



April 27, 2026

Mayor Todd Gloria &  
The San Diego City Council

## Re: **The Essential Role of Parks and Recreation in San Diego's Financial Recovery**

Dear Mayor Gloria and San Diego City Councilmembers,

As San Diego navigates a challenging budget cycle, we—a coalition of nonprofit community benefit organizations (CBOs) whose focus areas range from social and environmental justice to youth education to workforce development to fire safe councils—all urge you to immediately halt staff cuts to the Parks and Recreation Department and the Open Space Division. Positions are already being eliminated—and the damage to community programs and partnerships will compound quickly. The positions being cut are essential for maintaining equitable City services and sustaining the often-unrecognized function of the Parks and Recreation Department in activating public-private partnerships that support and expand City program impacts, and which raise millions of additional dollars for public benefit.

### **We strongly urge immediate action for the following:**

- **Retain Assistant Recreation Center Directors.** These positions are the operational backbone of City recreation programming. Without them, programs do not scale down—they disappear. Youth camps, after-school care, sports leagues, and senior activities all depend on the coordination, staff supervision, and community relationships these roles provide.
- **Retain the Asset Management (AM) Team.** This 11-person in-house team of landscape architects, a civil engineer, and GIS analysts currently oversees 175 capital improvement projects valued at **approximately \$1.2 billion, administers \$134 million in active grants, manages 116 joint-use agreements with school districts, and supports a total project portfolio of approximately \$2.9 billion.** They are the City's primary engine for community-driven park development and the technical backbone that makes CBO partnership projects possible.
- **Retain the current level of Park Rangers.** Rangers are the frontline presence that keep parks safe, accessible, and activated, especially in underserved and park-deficient communities where a neighborhood park or open space may be the only accessible green

space available, and including Regional Parks located within multiple Council districts that are major drivers of tourism dollars.

**We ask that you prioritize these departments and maintain their current staffing levels based on three critical strategic pillars:**

### **1. Authentic and Effective Community Engagement**

The Parks and Recreation Department is uniquely positioned to be the City's most effective department for community connection. Park and Open Space program managers, rangers, and recreation center service providers work in close coordination with the communities they serve, developing relationships over many years, and are the boots-on-the-ground that community members trust. This localized presence allows for:

- **Direct Feedback Loops:** Staff develop deep trust with community members, are responsive to public concerns in real-time, and build community connections through volunteer programs and nature stewardship. Recreation center staff, for example, are often the most trusted City presence in underserved neighborhoods, providing continuity for families across generations and serving as first points of contact for community concerns. Similarly, Open Space rangers work directly with neighborhood leaders to monitor urban canyons, mobilize volunteers, and strengthen code enforcement in natural spaces.
- **Inclusive Planning:** Parks and Recreation planners, program managers, and resource officers bring local stakeholders into co-leadership with City planners, ensuring that capital improvement projects truly reflect neighborhood needs. This community-rooted technical capacity ensures that projects are shaped by the neighborhoods they serve from concept through completion—a continuity of vision that is lost when projects are handed off to departments or consultants who enter the process mid-stream, after the trust has already been built.
- **Volunteerism:** The Parks and Recreation Department generates more volunteerism than any other City Department, accounting for approximately 44% of the City's total volunteer hours with support roles including youth sport coaches, trail and open space guides, recreation center assistants, canyon enhancement stewardship, therapeutic recreation aides, and more. The Human Resources Department measures this impact by applying independent business sector standards for an estimated dollar value of volunteer time, which equates to **\$2-5M dollars annually for approximately 70K to 175K volunteer hours**. This value is leveraged by an already thin level of staffing. Every staff position cut will result in a compounding loss of in-kind volunteerism and the loss of thousands of dollars of community support.

### **2. Essential Equity for Underserved Communities**

For many San Diegans recreation centers, neighborhood parks, and open spaces are essential social infrastructure. Maintenance and support of these diverse spaces and programs is a necessary condition of equitable access to parks, recreation, and public green space, supporting the health and quality of life for all San Diegans.

