new surfacing is usually resilient surface or fibar. Each of those surfaces comes with its pluses and minuses:

- Sand: When sand is clean it provides the most enjoyable experience for kids. They love to build sand castles. However, sand is difficult to keep free of glass, twigs and weeds and is very costly to replenish.
- Fibar is not as comfortable a surface but easiest of all to maintain and is cost-effective.
- Resilient Surface is safe but it wears out quickly under swings and slides and needs frequent patching.

From these surveys and from observation, we feel that PWA is not keeping up with patching of resilient surfaces and this can lead to injury.



Surveyors’ Comments: Play Surfaces

Arroyo Viejo: “The fibar under swings is completely gone and the fabric under the fibar is torn thru too. Some patches of the rubber play surface are worn around the tot lot not under kid play areas.” –**Karigaca & Pinter**

Manzanita: “Ragged black plastic with some sand on top at one end of play structure. Play surface needs restoration.” –**Dale Hagen & Ruth Tretbar**

Central Reservoir: “Vandals destroyed part of the rubber surface under the swings. Seating nearby is fine.” –**Patrick Haggarty**

Redwood Heights: “Surface under swings is destroyed. Large dangerous holes in the matting.” –**Barbara Goldenberg**

Allendale: “Sand not raked or cleaned. Blackberry vines and ivy growing in play area.” –Don Hamilton

Questionable Play Surfaces



DeFremery: Play Surface Patching



Carter Gilmore: No Patching (Karigaca)



Arroyo Viejo: fibar is thin. (Karagaca)

Good Play Surfaces



Verdes Carter-Clean Sand



Tassafaronga-good cushion of Fibar



Wade Johnson-Resilient surface is in good condition.

Manageable Park Problems

All of the problems cited thus far (and listed below) in this report are reversible given sufficient resources and creative approaches. Litter collection, for example, has greatly improved with the purchase in 2013 of three mini-packers which dramatically reduced trips to the dump. Other equipment purchases—Dingos² and Zero Turns³--have saved on labor and time. According to Supervisor Kennedy the Dingo has “turned into our work horse with park maintenance and we utilize it to make up for our limited staff.”

- Parched lawns, malfunctioning irrigation systems
- Proliferation of weeds
- Un-pruned shrubbery
- Broken water fountains

² Dingo: A Compact Utility Loaders equipped with auger drive, backhoe, hydraulic breaker and bucket

³ Zero Turn: Small riding lawn mower

- Inconsistent restroom maintenance
- Worn resilient surfaces in children's play areas
- Litter

Alert: Serious and Growing Park Problems

We believe that these three problems have inalterable consequences for parks once they are allowed to take a firm hold.

- **Gophers**
- **Homelessness in Parks**
- **Level C Parks**

Gophers

We have written at length about the proliferation of gophers in our parks. Although the problem is currently concentrated in West Oakland we worry that, without natural enemies, these critters can find their way to almost any park in Oakland. Pest control processes are restricted to methods that will not harm the park users which eliminates poisons. Trapping is a laborious process that works only temporarily. Some very creative thinking is needed to solve this problem.

