

2011 Mayoral Candidate Questionnaire

The Neighborhood Parks Council (NPC) works closely with our elected and appointed officials to ensure parks and open space are a priority at City Hall. Electing a “Park Friendly” Mayor who values neighborhood parks, open spaces and recreation facilities for all San Franciscans and understands the challenges facing our park system is essential for our city. With the help of our dedicated community volunteers San Francisco’s parks are the cornerstone of every neighborhood but it is with the support of our new Mayor that our parks can continue to thrive.

Please complete each question to the best of your ability in order for NPC to assess your “Park Friendly” rating. Everyone loves parks, Our coalition strives to understand your specific ideas about supporting parks, in addition to your overall level of appreciation for them. All responses will be posted on our website for the public to view. Thank You.

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Please return electronically to Victoria Bell, Deputy Director a vbell@sfnpc.org by Wednesday, September 7, 2011 by 5pm.

1. Tell us about your personal parks use or experience. In what ways do you feel San Francisco’s parks contribute to your quality of life?

Before I was elected to the Board of Supervisors (and still had a semblance of a personal life), I regularly spent time in many of our city’s parks -- at Washington Square Park, Huntington Park, Helen Wills Park, Chrissy Field, The Presidio, Fort Funston, Ocean Beach, Lafayette Park, Alamo Square Park, Stern Grove, Dolores Park, among others. On a typical Sunday, I would sit, nap and read in our parks, and take time to reflect and relax.

From my personal experiences, I found quite mixed park conditions, and seen the visibly negative impacts of funding cuts. Since accessible open space creates recreational opportunities for youth and families, addressing our park needs will be critical to reversing our recent trend of family flight. Safe parks can help reduce crime and increase public safety. Our quality of life is completely dependent upon the environmental stewardship of our city of our parks.

2. From your observations, what are the 3 most important issues facing recreation and parks in San Francisco? Specifically how will you begin to address these issues if you are elected?

A. Sustainable funding sources. Our parks have seen their funding cut dramatically over time. As Mayor, I would fight to shore up funding for our parks and recreation centers, help lead the next general obligation bond for the parks, and make sure that our already-committed dollars are well-spent – and that past bond monies don't end up in long delays for projects, as has been recently the case.

B. Addressing real community needs. We need a more accountable RPD that is responsive to the specific interests and needs of San Franciscans within different communities and neighborhoods. As seen in the most recent Recreation Assessment report, there is incredible pent-up demand for more open space in some places, for more active recreation opportunities, for more community gardens/urban agriculture, among other findings. As Mayor, I would ensure that we have more of a community-based process to determine how our system can address the needs of specific neighborhoods and constituencies.

C. Competing uses. Recent fights among competing uses at our parks and recreation facilities, have intensified, such as the controversies over Sharp Park, over off-leash dogs in GGNRA, over the soccer fields by the Beach Chalet. As Board President, my leadership style has always been about bringing people together to move beyond ideological fights and create pragmatic solutions to problems, and I would bring this leadership style to the job of Mayor.

3. What is your view of the role of volunteer community park groups? What commitment do you make to working with these groups to improve our public open spaces?

Volunteer community park groups have been critical to the health, safety, and vitality of the City's park system. Without volunteers picking up trash, restoring native habitat, building trails, and doing numerous other activities, our parks would be in much worse shape than they are today. Given the demonstrated need for more maintenance and beautification, and the current lack of resources for hiring new staff, I fully support encouraging the creation of new volunteer community park groups and individuals. In addition to the tangible benefits of the work being done, volunteerism creates a sense of stewardship and ownership, values that then can have ripple effects in other aspects of civic life and participation.

It is important to note, however, that the utilization of volunteers should not duplicate the work of existing RPD gardeners, arborists, custodial staff, and recreation directors. Volunteers in parks should be used to augment the existing levels of service provided by our city workers, and not chip into their job assignments. There is more than enough that can and should be done to transform our park system into a world-class system, and I'm committed to ensuring that volunteer stewards are a part of that solution.

