

April 29, 2019

Billings City Council
210 North 27th St.
Billings, MT 59101

Re: Park District 1 Spending Plan

Honorable Mayor and City Councilmembers:

On Friday, April 19, Tom Rupsis, the chair of the Parks, Recreation and Cemetery Board submitted an annual report to the council. The report identifies some areas of concern that the Heights Task Force members support; those areas are identified below with input from the Task Force. The Park Board recommendations are in blue; the Task Force recommendations are in purple.

2019 Annual Report of the Parks, Recreation & Cemetery Board

EXCERPTS

Council members have included a reference to the completion of development at Castle Rock park on the priority list. The updated CIP includes a complete master plan project for FY 20 and a playground project in FY 21. The playground is considered to qualify for PD1 as there used to be a playground in Castle Rock but it had to be removed when it was no longer safe. There is no additional funding allocated for the development that may be required to complete the new plan.

Recommendation: Include a note about future development of Castle Rock Park in the appendix of the FY 20-24 CIP. Estimated project costs can be put into the CIP when the master plan is completed.

The updated CIP was presented to the Park Board at the April 17th meeting by Director Whitaker. The community and perhaps not even the Park Board had any input into the changes. The Heights Task Force did not request and does not support funding \$75,000 for a Castle Rock Master Plan given that there is no funding at this point to develop Castle Rock Park.

We believe it is the ethical responsibility of council members and Park Board members to demonstrate working for the Common Good. Recognizing that stewardship of the public interest must be their primary concern, officials must work for the common good of the people of Billings and not exclusively for their neighborhood, and they need to ensure fair and equal treatment of all persons, claims and transactions coming before the city council, boards and commissions. Asking all Billings residents to pay PD1 fees while providing no resources to a significant percentage of the community does not reflect quality planning and a commitment to fair and equal distribution of limited resources.

In regards to Castle Rock, Cottonwood and Coulson, the Department must develop a strategy to actually build those parks. It is not sufficient to just develop the master plan and then hope funds will someday be allocated. Council should consider not approving any future master plan without a development strategy that describes how the development of the park will proceed in the near term (i.e., within 3 years after adoption).

Recommendation: Insist that staff propose a development strategy as a condition of the master plan approval for Castle Rock, Coulson and Cottonwood parks.

When two new middle schools were built in Billings, the first was built in the Billings Heights because the Heights was experiencing the fastest growth. When Chief Rasch was asked at two consecutive council meetings, what the priority would be if only one new fire station could be built, he answered the Heights (though both fire stations are needed to meet national fire safety standards). We recognize the need to develop Centennial Park and we believe the council needs to provide equivalent support for Castle Rock: \$2 million from the general fund, \$460,000 of payments that were made available to Centennial Park and an additional \$400,000 in the 2020-2024 CIP for additional needs identified. Given adequate resources to begin appropriate development of Castle Rock Park 35 years after the Billings Heights was annexed into the City of Billings, we would support a Master Plan if adequate resources were allocated to develop the park.

*We do support the playground at Castle Rock; we expect that the funding would not be contingent about the irrigation system not failing at North Park. We do not support developing three, \$1.3 million dollar splash parks in a single neighborhood. (See **Over budget South Park splash pad could delay other projects** By MIKE FERGUSON mferguson@billingsgazette.com Nov 25, 2016 https://billingsgazette.com/news/local/government-and-politics/over-budget-south-park-splash-pad-could-delay-other-projects/article_3070f3e5-7c53-53f1-b599-27160e4c48e4.html) “The low bid to construct the splash pad, made by General Contractors Construction Company of Billings, is for about \$1.03 million, about twice the budget for the project. To make up for the shortfall, parks staff recommends delaying planned irrigation upgrades at Stewart Park and restroom remodeling at Burlington, Centennial, Poly Vista and Coulson parks”. Note, that 3 years later the projected splash parks are estimated to cost \$1.3 million.*

Our Task Force recognizes needs for the following improvements in Heights Parks:

