

## Recommendations for the City of Jackson Parks and Recreation Department: *Purpose*

### *Vision*

There needs to be a comprehensive re-development of the vision of what *purpose* the Parks and Recreation Department (PRD) serves in Jackson. The current 5-year plan focuses on infrastructure improvement and while that is clearly important, it does not give the sense of how the City of Jackson (CoJ) should *utilize* our facilities. By focusing only on the infrastructure the CoJ will get bogged by thinking only about costs (or lack thereof) and not about *purpose*. If the CoJ focuses on *purpose* we can achieve much for very little. If the PRD is for the people, it needs to be inclusive and serve the people.

Policies will have to be examined to make this happen, but the CoJ also has to view the PRD facilities as places of democratic, civic and equitable engagement. The CoJ needs to be ambitious and that is the nature of this document with the recommendations below; if the CoJ is focused on its residents and the needs of the residents much of what is to follow is achievable.

To achieve this vision, the CoJ need to ask many questions including, but not limited to:

- What are our parks for?
- What are our recreation/community centers for?
- What draws people to them?
- What keeps them away?
- Are they inclusive?
- Who is left out?
- How do we de-bunk myths about our PRD facilities and locations?
- How can we think outside of the box, be inclusive and use the PRD for the residents of Jackson regardless of class, gender, disability, religion, national origin, immigration status, race or sexual orientation?
- What's missing / who's missing from the conversation?

Below are some recommendations to beginning answering some of the questions raised above. Some of the ideas can be turned into policies to be memorialized; some may simply be ideas to run with through Jackson resident engagement. The bulleted ideas do not represent every idea out there, but many of them can be done cost-effectively and efficiently if the CoJ engage its residents and use the knowledge, experience and resources the residents already have in the city. In order to achieve equity and the constant quest for justice through the use of our PRD, the people of Jackson need to know that the PRD will be present, consistent and represent their needs. It is important that the CoJ and the PRD have predictable (in terms of times), regular and necessary

programming and services.<sup>1</sup>

A. *Non-Athletic Social, Justice Programming*

The CoJ cannot be limited to use the PRD for athletics only—while this is obviously important, this tends to be male and able bodied-centric. Additionally, there is a lack of facilities for Soccer, a sport that includes both men and women and is democratically inclusive—that is, everyone who participates gets to play.

The CoJ has many social needs that need lifting and the PRD is a great resource to support achieving some of these needs. While government is not the only answer, through the PRD, the CoJ has the potential to meet the needs of our citizenry by thinking of other uses of our facilities and grounds in the PRD. The residents of Jackson already have a plethora of local knowledge, experience and aspiration to address many of the issues below. Some programming/classes/workshop examples that the CoJ should work to achieve include, but are not limited to:

- a. Mentoring programs for male and female youth/children
  - i. These mentoring programs should be safe spaces for youth with same-gendered mentors. They can be well structured and focus on issues like self-esteem, positive peer relations and more.
- b. Maternal well-being
- c. Healthy relationships / mentoring of young parents
- d. Educational Drop-in/Re-engagement centers<sup>2</sup>, including:
  - i. Credit recovery
  - ii. GED
  - iii. Short-term suspension drop-in (i.e. instead of being home or in the streets, report to the drop-in at the community center for programming)
- e. Academic tutorial programming after school, the weekends and during the summer.
- f. Comprehensive Sex Education—addressing safe sex, STD/I's, etc
- g. Job training: focused on skills for the CoJ economy as well as resume writing, interviewing tips, worker's rights, etc.
- h. Art, music, dance classes for all ages
- i. Financial literacy—understanding credit, banking, etc
- j. Home ownership

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<sup>1</sup> The bullets represent fragments of conversation, one focus group with students at Lanier High School, and social media/online outreach. Special thanks to Jason Thompson, Noel Didla, Ryder Taff, Harriett Johnson, Hilliard Jones, Ingrid Cruz, the students and educators in the 21<sup>st</sup> Century program at Lanier High School and many more.

