

Audit at a glance



Parks Legacy Plan

OCTOBER 2021

ABOUT | In 2018, Denver voters approved a 0.25% sales tax increase to support the Parks, Trails, and Open Space program. The city passed an ordinance for the program — the Parks Legacy Fund — which restricts this new revenue stream to specific purposes including acquiring additional land for parks and developing and maintaining new and existing parks. Parks and Recreation is responsible for managing the fund and oversees the city’s park system through a 20-year strategic plan called the “Game Plan for a Healthy City” and can expedite the plan’s goals by using legacy funds.

In the report

FINDING: The Department of Parks and Recreation Should Improve Existing Business Practices to Ensure Alignment with the Ordinance and Leading Practices

- The department could increase its impact and effectiveness through better transparency by communicating to the public the status and success of projects and successes of the fund created through use of legacy dollars. Parks and Recreation has a communications policy which notes its goal of developing a better-informed public. However, the policy has not been updated since 2013 and does not provide guidance on what content staff should communicate. Of the 42 projects reviewed, 32 received legacy funds but only three informed the public of that fact.
- The department cannot demonstrate compliance with all ordinance requirements for the Parks Legacy Fund.
- The department should preserve institutional knowledge related to the Park Legacy Fund through succession planning.

WHY THIS MATTERS

Ensuring Parks and Recreation is using this voter-approved tax increase in line with the ordinance and is effectively communicating with the community and other stakeholders gives Denver voters assurance the department is expanding and taking care of the city’s park system, which is why they voted for a 0.25% sales and use tax increase.

FINDING: The Department of Parks and Recreation Is Not Ensuring Appropriate Maintenance of All Parks

- We visited 10 parks, two dog parks, a park restroom, and two properties newly acquired using the legacy fund. We used Parks and Recreation’s own park evaluation criteria to score what we found. Six facilities, or 37.5%, passed the evaluation and 10 facilities, or 62.5%, failed.
- While Parks and Recreation expands the park system with acquisitions, donations, and partnerships, on-site evaluations conducted by both the Auditor’s Office and Parks and Recreation found the conditions of existing parks do not meet the department’s own evaluation standards.

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- Civic Center Park scored 29%. We found trash and debris, graffiti and vandalism, standing water, and trees obstructing walkways and missing mulch rings. We also identified accumulated human waste and vomit in stairwells and corners, exposed electrical wires, as well as hypodermic needles and other drug paraphernalia. At Harvey Park, which also failed, we found graffiti and trees in the park missing mulch rings, while limbs were not trimmed to provide sufficient overhead clearance along walkways. Greenway Dog Park scored 14%. The park conditions included a trench of putrid water, trees in poor health, weeds, and an uneven surface with multiple holes. In City Park, we found electrical wires tied to a tree and hung

across a walkway, which created a trip hazard for both pedestrians and cyclists. While at Montbello Central Park we found holes and trenches measuring between 36 and 43 inches deep with safety barricades missing in several locations.

- The current process for conducting evaluations annually is not sufficient to identify and address maintenance and safety issues. While recognizing external factors, such as the pandemic, have affected agency staffing, we found Parks and Recreation may be neglecting existing park assets, despite retaining more than \$14 million, from 2019 alone, in unused legacy funds the department prioritized for acquisition and park development.



SAFETY HAZARDS AT MONTBELLO CENTRAL PARK, CIVIC CENTER PARK, AND CITY PARK: Excavated holes and trenches without barricades, accumulated food and human waste, and electrical wire hung across path. PHOTOS BY AUDITOR'S OFFICE STAFF