- *playground at Castle Rock*
- *pave the parking lot at Castle Rock Now children leaving the splash pad and walking to a vehicle with bare feet may experience the dreaded “goat head” weeds that poke through skin and puncture bike tires*
- *pit toilets at the dog park and Castle Rock for year round use Castle Rock hills provide good winter sledding given enough snow (perhaps it would be more equitable to provide pit replacement toilets rather than heated, year round bathrooms available only to a select few parks)*
- *pave the parking lot at the dog park to allow handicapped accessibility. Given that this is the city’s most used park, the unpaved parking lot is a mess*
- *Councilman Ewalt described the 6 additional acres the city is discussing acquiring in trade from SD#2 at Castle Rock park as basically a “rock pile” at the April 22nd meeting. Consider why the city would increase acreage to a park they have not developed in 35 years without a plan for improvement*
- *pave the parking lot at Clevenger Park and see the other “critical improvements” recommended in the Parks Master Plan*
- *maintain the disc golf area at High Sierra Park; trash cans are not emptied, trash is not cleaned, and the weeds are not cut*

The Department’s CIP process seems to be broken, with proposed projects for Park District 1 not aligning with Council priorities and no plan for ongoing parks development. Projects prioritized in prior years have dropped completely off the CIP. For example, in 2016 (?), a traffic study was to be completed at Stewart Park because of safety issues getting emergency vehicles through the park when busy. This project was never completed and is no longer on the CIP. The Board prioritizes addressing safety concerns in a park.

Recommendation: Staff should present the entire list of known lifecycle replacement, maintenance, and ongoing development projects to the Parks Board annually at the November meeting. The urgency of each project should be provided (e.g., “Immediate need”, “1-2 years”, “3-5 years”, “5+ years”). Public meetings

should be held between the November and December meetings. Staff should compile the results for the December Parks Board meeting along with their recommendations.

Recommendation: The Parks Board will assign liaisons to each pair of Council members by ward. We will schedule meetings to get each Council member's direct input on potential priorities for upcoming years before the CIP is first presented to Council.

We fully support that the Department's CIP process is broken and are proud of the council members who pulled approval of the PD1 funding. Thank you to council members Gibbs, Ewalt, Neese, Friedl, Clark, Cole and Brown. We agree that assigning liaisons to each council members ward will improve communication and the quality of the decision making.

PD1 was adopted to fund \$9,000,000 in unfunded maintenance projects. Six years after implementation, the Park Master Plan identified \$22,542,500 "critical recommended improvements" (p 16), and an additional \$770,000 of "sustainable improvements" including improvement to the High Sierra dog park (p 17). The proposed CIP has expenditures not recommended in either list and begins to spend additional dollars to develop new parks in the core and west end and omitting undeveloped parks throughout the city including Castle Rock, Meadowlark, and High Sierra in the Heights.

- *Consideration needs to be given to projects that can be used throughout the year and reduce expenditures for limited use facilities (ie splash pads). If you review the document titled "What does a \$100,000 homeowner get for \$16 a year?" which was presented by the Park Board in 2011, projects are equitably proposed throughout the city (see attachment). We believe park funds should continue to be spent equitably and Park Board members and council members need to represent the needs of all citizens. Two of the three proposed projects for the Heights Parks have no support: The Master Plan absent funds for development and the Maintenance facility. The funding also falls significantly short of proportional funding. Heights has 35% of the residents and PD1 project funding is \$6.5 million ($\$6.5 \text{ million} \times .35 = \$2,275,000$). A Heights resident responded on the April 2019 survey "A better selection of playground equipment. My 4 yo son loves north Park playground, but we want to be able to walk to something like that. Castle Rock Park needs a playground like that."*

The planning process on individual projects routinely takes longer than staff's own estimates (e.g., Centennial) and often results in poor or questionable financial estimates (e.g., South Park splashpad, Rose Park pool house). This can lead to distrust by Council and the community when presented with parks development budgets/estimates. Given the limited knowledge of the Board in this particular area, it is unclear if these issues are specific to the Parks Department.

Recommendation: Determine if other departments experience better results with estimating project budgets. If so, it may be useful to share best practices in project planning and estimation across City departments.

The statement made at the April 22, 2019 Council meeting by Mike Whitaker was that the purchasing power of \$2 million had been eroded by 8.5% since the program was created. Given the budgeted numbers in the PD1 CIP (\$1,300,000 for a splash park that cost \$1.03 million in 2016; \$714,000 for irrigation at North Park vs the \$400,000 in the 2017 Master Park Plan. Page 18 of the Park Master Plan estimates a cost of \$50,000 to develop a master plan for Castle Rock Park, not \$75,000 as recommended in the CIP). Round numbers, changed often, and not supported by actual data leads to increased distrust of the park planning and spending.