Homeless in Parks

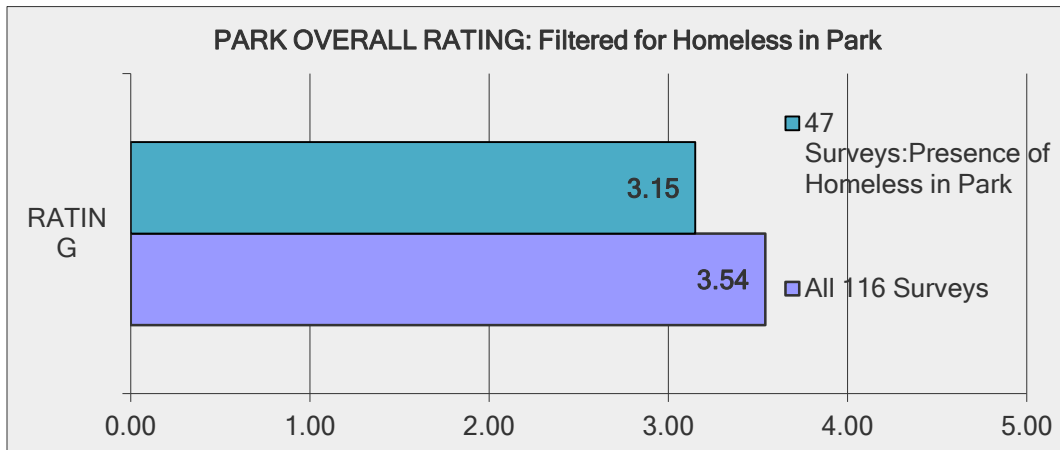
OPW Directors all agree that homeless in parks is one of their biggest maintenance challenges. Robert Kennedy, Maintenance Supervisor, says that maintenance crews are "having to respond to a record amount of large encampments and illegal dumping materials which take time away from routine maintenance." He relates that he got 115 Call Center complaints just about homeless encampments (some for the same parks) in one week in November. We have seen from the survey that over 40% of the surveyed parks have signs of homeless living there and their presence appears to negatively affect litter and restroom conditions. The process for cleaning out a homeless camp is complicated and maintenance crews often find that the encampment simply moves a few feet away to escape the 72-hour notice to vacate. OPW continues to work with Project Dignity to find shelter for the homeless but this is not an easy task for various reasons: the problem is not limited to parks or to Oakland--homeless dwellings and encampments are found in any area where natural shelter is available--and the Bay Area's temperate climate provides an ideal environment for outdoor living.

Survey on Homelessness in our Parks

Category 1 (Litter) has one question about homeless people in our parks:

- a. Are the grounds generally free of litter?
- b. Are enough trash receptacles available?
- c. Are trash receptacles emptied?
- d. Is there evidence of homeless people living in or using this park?**

When we filtered surveys for low ratings of 1-3 for question 11(d) we found 47 surveys. That means that surveyors found signs of homelessness in 40.5% of our parks and open spaces! This is a disturbing finding and cannot be ignored. In the chart below we see that the Park Overall rating where homelessness has been identified is well below the average for all parks.



The homeless have taken up residence at Grove Shafter Park.



Pine Knoll

Removal of trash and debris from homeless sites is only a temporary fix to an intransigent problem. Without success in finding permanent housing for the homeless inhabitants of our parks a long-term change in park conditions is unlikely.

Surveyors’ Comments: Homeless in our Parks

Hardy Park: “A large group of men hang out by the picnic table in the DMV parking lot. Piles of debris come and go.” –**Margaret Pinter**