- **Stability:** Assistant Recreation Center Directors are the operational core of the City’s recreation programming. Eliminating them would directly dismantle the City’s ability to deliver consistent, safe, and equitable programming across neighborhoods—with the heaviest impact on underserved communities where recreation centers serve as anchors for childcare, youth enrichment, senior services, and safe public space. These programs don’t scale down without these positions—they stop. Likewise, neighborhood parks, athletic fields, and open spaces all require active City staffing to be safe, welcoming, and fully activated, particularly in park-deficient communities where a local park or open space may be the only accessible green space available.
- **Preventative Maintenance:** Maintenance of park infrastructure—from recreation center facilities and athletic fields to open space trails and natural areas—is already deeply under-resourced. Further staffing cuts would lead to a deferred maintenance cliff where future repair costs far exceed today’s prevention costs. **It is well understood that regular maintenance can reduce overall infrastructure repair costs by 30%.** Additionally, deteriorating infrastructure generates accessibility and safety issues over time and can turn an essential public hub into a blighted, unsafe space for the community. Lack of maintenance in Open Space parks increases stormwater and flood risk, already a significant problem for the City, and leads to habitat degradation in many areas that are also within the City’s Multiple Habitat Planning Area preserve system.
- **Mitigating Fire Risk:** Climate-driven fire risk is among the most urgent consequences of understaffing in City Open Space. The City is literally playing with fire as it insufficiently funds its brush management responsibilities across 3,200 acres of wildland/urban interface (WUI), as documented in the July 2023 Performance Audit of the City’s Brush Management on City-owned Land. The Open Space Division has been building a community-supported strategy to close this gap (see next section), but staff cuts to brush management program managers would scuttle that solution exactly when San Diego needs it most. As with most environmental emergencies, underserved communities—with higher proportions of renters and under-insured homeowners—will bear the heaviest cost.

### 3. Fiscal Multipliers and Climate Resilience through Public/Private Partnerships

The Parks and Recreation Department and the Open Space Division are not just cost centers; **they are powerful activation hubs for local nonprofits that bring in millions of dollars in external grants and private donations for the City.** Many of the organizations signing this letter have been central to securing these external investments in our communities—and together we have raised millions for projects on City lands. Our collective ability to continue doing so depends directly on the staff relationships and institutional knowledge housed in the Parks and Recreation Department and the Open Space Division. These partnerships facilitate capital improvement projects—spanning green infrastructure, recreation facilities, natural lands, and neighborhood parks—that address critical community needs:

- **Asset Management Team:** The Parks and Recreation Department's Asset Management Team is the City's in-house engine for planning, designing, and delivering parks equitably and efficiently overseeing a portfolio of approximately **\$2.9 billion in public**

[sdcanonlands.org](http://sdcanonlands.org) [groundworksandiego.org](http://groundworksandiego.org) [midcitycan.org](http://midcitycan.org) [sandiegobirdalliance.org](http://sandiegobirdalliance.org)

**investment across San Diego's park system.** This team provides technical oversight and institutional knowledge that makes complex CBO partnership projects possible. Without them, the City loses in-house design capacity and the relationships and credibility that attract and sustain external investment. The [Asset Management Project Portfolio](#) documents this work.

- **Climate Infrastructure:** Partnership projects between the Parks and Recreation Department and local CBOS like Groundwork's Chollas Creek Federal Boulevard De-Channelization & Restoration Project and San Diego Canyonlands' Manzanita Canyon Streambed Bioengineering Project use nature-based solutions for flood mitigation and water quality improvements by enhancing and reinforcing natural riparian systems on City lands. Together, these two projects **brought in \$14 million dollars and represent a growing movement for community-led natural infrastructure work that can tap into the \$3.8 billion being generated by California's Proposition 4 Climate Bond measure** for water-quality, drought, flood, and wetland resilience over the next decade. These multi-benefit projects support flood reduction, water quality, heat mitigation, air quality, conservation, and the City's Climate Action Plan goals for carbon sequestration. Projects of this complexity are only possible because of the close working relationships built by Parks and Recreation Department and Open Space Division managers with local CBOs—relationships no other City department has the infrastructure to replicate.
- **Fire Resilience:** The Open Space Division has built a scalable model for community-led brush management on the City's wildland/urban interface, piloted with San Diego Canyonlands, whose standing City Right of Entry permit made grant proposals 'shovel-ready' and helped **secure \$2.5 million over five years for the City's brush management program.** The Open Space Division has since created a Brush Management Permit available to other nonprofits, and Canyonlands is now coordinating with local Fire Safe Councils and neighborhood groups to expand the use of this new permit—positioning the broader coalition to capture a portion of **the \$1.5 billion in fire resilience funds being released through the Proposition 4 Climate Bond measure over the next decade.** Staff cuts to brush management program managers would dismantle this model at exactly the wrong moment.
- **Biodiversity & Stewardship:** The Natural Resource office within the Open Space Division is the expert biological team managing San Diego City's Multiple Habitat Preserve Area and works closely with environmental CBOs to implement natural lands management mandated under the Multiple Species Conservation Plan, the Vernal Pool Habitat Conservation Plan, and the Parks Master Plan. Public/private partnerships with CBOs are essential for proper management of San Diego City's world renown conservation preserve system—part of the second largest park system in the United States—and these partnerships have quietly, and without fanfare, been built over many years. Many of these City nonprofit partners fulfill critical Open Space management functions, including San Diego Canyonlands in City Heights, the San Diego Habitat Conservancy managing 26 private preserves, the San Diego River Park Foundation along the 52-mile SD River corridor, and the Nature Collective managing San Elijo Lagoon.