Council focused on two recommendations of the Comprehensive Plan when the plan was approved. To the Board's knowledge, the Work Order Management system has not been implemented. The Heights and West End maintenance facilities were placed on the FY 20-24 CIP but still have major questions unanswered (e.g., location, buy vs lease).

Recommendation: Consider requesting that the work order management system should be implemented first so that real data can be compiled to justify the maintenance facilities.

Agreed. At the April 22 meeting, Mike Whitaker stated that the Parks Department currently rents three storage units across the street from Castle Rock Park. This supports the recommendation made at council meetings that the Park District explore leasing rather than building or purchasing buildings. Given that the Fire Department needs two additional stations and is planning to work with the Police Department on satellite police stations, it seems appropriate to consider any new construction of maintenance facilities in conjunction with these planning efforts and incorporate needs into a city wide bond issue.

The Billings Heights Neighborhood Plan, was prepared by the Planning & Community Services Department Adopted by the Billings City Council on January 23, 2006 Adopted by the Yellowstone Board of County Commissioners on February 7, 2006. In the fall of 2004, a resident survey was released to ask residents their opinions on nine focus areas identified by the steering committee. These focus areas included parks and recreation (the same survey was used in 2019 with almost identical results given that very little has been done). There was a perception in 2004 that there are inadequate sidewalks and trails to allow for pedestrian walking and biking trails to school, parks and other community facilities. There was an identified need for trail corridors that allow access to schools, parks and other neighborhood by avoiding primary and secondary streets. These routes should provide a safe connection to schools and parks for children. Medicine Crow opened in 2016. Barrett Road has been a flash point for the parents and community which the city addressed in 2019 by building a bridge to allow children to get off Barrett Road and the school district allowed walking students to get on the busses. (NOTE: The city spent \$4 million to build sidewalks to Ben Steele Middle School before the school opened).

The 2006 Heights Neighborhood Plan identified CIP projects. Primrose Park playground equipment is being completed now (projected completion date 2007). The Heights Aquatic Facility is a figment of our dreams. The large group 3 season picnic facility in the east end adjacent to the parking lot was never built, and the playground was removed and never replaced or upgraded as planned. A Master Plan was developed for Castle Rock so many years ago that the date of adoption by the city council cannot be found. The Master Plan reflects what the community wanted in 2006; it reflects what the community asked for in 2019. The Master Plan includes a community center facility. Steve Arvouschoug apologized for holding OBSD meetings in a bar, commenting that the Heights does not have any public meeting space.