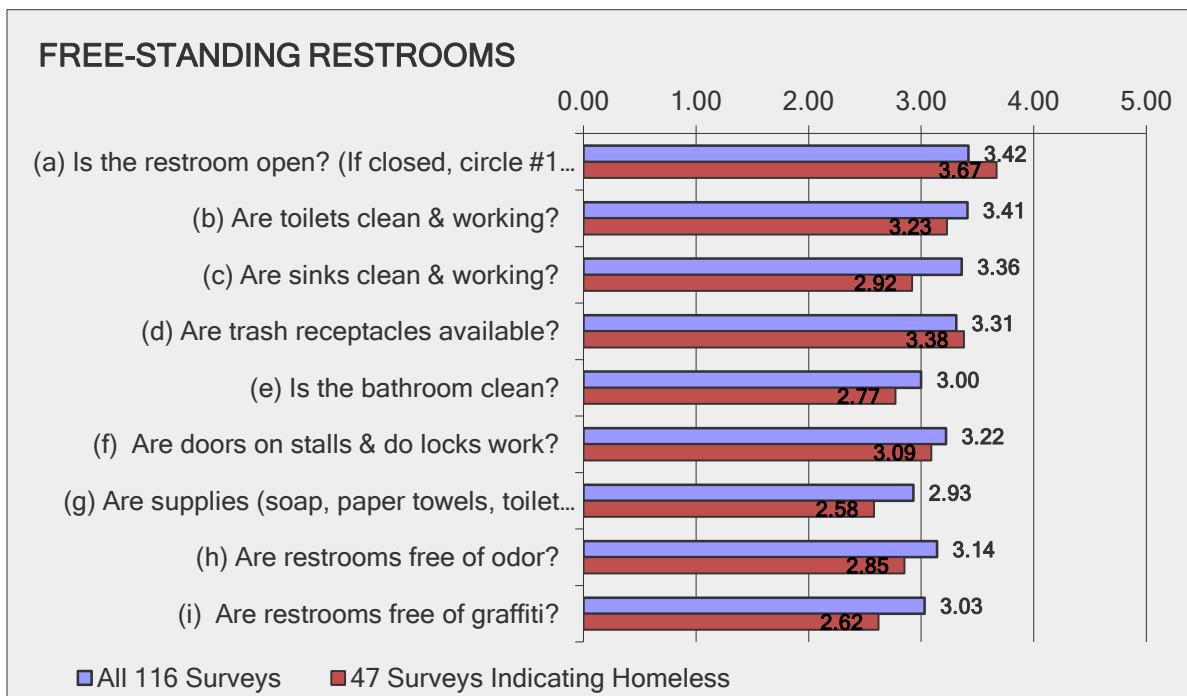
San Antonio: “We have homeless people sleeping throughout the Park.”--**Wendy Jung**

Splashpad Park: “The homeless individuals who hang out in the park are a huge problem. We're constantly dealing with litter including empty beer cans and whiskey bottles plus feces. Their behavior also frequently makes the park unattractive to others. While filling out the survey, two different guys urinated in the California Native plant bed.”—**Ken Katz and Mary Jo Sutton**

Arroyo Viejo: “A local resident stated there is a big homeless problem especially at night. 5 people asleep or hanging out alone at tables, no gear. More homeless between 78th and 79th behind trees--evidence from drugs (needles) behind the group of trees.” --**Nancy Karigaca and Margaret Pinter**

Homelessness and Restrooms

Under the Restroom category we see that all questions relating to maintenance of the restrooms are rated lower when there is evidence of homelessness in the park. In our temperate climate parks provide a good alternative to living on the streets and the recession has no doubt caused an increase in homelessness. We understand that this social problem seeps into all facets of city life but we must be mindful of the fact that some parks are being sacrificed to the homeless, robbing communities of safe, clean recreation areas.



Level C Parks

When revenues from the Landscaping and Lighting Assessment District began to fall short of covering expenses for park maintenance, City officials wanted, in 2008, to place a proposal on the ballot which would raise rates and add a cost-of-living clause to the existing Assessment District which had essentially become the sole resource for park maintenance funding. Around the same time, a similar assessment district for open land acquisition in Santa Clara County was overturned by the California Supreme Court so the Oakland proposal idea was dropped. OPW cut maintenance staff in the next budget cycle and had to curtail service which still continues. The agency then adopted a three-tiered approach to maintenance service which was an accommodation to reduced maintenance crews:

- **Service Level A** (for large, high-use parks) provides a frequent, regular level of routine maintenance.
- **Service Level B** (for smaller, less-used parks) a moderate level of routine maintenance.
- **Service Level C** (for small underused parks) no routine maintenance. Answer complaints only.

In this report, we have already commented on the apparent better conditions at the larger, well-used parks. Let's focus now on the parks that receive "no routine service", Level C Parks.

Assistant Director of Public Works, Susan Katchee, explains that maintenance resources have to be dedicated to parks that are most used by the public. There are not enough people to send to the many neighborhood mini-parks so they don't get any more attention than an occasional garbage collection. These "little parks are often taken over by nefarious elements [such as gangs and drug dealers] and it's a whole big problem in and of itself," she says. She would gladly assign more resources to parks that had a "grass-roots neighborhood campaign to take back their parks."

