

# Review of the Parks and Recreation Department for the City and Borough of Juneau, Alaska

## REPORT (Introduction)

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## **INTRODUCTION:**

In August of this year, Kimberly Kiefer, City Manager for the City and Borough of Juneau (CBJ), contacted me to conduct a review of the City's Parks and Recreation Department. Kiefer indicated that my prior employment with the CBJ as Director of Parks and Recreation and later as Deputy City Manager, and my understanding of the CBJ budget process, knowledge of the community makeup, and 42+ years in the parks and recreation field could be of assistance in the effort to improve the efficiency and effectiveness of Juneau's Parks and Recreation Department.

On September 4, 2014, I entered into a contract with the CBJ that stated, *"Consultant shall provide the City Manager with a written report concerning improving the efficiency and effectiveness of the Parks and Recreation Department, for example, related to improving of revenue returns, containing costs, aligning staffing according to service delivery, reorganization possibilities, policy development processes and recreational program service delivery effectiveness. Consultants findings will address near and long term recommendations."*

## **SETTING THE STAGE:**

The review of Parks and Recreation (P&R) was necessitated in large part due to a projected General Government budget shortfall of \$9 million for fiscal year (FY) 2016. The City Manager indicated that the CBJ had just completed the FY 2015 budget process where the Mayor and Assembly had approved \$3 million in budget reductions that included \$2 million operating and \$1 million capital budget. The \$2 million in operating budget reductions resulted in the elimination of 12.04 positions, which the City Manager in her budget transmittal letter stated *"makes it harder to maintain an acceptable level of service in all areas."*

The City Manager in the last paragraph of the transmittal letter concluded, “As we look forward to balancing the FY 16 budget we will need to take a hard look at what services and programs can be eliminated and where revenues can be raised. Juneau is a strong and diverse community, where the citizens have come to expect responsive municipal services delivered in an efficient manner.”

## **THE PROCESS:**

I traveled to Juneau two times to conduct interviews of department employees, key stakeholders, and other city department staff. I attended staff and volunteer committee meetings and toured facilities. I also created questions for a department employee survey that was available for each employee to fill out using Survey Monkey.

During my first visit to Juneau in September, I met with the P&R Director daily, the Deputy City Manager on numerous occasions, the P&R Senior staff, Youth and Adult Sports Coordinators, the HR Director, Building Maintenance leadership, both the current and previous manager of the Treadwell Ice Facility, several Parks and Landscape staff, Aquatics personnel, Zach Gordon leadership, the Manager of Centennial Hall, the Director of Engineering, and the Director of Finance.

During my second visit to Juneau in October, I met and interviewed the Eaglecrest Ski Area Manager, a representative from the Glacier Swim Club, Chair of the Aquatics Advisory Board, and Chair of the Parks Recreation Advisory Committee. I attended the Treadwell Task Force Meeting, conducted a conference call with the President and CEO of the Juneau Convention and Visitors Bureau, and met with the HR Director, Finance Director, and had several meetings with the City Manager and the Deputy

City Manager. I also toured the department's indoor facilities and many of the parks, under the guidance of key staff.

In addition to interviews, meetings, and site visits, I also assembled copies of the City and Department budget, documentation of agreements, memos and letters from stakeholders, advisory committee agendas, and meeting minutes. I reviewed facility schedules and operating hours, a number of employee position descriptions, read the 2012 CBJ Budget Survey from the McDowell Group, viewed staff and organizational charts, read numerous responses to questions I posed to P&R staff, and reviewed web documents and sites. I also received a copy of the Assembly Strategic Plan documents, Capital Improvement Plan (CIP), and several current policies the department utilizes to manage the \$12 million dollar operating budget. I also conducted separate phone interviews with three members of the Assembly and the Mayor.

### **KEY FINDINGS:**

Having previously served 28 years ago as Juneau's Director of Parks and Recreation and as Deputy City Manager, it was important that I stayed objective in the review of department abilities, functions, and outcomes as I developed this report. Although the department has increased in responsibilities with the additions of the Dimond Park Aquatic Center and Treadwell Ice Arena and with new functions such as parking and building maintenance, the primary tasks of maintaining parks, operating recreation programs, and managing facilities has stayed consistent. On the other hand, recreation program offerings appear to have shrunk in both numbers and participants. It was, however, heartwarming to see the success and contributions that the Zach Gordon Youth Center has been able to consistently provide to the community over its many years in operation.