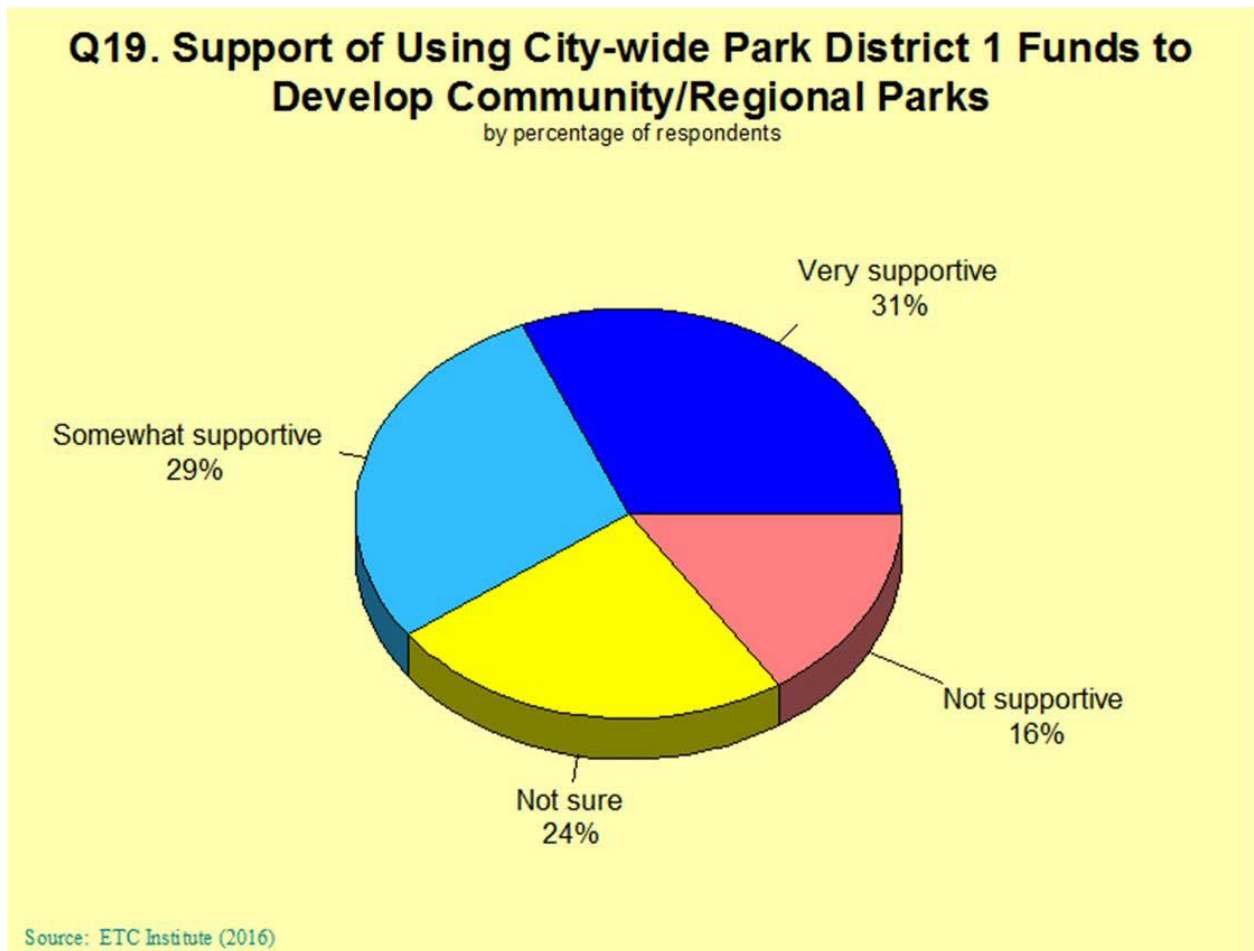
BELOW IS A LIST OF THE SOME OF THE CRITICAL IMPROVEMENTS IDENTIFIED BY THE SEPTEMBER 2017 CITY OF BILLINGS COMPREHENSIVE PARK AND RECREATION MASTER PLAN. NOTE THE NUMBER OF PROJECTS BUDGETTED IN THE 2020-2024 CIP WHICH WERE NOT IDENTIFIED AS CRITICAL IN 2017. What is the purpose of paying for a Master Plan if the Parks Department pays no attention to the plan when developing the CIP?

Park	Ward	CRITICAL IMPROVEMENTS (page 16) Recommended Improvements	Projected Cost	Budgetted Cost	PROPOSED/ COMPLETED CIP PROJECTS
		CITY OF BILLINGS COMPREHENSIVE MASTER PARKS PLAN SEPTEMBER 2017			
Centennial	5			\$ 400,000	bathroom, east parking lot, electrical upgrades
Castle Rock	2			\$ 75,000	master plan
Castle Rock	2			\$ 300,000	playground
Central		rebuild tennis courts; resurface parking lot; amenity replacement; installation of sod in the t- ball field to create more multi-purpose use of space	\$ 1,100,000	\$ -	tennis courts \$500,000 SCHEDULED COMPLETION 2022
Grandview		Replace existing irrigation system with automated system	\$ 200,000	\$ 300,000	
Highland	1 (not Heights)	Playground, sprayground (recirculating) & amenity replacement	\$ 1,600,000	\$ 550,000	playground & irrigation
Lillis	5			\$ 50,000	pickleball
Riverfront		replacement of roads & parking lot; replace existing irrigation system with automated system	\$ 3,100,000		