Park and Tree Services Division Manager Brian Carthan feels that there are some Level C parks that should be closed because they are a danger to their communities. Dolphin and Holly parks in East Oakland and St. Andrews Plaza in West Oakland are examples of dangerous parks. Tyrone Carney was closed some years ago because of drug activity. When grant money can be identified to change the atmosphere and conditions in a park, that may be a solution. West Oakland Bishop Floyd Begin Plaza will be renovated and it is expected that families moving into new housing there will use the park. Carthan also still has hope that a park or green space can be rescued if the neighborhood has the will. "It starts with a small group," he says.

East Oakland Park Supervisor Clinton Pugh relates that he does not like to leave Level C parks to the elements so, when he can, he organizes his crews to perform workday blitzes. One such site is Tyrone Carney, a park that has been closed for years now but has become a favored dump

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site. His crews cleaned up the site in the spring and it has been much easier to keep it clean ever since.

A number of small pocket parks, especially in Council Districts 3 and 7 are in serious decline. The presence of homeless camps and gang graffiti clearly mark some of these parks off-limits for residents. One study concluded that, “Unfortunately for residents who live nearby, the presence of gangs in the parks often prevents them from using the parks to participate in leisure activities.”⁴ Other parks are suffering from neglect--equipment break-down and insufficient maintenance. OPW categorizes these parks as Level C: they receive “no routine maintenance,” and are attended to only when complaints are registered.

Referring to the dilapidated 88th Street Mini in his area, Park Supervisor Clinton Pugh comments: “It’s nestled right in the community. People have to see these parks when they are taking their children to school, going to work and it bothers me and we’re working to get things done in these parks but at the same time I must address the A-level parks. “

The following are just three examples of Oakland parks that have become liabilities to their neighborhoods.

Holly Mini Park has been a haven for homeless and possibly gangs for years.



⁴ 2009 “Gangs of Chicago: Perceptions of Crime and Its Effect on the Recreation Behavior of Latino Residents in Urban Communities”, Kim Shinew and Monika Stodolska

Dolphin Mini has no record of service requests. No one cares enough to complain about conditions there.



88th Mini is a blight in this neighborhood.



Do we simply abandon these problem parks or do we try to resuscitate them? What would it take to get a neighborhood to embrace its park and keep it safe for wholesome uses? What has happened to these parks can happen to any neighborhood park that is not properly cared for.

Sure-Fire Remedies for Parks in Trouble

Capital Spending

Capital spending is a sure-fire remedy for a failing park where there is buy-in from the community. Community input in the planning process and a commitment to participate in the upkeep of the park is essential to the future success of any new or refurbished park.

Capital Spending Successes

Ernie Raimondi Park was reborn when a synthetic playing surface and turf baseball field were installed with \$5 million in grants and donations raised by



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Friends of Oakland Parks and Recreation. The new regulation soccer /football field allows for year round play and maintenance requirements are less burden-some (no mowing or irrigation required but regular vacuuming, brushing and turning over of crumb rubber must be executed). Of Oakland's 53 sports fields only 10 are of regulation length (for teenagers and adults) and only two are equipped for football. With its 7,500 mem-bers the Jack London Youth Soccer League alone has to struggle to find venues to schedule play in the East Bay so the refurbishing of this sports complex has offered significant opportunities for play for youths and adults.

Capital Spending Mistakes

But installing new equipment or building new parks is no guarantee of success. A park must fulfill a need and have the support of the neighborhood to thrive. Two West Oakland parks stand out as glaring examples of ill-conceived projects:

25th Street Mini Park was built with East Bay Regional Park District and Measure WW funds approved in 2008. The park (rt.) is, ironically, in pristine condition because it is usually locked. The Parks and Recreation Advisory Commission stipulated that a neighborhood group take responsibility for this park before approving the design plans. But, out of safety concerns, this park is only open mornings and early afternoon until 3pm. Is this the best way to manage a park?;



Cypress Freeway Memorial Park was dedicated in 2005 to commemorate the Loma Prieta Earthquake and the collapse of the Cypress Freeway.



