



CITY OF NOVATO
PARKS & RECREATION

Recreation, Cultural and Community Services Advisory Commission

REGULAR MEETING

Minutes

Thursday, July 11, 2024 – 6:00 PM

A. CALL TO ORDER AND ROLL CALL

The meeting was called to order by Chair Weber at 6:00 PM.

Commissioners Present: Erin Lacey, Mavi Pilloton, Betsy Ricketts, Zachary Schmechel, Nancy Weber, Beverley Winsor

Commissioners Absent: Dennis Bentley, Suzanne Crow, Emily Larsen

Staff Present: Director of Parks, Recreation, and Community Services Katie Gauntlett; Community Services Division Manager, Drew Bendickson, and Recreation Division Manager Alexandra Kambur.

B. APPROVAL OF FINAL AGENDA

Commission Action: Upon motion by Commissioner Ricketts and seconded by Commissioner Pilloton, the Commission voted **6-0-0-3** to approve the final agenda.

Ayes: Lacey, Pilloton, Ricketts, Schmechel, Weber, Winsor

Noes: None

Abstain: None

Absent: Bentley, Crow, Larsen

Motion Carried

C. PUBLIC COMMENT

None

D. CONSENT ITEMS

D.1. APPROVAL OF THE MEETING MINUTES

This item was pulled from the agenda and will return to the Commission for approval at a future date.

E. UNFINISHED AND OTHER BUSINESS

None

F. GENERAL BUSINESS

F.1. Fiscal Sustainability Update from Amy Cunningham, City Manager, and Jessica Deakyne, Assistant City Manager.

City Manager, Amy Cunningham, provided an update on Novato's fiscal sustainability challenges and potential solutions. City Manager Cunningham noted that the City Council adopted a \$4 million operating deficit for FY 2024/2025, the fifth consecutive year with a deficit budget. The City Manager shared that a 5-year general fund forecast was provided to the Novato City Council. She explained that emergency reserve funds are being used to offset operating costs and preserve existing services, and that if spending continues at current levels, emergency reserves are projected to be depleted by Fiscal Year 2026/2027.

City Manager Cunningham explained that Novato faces unique financial challenges compared to other cities in Marin County. The City Manager explained that property tax is the City's largest revenue source followed by sales tax. Novato receives a smaller share of property tax revenue compared to other Marin cities, receiving just 7% of each property tax dollar, compared to Mill Valley at 26% and San Rafael at 12%. For sales tax, only 1.25% of the 8.5% collected in Novato returns to the City. Novato's current sales tax rate of 8.5% is lower than many neighboring cities, several of which have already reached the state cap of 9.25%. Additionally, City revenue is impacted by separate special districts that provide fire, water, trash, sewer and wastewater services to residents.

City Manager Cunningham outlined cost containment efforts already in place, including reducing personnel from a peak of 234 employees to the current level of 198, contracting out services, and increasing revenue through efforts to update the City's user fee schedule. However, she noted that 70% of City costs are related to staff and that reductions in staffing have a negative impact on service delivery. City Manager acknowledged that with current staffing levels at 198 employees, the City is not able to meet resident expectations. She shared results from the City's budget priorities survey, in which Novato residents identified street maintenance, emergency response, reducing the risk of wildfire, and maintaining parks and recreation programs and facilities as the communities' top priorities.

The presentation concluded by discussing a potential ballot measure to increase local sales tax by 0.75 cents, which would generate approximately \$10 million annually for priority services. City Manager Cunningham emphasized that this would be locally controlled revenue that could not be taken by the State or the County.

Commissioner Ricketts sought clarification on what percentage of the 198 current employees are associated with the Police Department, Public Works, and Parks & Recreation. In response, City Manager Cunningham indicated that roughly 50% of the City of Novato's staffing costs are allocated to public safety. Commissioner Ricketts inquired about the potential use of \$10 million in new revenue if a sales tax measure were to pass. City Manager Cunningham explained that if Council places a measure on the November ballot and voters approve the sales tax increase, the \$10 million in new revenue would be allocated to address the deficit, replenish emergency reserves, fund the capital program to tackle deferred maintenance, and address other priority needs.

