

**Draft Letter for Possible Endorsement by
Washoe County Regional Parks and Open Space Commission**

Dear Washoe County Commissioners and County Manager:

Washoe County has experienced revitalization in recent years, with significant economic and population growth reflecting a new recognition of all that our region has to offer. Among Washoe County's assets is our parks system, which boasts unparalleled natural beauty, provides educational and recreational opportunities, and enhances quality of life in our communities.

The Washoe County Regional Parks and Open Space Division of the Community Services Department (Parks Department) manages over 12,000 acres, including 49 parks, athletic fields, shooting and archery facilities, golf courses, a campground, and a museum for the benefit of over 450,000 residents.¹

Though Washoe County has seen steady increases in population and revenues over the past several years, the Parks Department budget has remained relatively stagnant.² In fact, the Parks Department budget for last fiscal year was over \$2 million less than it was ten years ago.³ Moreover, Washoe County employs nearly two-thirds fewer Parks Department staff than comparably-sized jurisdictions.⁴

As our region enters an exciting period of development, we must provide adequate funding to ensure that the Parks Department can continue to maintain its facilities, provide quality services, and meet our communities' needs. **Accordingly, the Washoe County Open Space and Regional Parks Commission asks you to consider the following above base funding requests for Fiscal Year 2018-2019 to help our parks flourish into the future.**

¹ *Nevada County Population Projections, 2015-2034*. Jeff Hardcastle, Nevada State Demographer, Nevada State Department of Taxation. Available at: https://tax.nv.gov/uploadedFiles/taxnvgov/Content/TaxLibrary/Nevada_County_Population_Projections_2015-2034.pdf.

² *Fiscal Year 2016-2017 County Manager Recommended Budget Overview for Open Space and Park Commission*. David Solaro, Washoe County Community Services Department. Powerpoint presentation delivered June 6, 2017.

³ In 2017, the Parks Department budget was \$6.2 million, compared to \$8.75 million in 2007.

⁴ According to the 2017 National Recreation and Park Association Agency Performance Review, Parks Departments serving jurisdictions with populations greater than 250,000 employed 4.3 full-time equivalents (FTEs) per 10,000 residents, while Washoe County employs only 1.46 FTEs per 10,000 residents.

1. \$101,000 to implement the Washoe County Community Services and Human Resources Departments' recommendation to increase pay grades for Parks Department seasonal employees.

Current pay grades for key seasonal employees start at only \$8.25 per hour, the Nevada state minimum wage. Consequently, the Parks Department experiences difficulty recruiting qualified park aides, recreation leaders, pool managers, lifeguards, and shooting range safety officers.

Many critical positions went unfilled last year, placing additional burden on the already stretched-thin full time staff and resulting in a reduction in services to the community.

For example, homeowners living near one park have resorted to volunteering to manage entrance gates because the Parks Department does not have adequate staff to do so. Individuals renting parks facilities must now contract with private security firms at their own expense instead of relying on Parks Department staff to oversee their events. Because the Parks Department could not attract qualified candidates, a single employee operated the Regional Shooting Range over the busy summer season.

The Washoe County Community Services and Human Resources Departments recommend pay grade increases of five to 30 percent for seasonal positions to make Washoe County's wages competitive with similar employers, including the State of Nevada and local municipalities. An above base increase would allow the Parks Department to implement these recommendations, enabling recruitment and retention of effective seasonal staff and improving the quality of services provided to the public.

2. \$120,000 to support the Tree and Weed Programs.

Weed abatement and tree maintenance are critical to reduce wildfire risk and maintain the beauty and usability of Washoe County's parks and open spaces. These activities are especially urgent following the increase in vegetation after high precipitation years.

Because of recession-era budget reductions, the Parks Department has not had the resources required to optimally manage trees and weeds. For example, the Parks Department has applied weed-reducing herbicides on a much less frequent basis than would be ideal for minimizing fire fuel hazards, and has foregone pre-emergent sprays in many areas.

An above-base increase would buttress the Parks Department's Tree and Weed Program, allowing for implementation of an aggressive natural resource management plan that would protect both our parks and communities.

The Commission believes that an investment in our park system is an investment in the future of Washoe County. These above-base funding requests, totaling \$221,000, represent only slightly more than a ten percent restoration of the recession-era Parks

Department budget reduction, but will be instrumental in addressing critical park maintenance needs and ensuring provision of quality parks services as our community looks forward to an exciting new era of development.

Thank you for your consideration.

Sincerely,

Washoe County Regional Parks and Open Space Commission