When community discussions were held to plan for the Cypress Memorial Park (lft.), neighbors voiced preference for a park with a play structure, a component that did not make it into the final design. Instead they got a beauty-fully designed tribute to the victims of the earthquake which today is used principally by the homeless or the indigent.

Both of these parks failed to get the kind of buy-in from their communities that would guarantee their success.

They may be located in neighborhoods but they are not used by the neighbors.

Neighborhood Support Groups

Neighborhood support groups are an excellent antidote to maintenance deprivation. There are dozens of long-existing volunteer groups that have adopted parks in their neighborhoods. Those parks benefit from many eyes on the park to monitor park problems, park workdays to clean and green and even funding to make capital improvements. In neighborhoods where the population is more transient, parks don't get the same attention or care. How to generate neighborhood support for parks in deprived neighborhoods is perhaps the greatest challenge. The mission of the City's Adopt-a-Spot Program should be expanded to include outreach to neighborhoods that do not already have parks groups.

Is Oakland Living Up to Its Billing?

The benefits of parks in cities are well-documented. In its 2009 "Measuring the Economic Value of a City Park System"⁵ Trust for Public Land measures value by seven major factors: property value, tourism, direct use, health, community cohesion, clean water, and clean air. While economic and health benefits are most often cited to argue for more parks--proximity to parks increases property values and taxes and exercise in the parks improves health--community cohesion may be the more important benefit to neighborhoods that lack venues for safe socialization.

"Numerous studies have shown that the more webs of human relationships a neighborhood has, the stronger, safer, and more successful it is. This human web, which Jane Jacobs termed "social capital," is strengthened in some cities by parks. From playgrounds to sports fields to park benches to chessboards to swimming pools to ice skating rinks to flower gardens, parks offer opportunities for people of all ages to interact, communicate, compete, learn, and grow. Perhaps more significantly, the acts of improving, renewing, or even saving a park can build extraordinary levels of social capital. This is particularly true in a neighborhood suffering from alienation partially due to the lack of safe public spaces."⁶

The Trust for Public Land ranks Oakland 13th out of the 60 largest cities in the nation for its park system. The scoring is based on acreage, services, investment and access. While Oakland can boast of abundant park acreage (33,181 acres of parkland and open space) easily accessible parks (130 recreational parks) and a healthy number of playgrounds (1.8 per 10,000 residents), the TPL ranking does not look at the quality of conditions in our parks. This is where Oakland falls short.

⁵ www.tpl.org/sites/default/files/cloud.tpl.org/pubs/ccpe-econvalueparks-rpt.pdf

⁶ "Measuring the Economic Value of a City Park System", Community Cohesion, The Trust for Public Land, Peter Harnik and Ben Welle,

For years we have skated on maintenance thin ice, trying to maintain a vast system of parks with only a small band of maintenance workers, fewer and fewer of whom are skilled gardeners. Without sufficient staff to properly maintain all parks Public Works has chosen to concentrate its resources in the bigger, well-used parks. The smaller parks are left to their own devices; those that have neighborhood support groups have weathered the storm, while those without have not. To truly deserve the high ranking from TPL we must address the needs of all our parks.

Oakland's approach to park maintenance--focus limited resources on the larger, well-used parks--is not unique. New York City has been blamed for highlighting its "marquee" parks (quite a few of which now have private conservancies to maintain them) and ignoring its small neighborhood parks. A new initiative there will fund 35 community parks that were chosen from a list of 200 parks deemed "beyond repair". In a New York Times article on October 29, the author states: "Ignore a park long enough, and it will either be beyond repair or need to be built from scratch."⁷ We believe that quite a few of Oakland parks are well on their way to this fate.

Recommendations

Important questions have been raised by this report but they are not new. In our previous reports we have highlighted the same issues and the same threatened parks year after year. The only difference is that, with few exceptions, conditions have gotten worse. Does our city have the commitment to find the means to preserve this unique network of assets?