Chair Weber inquired about the number of City Departments that feel they are understaffed. City Manager Cunningham responded that all City Departments share this concern. Chair Weber sought clarification on any restrictions related to the use of new sales tax revenue. City Manager Cunningham clarified that the new revenue could be allocated by the City Council at their discretion to address priority areas.

Public Comment

None

F.2. Receive a presentation from the Age and Disability Friendly Novato Taskforce.

Lauren Vreeland-Long shared the status and future plans for the Age and Disability Friendly Novato taskforce. Vreeland-Long noted that a previous Taskforce had sought the “age-friendly” designation in 2016-2017, but the group eventually disbanded. The new Taskforce is made up of volunteers with a shared goal of helping Novato re-gain the “age friendly” designation and ensuring that Novato is inclusive and accessible to residents of all ages and abilities. Vreeland-Long shared that the Taskforce’s fiscal sponsor is Marin Ageing and Disability Institute and that they have secured a grant to fund their important work.

Vreeland-Long explained that “age friendly” comes from the World Health Organization, which conceptualized the need for Cities and communities to prepare for the needs and resources needed to support the growing number of older adults. The World Health Organization then partnered with AARP (American Association

of Retired Persons) to better define and promote strategic planning concepts around the “age friendly” designation.

Vreeland-Long shared that the Taskforce has been engaged in community outreach, steering committee meetings, focus groups and similar, to better understand local needs and is actively reviewing the AARP requirements for “age-friendly” designation. They are expecting to use the data collected to formalize a strategic plan and are looking forward to presenting their plan to the Novato City Council in the Spring of 2025.

Public Comment

None

F.3. Receive a presentation from Parks, Recreation and Community Services Director, Katie Gauntlett, and provide feedback on results collected from the online engagement survey and public meeting seeking community feedback for future improvements to the playground at Josef Hoog Community Park, 558 Marin Oaks Drive

Director Katie Gauntlett presented results from community feedback collected in June of 2024 related to future improvements to the playground at Josef Hoog Community Park located at 558 Marin Oaks Drive. At just under 10 acres, Josef Hoog Park is designated as a Community Park, with several amenities including several walking paths, one half-court for basketball, a large reservable barbeque area, and playground.

Through the Parks Master Plan process, Josef Hoog playground was identified as one of the City’s five playgrounds in urgent need or repair or replacement. Director Gauntlett shared the playground is well over 15-years old and has reached its end of its useful life. Additionally, the current playground is set on sand, which does not meet current ADA standards for accessibility.

Director Gauntlett explained that the City of Novato’s adopted budget for FY 2024/2025 included \$720,000 to this playground project. Of the \$720,000 allocated, \$520,000 is from one-time American Rescue Plan Dollars that the City received during the COVID-19 pandemic, which must be encumbered by December of 2024. To further support the project and reduce costs, Director Gauntlett indicated that Parks and Recreation Staff were in the process of applying for a matching grant through GameTime, a playground equipment provider.

In June 2024, staff initiated community engagement efforts through an online survey and a public meeting. The Parks & Recreation Department actively promoted these opportunities via the City of Novato’s e-newsletter, social media channels, email campaigns, and PeachJar flyer distribution through the Novato Unified School District. Hard copy flyers were also posted in park kiosks and at the

City's public service counters, with additional flyers distributed to homes in the immediate vicinity of Josef Hoog Community Park.

The online survey, available from June 6 to June 30, 2024, was hosted on the City of Novato's Open Novato platform and offered in both English and Spanish. The survey attracted 301 website visitors and received 204 responses. Of these respondents, 97% were Novato residents, predominantly from the 94949 ZIP code. When ranking playground equipment, swings emerged as the top priority, followed by climbers and slides. Preferences for colors leaned towards cool and nature-inspired tones. Additionally, respondents showed a strong preference for rubberized surfacing and perimeter fencing. Beyond quantitative data, participants had the chance to provide qualitative feedback on the playground and Josef Hoog Community Park as a whole.