There are several areas where I am concerned that the department is not doing the best they could, and these include: the upkeep and maintenance of

the parks, the decline in the popularity of the department, the extreme lack of positive public relations, a failure to understand the need of the user, and the overall lack of creative and visionary leadership. The primary focus points of any Director and the leadership team should be on the direction in which the department should head, how to get there, and who they can find to support that vision. My view is that these focus points are lacking in clarity and are inadequate for a department of this size and complexity. This has helped create an untenable situation where the department is at risk of failure, unless immediate changes are made to get the department back on the right course.

Below, I have outlined my key findings in detail:

**Leadership:** The department needs to be led in a positive and collegial manner in order to address the challenges it is currently facing with the budget, creating a department vision, understanding what the public needs, preventing conflict, and once there is conflict, with how to solve it. Through my observations of several key staff and through my discussions with members of the public and several major partners, there appears to be far too much negativity, a lack of creativity, and in some limited cases, a lack of accountability by department leaders. The department must change to a “positive led culture” focusing its time and energy on making supporters out of those who they may have offended or disagreed with. To help assist in creating this new paradigm, each and every employee in the department should have a refresher course in public relations, conflict management, problem solving, and what it means to be accountable. I found that the majority of the employees in the department that I had contact with were dedicated to the citizens of Juneau and were very capable of turning the organization around with training, encouragement, and sound leadership.

**Planning:** The department comprehensive plan is outdated. Lacking money to complete a new long-range plan is not a justification to stop planning or to

retain the status quo. Planning is a daily function of a successful department and should be the focus of how each and every employee performs their job. If the department was actively planning then a number of the recommendations presented in this report might already be operating, such as a Major R&M plan, a Fees and Charges program, or a functioning public evaluation process. Due to the absence of continuous planning, the department will find it challenging to implement many of the recommendations in this report (if accepted) without setting priorities and committing the necessary staff resources. To create a stronger overall department unit I would suggest forming department teams to accomplish many of these recommendations. Establishing cross-functional teams will help encourage employee participation, provide a fresh outlook with different views, and will aid in employee buy in. I would also encourage the department to initiate a “be inspired, innovative, and steadfast” movement to encourage positive change with the goal of becoming the best department in the city.

Furthermore, in reviewing the CBJ Strategic Plan documents it appears that the department has not fully thought out its role or advocated a position in how to carry out the goals and objectives of the elected officials. I would recommend that a review of all department goals, strategic initiatives, and the creation of a single mission statement be conducted to aid in aligning better to the vision of the Assembly.

**Staffing:** One way to improve the success of the department is to hire the best employees who possess proven leadership skills, are visionary thinkers, have problem solving abilities, have the right skill set, and when possible who are trained in parks and recreation. The department appears to have hired from within the ranks without first advertising outside the city organization. If this hiring practice continues the department may not be able to achieve the type of success it needs. In my experience, the introduction of new blood can

accomplish the outcomes necessary for an organization to excel. Regardless of who applies for an opening, each and every applicant whether internal or external, should compete for the job. The department has an obligation to the public to seek the best person for any position. This can be accomplished through open recruitment and by conducting a thorough selection process. On key leadership positions the department should recruit locally, statewide, and nationally if possible.

The goal of the city should be to have the best possible employees leading the department with the right kind of skills and abilities to achieve the vision of the Assembly.

**Parks and Recreation Advisory Committee:** Presently the department assists the Parks and Recreation Advisory Committee (PRAC), Aquatic Board and the Jensen Olsen Arboretum Board. Having so many committee's/boards has created confusion over roles and responsibilities with the staff and several appointed members I interviewed. This confusion over roles and responsibilities has significantly diminished the function of the PRAC to the point that I am not sure what role they serve any longer. This has been frustrating to the PRAC chair, which would like to see the PRAC play a greater role in recreation and park planning, department policy development and assisting the Assembly in carrying out strategic initiative's. I would like to suggest that the Assembly re-evaluate the governance structure for each appointed committee or board within Parks and Recreation to determine what specific roles and responsibilities each group should play in the CBJ. Clearly describing what expectations the Assembly has for the PRAC will be particularly critical as the Assembly ponders what direction the Aquatic Board will take and in evaluating the findings of the Treadwell Committee report. Regardless of what policy decisions the Assembly ultimately makes with respect to the Aquatic Board or the Treadwell Committee findings it will be imperative to clearly define the PRAC, Aquatic

Board, Jenson Olsen Arboretum Board and possibly a new Treadwell committee duties and expectations in a new governance policy. Having a clear governance policy will help eliminate confusion, stepping over boundaries, reduce hurt feelings and define staff and appointed members roles to the policy makers.