OPW has to compensate for its dwindling numbers of maintenance personnel by providing only the most basic service, streamlining maintenance tasks where it can, by reorganizing crews and purchasing new machinery—all good ways to offset insufficient staffing numbers. It increasingly counts on volunteer workdays and individual volunteers to pick up the slack while maintaining the delicate balance of respecting the needs of union workers. Nevertheless, a sub-par level of service to our parks is jeopardizing the system as a whole and we must not be complacent about it. There's much that we can do to rescue our parks and green spaces.

- **DEDICATE MORE GENERAL FUND RESOURCES TO PARKS MAINTENANCE.**—Even in an environment of cash-strapped general funds, revenue dedicated to park maintenance is a solid investment and will save money over the long run.
- **DEVELOP A DEDICATED CITY-WIDE REVENUE SOURCE TO AUGMENT SKILLED MAINTENANCE STAFFING.**—It's been six years since the Council proposed a ballot measure dedicated to park maintenance. The economy has improved and the political

⁷ The New York Times, Wednesday, October 29, 2014, "Room to Grow In Mayor's Plan For City Parks", Michael Kimmelman

climate for quality-of-life ballot measures (to wit-Santa Clara Measure Q⁸ and Berkeley Measure F⁹) is gaining momentum. Let's put a parks measure forward on the 2016 ballot to save our parks.

- **ENCOURAGE & SUPPORT THE ESTABLISHMENT OF CONSERVANCIES OR TRUSTS AND OTHER NON-TRADITIONAL FUNDING SOURCES FOR PARKS**—We may not be as rich as NYC but we should be able to grow support for a private-public partnership for our larger parks like Lakeside Park or Joaquin Miller.
- **GROW AND IMPROVE VOLUNTEER SUPPORT OF PARKS** —Our volunteers are our most precious resource and continue to be underutilized. In many neighborhoods, groups have taken on the responsibility of caring for their parks but they need a consistent, reliable source of City support to do a good job. The Adopt-a-Spot Program should be expanded and improved to become more responsive to the desires of groups and individuals to volunteer and even to generate the establishment of neighborhood park groups where there are none. We need to promote and encourage stewardship for every Oakland park.
- **WORK MORE CLOSELY WITH EXISTING SPORTS GROUPS**--Throughout the United States, sports leagues contribute significantly to the maintenance of sports fields and Oakland has made some progress to adopt this well-proven approach. We encourage an even stronger partnership.
- **ESTABLISH STRONG NEIGHBORHOOD SUPPORT FOR CAPITAL IMPROVEMENTS OR NEW PARKS BEFORE THEY ARE IMPLEMENTED OR ESTABLISHED.**—We have seen how capital improvements can turn a park around time and time again. At the same time, we also see how quickly a park can decline when the neighborhood has not bought into the project.
- **MAKE HARD DECISIONS ABOUT DECLINING PARKS** —It's time to take a serious look at the parks that are neighborhood liabilities and develop a plan to turn them into assets.

⁸ Santa Clara Measure Q: To protect and preserve natural open space areas for future generations by improving parks,, open spaces and trails; protecting land around creeks, rivers and streams to prevent pollution and improve local water quality, preserving wildlife habitat expanding public access; enhancing environmental education; and protecting scenic hillsides, shall Santa Clara County Open Space Authrity levy a special tax of \$24 annually per parcel for 15 years, with citizen oversight and all funds benefitting local open space?

⁹ Berkeley Measure F: Shall the parks special tax be amended to sustain community parks like the Rose Garden, children's playgrounds, tennis, basketball courts, and ball fields, by increasing the per square foot tax rate from \$0.1256 to \$0.1466 and adding an inflation factor?