On June 27, 2024, Parks and Recreation hosted a public meeting at the playground in Josef Hoog Community Park. Approximately 30 adults and 14 children attended, most of whom lived in the area immediately surrounding the park. During the meeting, Director Gauntlett provided details about the project's scale, scope, and funding. Attendees voted on their preferred playground equipment, surfacing, and color scheme by placing stickers on a voting board. They also had the opportunity to offer additional feedback by posting notes on a general comment board.

Regarding the next steps and project timeline, Director Gauntlett outlined that we can expect to receive a response about the matching grant by mid-August. Following that, we will proceed with designing a draft of the playground and then seek feedback from the Commission on the draft design. Given the tight timeline, the City will need to act swiftly to purchase equipment this fall to ensure the funds are encumbered before the end of the calendar year.

Commissioner Lacey expressed gratitude for the playground at Pioneer Park and remarked that the community surrounding Josef Hoog Park must be excited about the prospects of having an updated playground in their neighborhood.

Commissioner Ricketts inquired about the total budget of \$720,000 and breakdown of costs. Director Gauntlett shared that we will have a better idea of costs after drafting a playground design; sharing that the majority of projects costs are anticipated to be associated with construction labor. Commissioner Ricketts emphasized the need to prioritize the voices of those in the neighborhood surrounding Josef Hoog Community Park, noting that there were some differences between feedback collected through the survey and the public meeting. Ricketts expressed concerns about perimeter fencing, given the limited size.

Chair Weber asked if it might be possible to increase the size of the playground. Director Gauntlett shared that there are financial constraints that would make it difficult to expand the size of the playground project. Chair Weber inquired about

adding additional benches to the park. Director Gauntlett expressed an interest in pursuing community partnerships to add benches to the park.

Public Comment

None

G. COMMITTEE AND LIAISON REPORTS

G.1. Staff Updates

Recreation Division Manager, Alexandra Kambur, shared that on July 9, 2024 the Novato City Council recognized July as Parks & Recreation month. Kambur thanked Commissioners for attending the Council meeting to accept the Proclamation and extended recognition to Parks & Recreation staff and community volunteers for their hard work and contributions over the past year.

Kambur announced that Novato Parks & Recreation collaborated with Novato Rotary on a trail sign improvement project at Reservoir Hill Vista Trail, located at 1000 Hamilton Pkwy. The project involved replacing old, weathered signs with new, updated signage, aimed at enhancing the overall trail experience. Kambur expressed gratitude to Novato Rotary for their efforts in installing the new signs.

Kambur highlighted the key community engagement efforts that the Parks & Recreation Department launched in June 2024 to gather input for future improvements to Josef Hoog Community Park.

Kambur reminded Commissioners of several upcoming events. The Concerts on the Green will be held at 901 Sherman Ave. on July 19, August 2, and August 16, while Hot Amphitheater Nights will take place at 601 N. Hamilton Pkwy on July 27 and August 31. At the Margaret Todd Senior Center, there will be a Hawaiian Lunch on Wednesday, July 31, at 12:00 PM, and an intergenerational Tie-Dye Event on Wednesday, August 14, at 1:00 PM. At the Hamilton Community Pool, Wicked Slish will offer sweet treats on Saturday, July 13, from 1:00 to 4:00 PM, and Hopmonk will serve lunch items and ice cream on Saturday, July 20.

Kambur concluded the presentation reminding Commissioners that there is still plenty of time to register for summer classes and camps.

Chair Weber inquired about the availability of private lessons at the Hamilton Community Pool. Drew Bendickson, Community Services Division Manager, confirmed that both private and small group lessons are offered. Director Gauntlett reported that, over the past three weeks, the pool has been averaging 1,600 drop-in visits per week. This figure does not include participants using punch passes, memberships, or attending swimming lessons.

Commissioner Reports

None

ADJOURNMENT

The meeting was adjourned at 7:25 PM.

I HEREBY CERTIFY that the foregoing minutes were duly adopted at the RCCS Commission meeting of September 17, 2024.

/ Alexandra Kambur /

Alexandra Kambur, Recreation Division Manager