<sup>2</sup> Columbus Municipal School district is doing a great job at this – Columbus 2020. I think it would be a great tool here. It allows those who have dropped out to earn a high school diploma instead of a GED. Also examine re-engagement centers in Milwaukee, Boston, and Philadelphia amongst others: <http://www.edweek.org/ew/articles/2013/06/06/34overview.h32.html>

- k. Know Your Rights: renters rights, school discipline, disabilities, incarceration/expungement, immigrant rights, workplace rights, etc.
- l. Healthy living—good nutrition
- m. Civic education, empowerment and civic leadership classes for families.
- n. Green education classes
  - i. Urban agriculture
  - ii. Making home eco-friendly

#### B. *Cultural Awareness*

The CoJ is rich in cultural history and the contextual present. The CoJ can be more pro-active in featuring this within the limits of our PRD. The following are some ideas on how to do this:

- a. Cross, inter and intra-cultural awareness events—this could be events around holidays/festivals for different racial, ethnic, sexual orientations, international, religious groups, etc
- b. Language classes—both for first language English speakers learning other languages and for Jackson residents learning English as a Second Language. A growing language group in CoJ is Spanish. This is a good starting point.
- c. Citizenship classes for resident immigrants seeking citizenship.
- d. Re-name the parks for local hero's/martyrs of the movement and our present causes.

#### C. *Drawing Jackson Residents to the PRD facilities*

The CoJ is not short on space within the PRD, we are currently short on figuring out how to draw people to our facilities in an equitable manner across the city. By being creative and using the PRD space the CoJ can reach the residents. Some ideas include, but are not limited to:

- a. The arts
  - i. Locate museums in the PRD facilities
  - ii. Live musical performances by local and/or well-known artists
  - iii. Movie screenings: this is currently happening in the Arts Garden and Belhaven Park—which serve mostly white residents—it needs to be spread further.
  - iv. Art installations by local and/or well-known artists.
  - v. Theatre, spoken word, poetry in the parks by local and/or well-known artists
- b. Events
  - i. Festivals
  - ii. Cook out competitions
  - iii. Fashion shows
  - iv. People's Assemblies by ward
  - v. Voter registration drives and education
- c. Infrastructural improvements

- i. Please see 5-year plan for reference on these needs.
- d. Aesthetics—work with local neighborhood groups on beautification of the local parks.
- e. Allow café's, diners, food trucks, etc to locate in the PRD facilities
- f. Business incubators
  - i. Focused on new businesses that can employ youth and low-skilled adults; this can be coupled with job skills training noted above.
  - ii. The city can take applications for new businesses that will either receive very low rent or free use of space based upon whether or not their business can benefit the community, employ people in the community and be able to operate without city assistance within three years.
- g. Americans with Disabilities Act (ADA) compliance to attract people with disabilities.
- h. Government services
  - i. Locate "CoJ Service Centers" in PRD so residents can file complaints, make suggestions for their ward representatives, get city business done (i.e. pay bills)
- i. Housing services
- j. Increase walking and biking trails
- k. Water parks / features
- l. Shaded seating

#### D. *Wrap-around social services*<sup>3</sup>

Wrap-around services for youth and families may be similar to the old Project Safe Space that existed in the CoJ years ago where a young person can go in crisis or if they have been put out of their home--this can be during the day or night time with services such as social work, health/nursing, etc. The CoJ can expand those wrap-around services to include the following:

- a. Alternatives to incarceration--i.e. evening reporting centers, midnight basketball leagues, etc.<sup>4</sup>
- b. Health clinics
  - i. These can be focused on men's health<sup>5</sup>, women's health, elder health and teen health (like the new mid-town teen health clinic).
  - ii. Pre-natal clinics
- c. On-site social workers / mental health supports
- d. Legal Clinics – on expungement, citizenship counseling , housing, etc.

#### E. *Outreach ideas*

<sup>3</sup> There should be federal money for this (Street Outreach, Basic Center Programs, etc.)