Appendix

A. Photo Credits

B. List of Oakland Parks Mentioned in this Report

C. 2014 Love Your Parks Day Survey

A. Photos by

- Nancy Karigaca
- Susan Montauk
- Ed & Cathy Sweeney
- Lasonia Williams

B. Oakland Parks Mentioned in this Report

Park	Council District	Address
25 th Street Mini	3	2251 San Pablo Avenue
88 th St. Mini	7	1722 88th Avenue
Allendale	4	3711 Suter Street
Arroyo Viejo	6	7701 Krause Avenue
Begin Plaza	3	2251 San Pablo Avenue
Bella Vista	2	1025 East 28th Street
Bushrod	1	560 59th Street
Carter-Gilmore	6	1390 66th Ave. @ Lucille
Central Reservoir	5	2506 East 29th Street
Cesar Chavez	5	3705 Foothill Boulevard
Clinton Square	2	1230 6th Avenue
Concordia	6	2901 64th Avenue
Cypress Freeway Memorial	3	14th St. & Mandela Parkway
DeFremery	3	1651 Adeline Street
Dimond	4	3860 Hanly Road
Dolphin Mini	7	1299 73rd Avenue
Eastshore & Astro Play Area	2	550 El Embarcadero and Lakeshore Avenue
FM Smith	2	1969 Park Boulevard
Franklin	2	1010 East 15th Street
Fruitvale Bridge	5	3205 Alameda Avenue
Garber	1	Alvarado Rd & Claremont Ave
Hardy	1	491 Hardy Street

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Holly Mini	7	9830 Holly Street
Joaquin Miller	4	3590 Sanborn Drive
Lakeside	3	666 Bellevue Avenue
Lion's Creek Crossing	6	966 66th Avenue
Lowell	3	1180 14th Street
Manzanita	5	2701 22nd Avenue
Montclair	4	6300 Moraga Avenue
Morcom Rose Garden	2	700 Jean Street
Mosswood	4	3612 Webster Street
North Oakland Regional Sports	1	6900 Broadway
Park Boulevard Plaza	2	2100 Park Boulevard
Pine Knoll	2	Lakeshore Ave. & Hanover Ave.
Poplar	3	3131 Union Street
Raimondi	3	1800 Wood Street
Redwood Heights	4	3883 Aliso Avenue
San Antonio	2	1701 E 19th Street
Grove Shafter	3	Martin Luther King Jr. Way & 36th Street
Shepherd Canyon	4	6000 Shepherd Canyon Road
South Prescott	3	3rd Street/Chester Avenue
Splash Pad	2	Grand Avenue & Lakepark
St. Andrews Plaza	3	32nd St. & San Pablo Ave.
Tassafaronga	7	85th Avenue & E Street
Verdese Carter	7	9600 Sunnyside Street
Wade Johnson	3	1250 Kirkham Street
William Wood	5	2920 McKillop Road
Willow	3	1368 Willow Street

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C.		2014 OPC LOVE YOUR PARKS DAY SURVEY September					
Rate every question by circling <u>one rating only</u> . More is better: 5 = Best, 1 = Worst.							
1. LITTER							
	a. Are the grounds generally free of litter?	1	2	3	4	5	N/A
	b. Are enough trash receptacles available?	1	2	3	4	5	N/A
	c. Are trash receptacles emptied?	1	2	3	4	5	N/A
	d. Is there evidence of homeless people living in this park?	1	2	3	4	5	N/A
2. PICNIC AREAS (Picnic areas are designated by tables with benches)							
	a. Are picnic areas generally litter-free?	1	2	3	4	5	N/A
	b. Are enough trash receptacles available in the picnic area?	1	2	3	4	5	N/A
	c. Is the water fountain in the picnic area working?	1	2	3	4	5	N/A
	d. Are barbecues in good condition?	1	2	3	4	5	N/A
	e. Are picnic benches & tables in good condition?	1	2	3	4	5	N/A
	f. Are picnic benches & tables graffiti-free?	1	2	3	4	5	N/A
3. RESTROOMS <u>Freestanding Only</u> (not in Rec Centers, not porta-potties)							
	a. Is the restroom open?	1	2	3	4	5	N/A
	b. Are toilets clean & working?	1	2	3	4	5	N/A
	c. Are sinks clean & working?	1	2	3	4	5	N/A
	d. Are trash receptacles available?	1	2	3	4	5	N/A
	e. Is the bathroom clean?	1	2	3	4	5	N/A
	f. Are doors on stalls & do locks work?	1	2	3	4	5	N/A
	g. Are supplies (soap, paper towels, toilet paper) available?	1	2	3	4	5	N/A
	h. Are restrooms free of odor?	1	2	3	4	5	N/A
	i. Are restrooms free of graffiti?	1	2	3	4	5	N/A
4. HARDSCAPE, FURNITURE, SIGNAGE							
	a. Is there a sign with the park name at, at least, one entrance?	1	2	3	4	5	N/A
	b. Is there a sign with park rules at, at least, one entrance or nearby?	1	2	3	4	5	N/A
	c. Are signs graffiti-free?	1	2	3	4	5	N/A
	d. Are fences in good condition?	1	2	3	4	5	N/A
	e. Are gates working properly & open (during posted hours)?	1	2	3	4	5	N/A
	f. Are benches/seating areas in good condition?	1	2	3	4	5	N/A
	g. Are walkways in good condition?	1	2	3	4	5	N/A
5. DRAINAGE & IRRIGATION SYSTEMS							
	a. Do grounds & landscaping appear to be adequately watered?	1	2	3	4	5	N/A
	b. Are the low areas free of collected water?	1	2	3	4	5	N/A