4. There is a substantial budget gap for the City's ongoing parks and recreation programs, estimated at over \$30 million a year. What will your administration do to reduce or eliminate this serious annual shortfall? And how will you mitigate the impact on the General Fund?

I believe that we should take a balanced approach to funding the Recreation and Parks Department. When the collapse of the economy in 2008 led to dramatic drops in general fund revenues for RPD, I have supported some of the department's efforts to increase efficiency and raise revenues in appropriate contexts. But since parks are important public goods that our general tax base should support, the General Fund should have a significant role in financing much of the Rec & Parks' budget. I would not direct our city parks and recreational services to entirely pay for themselves since this would likely lead to wide-ranging privatization that will not best serve the people of San Francisco in the long run.

I have supported new revenue sources such as business tax reform, bringing back the vehicle license fee to pre-2003 levels, and licensing our city's dark fiber. I am also looking forward to thoroughly reviewing the recommendations in the new SPUR Revenue Task Force report; I know that the diverse leaders who worked on this effort have come up with creative, much-needed solutions that we should consider.

5. RPD requires nearly \$2billion in capital funding to repair and renovate our parks. Will you commit to supporting the upcoming GO park bond?

Yes. As the Board of Supervisors representative on the Capital Planning Committee, I have already supported the bond, and I will continue to play a leadership role on it as Mayor.

6. How will you work to ensure both capital and operating funding becomes more sustainable for RPD while ensuring parks are accessible, safe and enjoyable for all?

At the highest level, city government often addresses either capital or operating needs, and forgets that we need to address both simultaneously. We need to ensure that our park system simultaneously receives both capital and operating funding to ensure our parks are accessible, safe and enjoyable for all.

RPD has seen a consistent and significant decline in General Fund support over the past five years. This, combined with increased labor costs, has created a dire funding situation for the Department and has resulted in layoffs, significant deferred maintenance and closures of facilities important to communities across the City, such as the North Beach Clubhouse in my district.

With the fusion of NPC and Neighborhood Parks Trust, the Department will have a unified advocacy nonprofit through which to better seek philanthropic funding, state and federal grants, and other forms of support. As Mayor, I will prioritize and empower work with this new, stronger park ally to pursue sustainable funding sources.

The Open Space Fund, created in 1974 and renewed in 2000, provides RPD with a dedicated set-aside of 2.5 cents per \$100 in property taxes. While initially intended for acquisition and capital purposes, over the past years it has been used more and more for ongoing operational uses, a situation that is undermining the original intent of the fund. There is discussion of increasing the open space set-aside from 2.5 cents to 5 cents, and I support the investigation of this potential funding source in order to ensure that we are able to dedicate adequate funds to the original purpose, as well as provide the department with more secure funding sources.

Further, I support the investigation of new, appropriate public-private partnerships, concessions, and other models for revenue generation. Although the discussion of concessions and revenues often provokes debates about "privatization" of our city's parks, I believe there are ideas in this area worth exploring. For example, plant sales of native plants grown in nurseries on RPD property or farm stands selling produce generated in RPD-managed community gardens are types of concessions that can generate revenue, build community, and reinforce the fundamental values underlying the sustainable use of open space.

7. Deferred maintenance of things like irrigation systems continue to plague the park system. With little funding available to fix these types of problems, what would you propose to improve park maintenance?

In addition to increasing funding sources for our parks and better utilizing volunteer park stewards, as Mayor, I would direct RPD to plan better for future park maintenance. In the past, the City has often created new parks, or infrastructure within parks, without attention to their ongoing maintenance requirements. The City should not use capital funds to create new parks or infrastructure, or accept bequests of new parks or infrastructure, without a plan for dedicated maintenance in perpetuity.

Additionally, there are some mini-parks and other facilities that are isolated and require considerable time and effort for RPD maintenance, and there is the potential that some of these properties might better serve RPD and the community needs if they were converted to other uses, such as community gardens, which would be primarily maintained using different less-intensive models. As Mayor, I would support and encourage such transitions when and where appropriate for both RPD and the communities' needs.