<sup>4</sup> [www.jdaihelpdesk.org](http://www.jdaihelpdesk.org)

<sup>5</sup> <http://www.wkkf.org/knowledge-center/resources/2002/09/baltimore-opens-nations-first-mens-health-center.aspx>

The CoJ cannot wait for people to just show up at PRD facilities if the people do not know what is going on, when and where. Here are some ideas to reach the citizens:

- a. Social Media – the cheapest and easiest way to reach many people in Jackson. Creative use of the internet, facebook, twitter, the CoJ's website, instagram, texts, etc. will reach many of our youth and young professionals. Of course, the CoJ needs to be aware of the digital divide and reach people through other means, as noted below.
- b. Schools—good relationships with JPS will allow for events, programming, etc to be posted in our schools (and go home to parent/guardians) with regard to what is going on in the PRD.
- c. Retirement communities--good relationships with our retirement communities will allow for events, programming, etc to be posted in our elder communities with regard to what is going on in the PRD.
- d. PSA's—the city should invest in PSA's in partnership with radio and TV stations, using political and celebrity figures around Jackson (or from Jackson) to promote what is going on in the PRD.

F. *Sustainability*

While ambitious, many of the ideas set forth in this document can be sustained with communal buy-in rather than dependence on external or city funding streams. The CoJ can get all the money in the world, but it doesn't matter if what is happening with the PRD space is neither democratic nor relevant. That said, there are opportunities to look in multiple directions, beyond people-power, to support the work of the PRD.

- a. Funding of PRD – external sources
  - i. Grants—there are federal and private grants available for programming.
  - ii. Foundations—Soros Foundation, Gates, Schott, Kellogg and a number of others currently have funding available around “Black Male Achievement”—creative ideas can access this funding for our PRD.
    - 1. As well, CoJ has a rich history of homegrown stars, from athletes to artists. If the CoJ reach out to these individuals and their foundations, we may be able to source funding for programming.
  - iii. Rental fees for large events (but not for family, smaller events)
  - iv. Lowe's<sup>6</sup> and other big-box stores located in Jackson have social responsibility grants.
- b. A community consortium of artists, educational institutions and city government can come together to seek funding to holistically engage and meaningfully beautify public spaces.

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<sup>6</sup> <http://responsibility.lowes.com/archives/teaming-up-to-revitalize-neighborhoods/?pageType=cr>

- c. Partnerships, including but not limited to:
  - i. UMC/Jackson Hinds (health clinics);
  - ii. Metro Chamber (business incubator); Leadership Jackson
  - iii. Jackson Arts Council/MS Arts Council (art/music/dance classes; live performances);
  - iv. M&B Concessions (movie nights – popcorn and candy);
  - v. Sound and Communications, Inc. (movie nights – screens and PAs);
  - vi. Thalia Mara/Ballet Magnificat (ballet classes).
  - vii. JPS—educational supports
  - viii. The colleges: JSU School of Education and Social Work, Tougaloo, Millsaps, Hinds, MC Law (legal clinics)
  - ix. Greek clubs and alumni associations
  - x. Churches (to provide some programming)
  - xi. Eastern Star, Masons, etc

#### G. *Barriers*

Safety and security are the biggest barriers to the successful utilization of our PRD. Right now, they are not female friendly, they are not friendly to persons with disabilities and many more. The CoJ needs to address these concerns:

- a. Safety and security concerns
  - i. Better lighting
  - ii. More park ranger patrols (*not* law enforcement)
  - iii. Better signage
  - iv. Emergency stations
  - v. Public awareness
  - vi. Secure (and clean) bathrooms
- b. Facilities for persons with disabilities
  - i. Bring all facilities into ADA compliance, but also promote activities for persons with disabilities.
- c. Inclusivity—see note above about disregard for females, people with disabilities, etc.
- d. Insurance—the current policies make having an event unattainable for many. This policy can be changed.

#### H. *Best Practices*

We can look around the country, world and within Mississippi for PRD-type spaces as good examples of what is possible around Jackson. Here are some, but not all, ideas:

- a. Central Park in New York
- b. Millennium Park in Chicago
- c. LeFleurs Bluff in Jackson
- d. City Park in New Orleans
- e. Hamstead Heath in London