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6. GREENERY						
GRASS & GROUND COVER.....						
a. Is the grass mowed?	1	2	3	4	5	N/A
b. Is the grass edged?	1	2	3	4	5	N/A
c. Is the grass or ground cover free of animal poop?	1	2	3	4	5	N/A
d. Is the grass or ground cover free of bare spots?	1	2	3	4	5	N/A
TREES.....						
e. Are trees in good condition (free of dead branches)?	1	2	3	4	5	N/A
FLOWERS & SHRUBS, COMMUNITY GARDEN.....						
f. Do planted areas/flower beds appear to be thriving?	1	2	3	4	5	N/A
g. Are planted areas/flower beds weeded?	1	2	3	4	5	N/A
h. Are shrubs weeded & pruned?	1	2	3	4	5	N/A
i. Is the community garden in good condition?	1	2	3	4	5	N/A
GOPHER HOLES AND MOUNDS.....						
j. Is the landscape free of gopher holes & mounds?	1	2	3	4	5	N/A
7. RECREATION CENTERS/EXTERIOR						
a. Is the rec center building name visible?	1	2	3	4	5	N/A
b. Are rules, hours & programs posted outside?	1	2	3	4	5	N/A
c. Are building exterior walls/windows free of graffiti?	1	2	3	4	5	N/A
d. Is exterior paint/siding in good condition?	1	2	3	4	5	N/A
e. Are windows & doors in good condition?	1	2	3	4	5	N/A
8. OUTDOOR SPORTS AREAS						
a. Is the turf/grass (sports fields only) in good condition?	1	2	3	4	5	N/A
b. Is court (tennis or basketball) surfacing in good condition?	1	2	3	4	5	N/A
c. Are courts free of pools of water?	1	2	3	4	5	N/A
d. Are drinking fountains at sports fields or courts working?	1	2	3	4	5	N/A
e. Is there netting (tennis or basketball) where it is needed?	1	2	3	4	5	N/A
f. Are courts (tennis or basketball) properly marked with lines?	1	2	3	4	5	N/A
g. Are bleachers graffiti-free?	1	2	3	4	5	N/A
h. Are bleachers in good condition?	1	2	3	4	5	N/A
9. OUTDOOR CHILDREN'S PLAY AREAS						
a. Is surface area free of litter, sharp objects and weeds?	1	2	3	4	5	N/A
b. Is play equipment in good condition?	1	2	3	4	5	N/A
c. Is play equipment free of graffiti?	1	2	3	4	5	N/A
d. Is the sand or fibar clean?	1	2	3	4	5	N/A
e. Is the rubber play surface in good condition?	1	2	3	4	5	N/A
f. Is seating for parents in good condition?	1	2	3	4	5	N/A
PLEASE GIVE THIS PARK/AREA AN <u>OVERALL RATING.</u>	1	2	3	4	5	