Terry	1 (not Heights)	Playground, sprayground (recirculating) and amenity replacement	\$ 1,600,000	\$ 1,550,000	
Terry	1 (not Heights)			\$ 80,000	covered picnic
North	1 (not Heights)	Replace existing irrigation system with automated system	\$ 400,000	\$ 714,000	
North	1 (not Heights)			\$ 1,300,000	Splashpad
North	1 (not Heights)			\$ 318,000	playground
Rose	5			\$ 100,000	upgrade spray feature
Rose	5			\$ 106,000	pool liner
South	1 (not Heights)			\$ 106,000	pool liner
South	1 (not Heights)			\$ 74,000	design bath house
Clevenger Park	2	Parking lot redesign/replacement	\$ 650,000	\$ -	
Hawthorne	2	conversion of wading pool to sprayground and replacement of shelter and restroom	\$ 1,600,000	\$ 170,000	replace playground SCHEDULE 2019
Hawthorne	2			\$ 70,000	shade structure SCHEDULE 2019
Primrose	2	playground and amenity replacement	\$ 225,000	\$ 215,000	SCHEDULED 2019
				\$ 875,000	satellite maintenance
				\$ 396,000	road and parking lot improvements
TOTAL			\$ 8,650,000	\$ 6,023,000	

PRIORITY INVESTMENT RATING	
(Statistically Valid Survey)	
Activity	Corresponding Facility Need
Walking/Jogging/Biking	Walking and Biking Trails
Family Recreation Swimming	Aquatic Facilities in Community Parks or Multi-Generational Recreation Center
Family Outdoor Adventure Trips	Outdoor Recreation Amenities
Visiting Parks	Neighborhood and Community Parks
Indoor Climbing Wall/Walking Track	Multi-Generational Recreation Center
Adult Water Fitness	Aquatic Facilities in Community Parks or Recreation Center
Recreational Family Ice Skating	Ice Rink
Adult (ages 55-70) Fitness/Exercise	Multi-Generational Recreation Center
Learn to Swim Programs for Children	Aquatic Facilities in Community Parks or Multi-Generational Recreation Center
Socialization with Dogs	Off-Leash Dog Park
River/Lake Water Sports	Accessible Entry Points to Lakes and Rivers
Space for Performing Arts	Multi-Generational Recreation Center

BELOW IS THE PUBLIC SUPPORT FOR PD1 FUNDS INCLUDED IN THE SEPTEMBER 2017 CITY OF BILLINGS COMPREHENSIVE PARK AND RECREATION MASTER PLAN. ONLY 31% OF RESIDENTS WERE VERY SUPPORTIVE AND 40% WERE EITHER NOT SUPPORTIVE OR NOT SURE. The April 2019 Billings Heights Survey which was sent to all Task Force members and a link posted on Facebook, show a current high level of support for Park funding (see attached).



Summary of Recommendations:

1. Please demonstrate your commitment to the common good by encouraging the Parks and Recreation staff and Park Board to work to develop a Park District 1 spending plan that is equitable and fair to all Billings residents.
2. Insist the Parks and Recreation staff working in conjunction with the Park Board develop an integrated strategy that includes community input to insure we are providing economical projects and improvements that meet the stated needs of the Heights community (and all Billings residents).
3. What opportunities will there be for public participation as the PD1 CIP budget is revised?
4. Encourage the Parks and Recreation staff to present the entire list of projects along with costs and urgency to the public prior to making a proposal to the city council. A list of “critical improvements” is available on Page 16 of the CITY OF BILLINGS COMPREHENSIVE MASTER PARKS PLAN SEPTEMBER 2017; the recommendations are not reflected in the PD1 CIP spending plans. Consider how carefully the Priority Investments listed on page 7 of the Master Plan are funded in the next 5 years.
5. Encourage the Parks and Recreation staff and Park Board to assign community liaisons to each pair of Council members by ward to assist in setting potential priorities.
6. Encourage the Parks and Recreation staff to develop a “best practices” for project planning and estimating projects. Consider monitoring the project planning given the large discrepancy between the estimated costs projected in the CITY OF BILLINGS COMPREHENSIVE MASTER PARKS PLAN SEPTEMBER 2017 and the Park District 1 CIP estimates.
7. Encourage the Parks and Recreation staff to develop a work order management system that will use real data to justify maintenance costs and priorities.

ATTACHMENTS

- *What does a \$100,000 homeowner get for \$16 a year?*
- *19.04.29 Billings Heights Park Survey*
- *19.04.29 Billings Heights Park Survey Question 5, individual comments*