Dozens more, including San Diego Coastkeeper, Wildcoast, the Sierra Club, the CA Native Plant Society, and the San Diego Bird Alliance mobilize volunteers and advance policy through the Open Space Division. The Bird Alliance's coalition of over 100 groups drove the Rewild Mission Bay Initiative, now codified as the De Anza Natural Plan, helping to secure **over \$1.25M from the Regional Water Quality Control Board and bringing in over \$1M in private foundation support for Mission Bay** in the last 5 years. This entire network of nonprofit partners is managed by a remarkably small team in the Open Space Division. **Cuts to the Open Space Natural Resource Office and Ranger program would represent a pyrrhic strategy: minor short-term savings severing a web of support worth millions.**

Council President Joe LaCava's recently introduced **Pathways for Public Improvements Council Policy** aims to address San Diego's projected \$120 million budget shortfall by streamlining public-private partnerships with the City's expansive nonprofit community. What is not fully recognized, however, is the central role of the Parks and Recreation Department and Open Space Division in advancing public-private partnerships through years of collaboration, activating CBO partnerships for maximum value to the City, and ensuring alignment of nonprofit work with City policy and programs. No other City department has the social infrastructure or institutional knowledge to maintain this public-private network, let alone grow its potential to reach the goals of the Pathways for Public Improvements Policy.

The Parks and Recreation Department and Open Space Division are unsung heroes of community engagement and CBO partnership activation in the City of San Diego. Please **DO NOT be pennywise and pound foolish** by cutting funding and staff from these programs, or by attempting to rewrite organizational structure to find short-term savings at the expense of the extraordinarily valuable community networks the Parks and Recreation Department has crafted over many years.

Sincerely,

**The undersigned coalition of community organizations and members:**





### Co-Signing Organizations

32nd Street Canyon Task Force  
 Business for Good San Diego  
 Casa Familiar  
  
 CleanEarth4Kids.org  
 Climate Action Campaign  
 Climbing for the Community  
 College Canyons Fire Safe Council  
 Community Wraparound  
 Eastern Areas Community Planning Committee  
 Emerald Hills Neighborhood Council  
 Environmental Health Coalition  
 Fern Street Circus  
 Fiesta Island Dog Owners  
 GEM Coffee  
 Groundwork San Diego–Chollas Creek

Our Time to Act  
 Paddle for Peace  
 Partnership for the Advancement of New Americans (PANA)  
 Redwood Village Community Council  
 Rolando Park Community Council  
 Rolando Park Fire Safe Council  
 San Diego 350  
 San Diego Bird Alliance  
 San Diego Canyonlands  
  
 San Diego Parks Foundation  
 San Diego Pediatricians for Clean Air  
 Save Our Access  
 Sierra Club San Diego  
 Talmadge Fire Safe Council  
 The Aja Project

Kate Sessions Commitment  
Latino Outdoors San Diego  
Mid-City CAN  
Mindful Murals  
North Star Naturalist  
Oak Park Community Council

Tierras Indigenas  
Urban Collaborative Project  
Viet Voices  
Wildlife Jewels  
Youth Empowerment

### **Community Leaders**

**Howard Cuarezma**, Secretary, Southeastern San Diego Community Planning Group; Member, Mountain View Community Recreation Group

**Elena Franco**, President, Mt. Hope Neighborhood Council

**Jasmine Mallen**, President, Southeastern San Diego Community Planning Group

**Saige Gonzales Walding**, President, Chollas Valley Community Planning Group