8. NPC's Green Envy study, a landmark white paper first published in 2003 and updated in 2007, advocates for equitable open space for all residents in all neighborhoods of San Francisco. What, specifically, would your administration do in the next four years to ensure that every neighborhood can have green space for play, exercise, and respite from urban life?

As the Supervisor for District 3, which has the unfortunate distinction of having the lowest open space per resident, I understand this problem all too well through the eyes of my constituents. It is an environmental justice issue in addition to a quality of life one. As Mayor, I would direct RPD to prioritize the acquisition of open space in neighborhoods that most need them. I would work with Planning, OEWD and other City entities to develop more incentives for the creation of more open space. I would strongly consider supporting increasing the open space fund set aside in property taxes in order to acquire new open space in these areas, as well as support a parks bond as discussed above.

9. The Blue Greenway project promises to transform our eastern shoreline and serve a number of communities desperately in need of open space and access to the water. But the southeastern waterfront has many pollution issues, developing it is expensive, and there is a significant funding gap in the Blue Greenway plans. What will you do, in the next four years, to advance the Blue Greenway and bring it closer to reality?

As an avid bicyclist who has supported the Blue Greenway project to follow our shoreline, I am very supportive of advancing the Blue Greenway to bring it closer to reality. As a member of the Bay Conservation and Development Commission (BCDC), I have worked closely with my counterparts in the nine Bay Area counties, and would be happy to lead efforts to see if all of our counties could collectively raise and devote more monies to the Blue Greenway. I'm also proud of my efforts to negotiate the final agreements to move forward the Hunters Point Shipyard project to clean up the southeastern neighborhoods of the city, and would be happy to work with other city officials to obtain more state or federal funding for the Blue Greenway project, as well as with private developers to have them support the Blue Greenway.

10. Numerous neighborhoods in the City are exploring ways to better support their local parks, including voluntarily taxing themselves for new and increased services (Park Improvement Districts, etc.). It is nearly impossible to develop these districts without clearly understanding what the Recreation and Parks Department currently spends on each facility. The Department does not maintain this type of budgeting, and it is therefore difficult to understand what the needs of each park are.
What will you do in your administration to support improved clarity of the Recreation and Parks Department's fiscal management given its extremely diverse facilities?

PIDs are likely an excellent model for many parts of the city, and in order to appropriately implement, them we must have complete and specific information of what is happening at a facility- and community- level in our park system. We should be able to understand costs, revenues, and usage figures specific to each facility in the RPD system. We should also be able to understand demand for RPD amenities and recreation programming on a neighborhood and facility level, thereby ensuring that we are directing the right types of resources at the right audiences. As Mayor, my administration would implement budgeting and performance management so that all of these variables would be appropriately tracked. I recently introduced a legislative drafting request related to transparency in budget expenditures, which is one piece of a larger vision I have for City budgeting that provides real data of expenditures and performance for all City functions.

11. Community outreach and a transparent public process is a critical component to our civic work in San Francisco, such as when we look at leasing facilities, adding amenities and

even creating a new public park. How will you support the public dialog about parks across every City agency that manages land?

Much of our public's frustrations with city government are based on lack of adequate community outreach and transparency when it comes to how we allocate our scarce resources, and this is particularly true when it comes to our parks. Whether it is the lack of planning around clubhouses, lack of input on recreational activities, or lack of feedback regarding the RPD budget, we need to do a better job of implementing a real community-based budgeting and planning process for our park needs.

Community engagement is key to delivering for our neighborhoods. In my district's diverse neighborhoods of Polk Street and North Beach, we brought together residents, local businesses and community leaders to directly tackle the issues they face together in the form of neighborhood councils. Our neighborhood council model has empowered the community to face their problems first-hand and provides them the resources and access to do so, and I would look to expand this citywide, particularly to address parks issues.