



# **City of Newburyport Parks Reorganization Plan**

*Response to Public Comment and Supplemental Information*

Presented to the Newburyport City Council as a  
follow-up to the Mayor's August 8, 2022 Proposal

September 19, 2022



CITY OF NEWBURYPORT  
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President Shand and Members of the Newburyport City Council,

On August 8, I submitted my plan for the reorganization of the Parks Department as a new Division within the Department of Public Services. Since this time, the plan has been discussed at a meeting of the Committee on Neighborhood and City Services and during public forums at two special city council meetings. We have received helpful feedback to this proposed reorganization plan, and we appreciate the thoughtful comments made by residents. We understand that change can be difficult, and we want to provide additional details utilizing this feedback, to clarify the plan and address frequently asked questions. The common theme we have heard echoed through all the public comments is a shared love and appreciation for our parks, and a desire to strengthen them. The administration greatly values our parks and has proposed this plan in order to better maintain and enhance these public spaces.

It is my intention that this document will help further address some of the questions we have received throughout this process and will explain in greater detail how the August 8 plan will be implemented. We look forward to the Council's affirmative vote on the reorganization plan, and will be available for further questions, including at the September 20 meeting of the Committee on Neighborhood and City Services.

Thank you for your attention to this important matter. We look forward to continuing to provide a high level of service to our City's parks. They are places to foster our sense of community identity, support our quality of life, and enhance our economic and environmental sustainability, and I believe this plan will make a significant improvement in these efforts.

Sincerely,

Mayor Sean Reardon

## **Part One: Responses to Public Feedback**

*The Administration has produced a full plan for restructuring the Parks Department as a Division within the Department of Public Services, and we have received feedback and questions from the public. The public has been largely supportive of the parts of the plan to improve efficiencies and operations of parks maintenance. There have been inquiries regarding leadership, interaction with the public, and more specialized administrative functions. Below are responses to some of the most frequently asked questions regarding the plan. In the next section, we will outline adjustments and clarifications to the plan that may be particularly notable for the community.*

### **How will the public interact with the Parks Division?**

Our parks offer many benefits to residents and visitors, and in most cases, they act as hubs for recreation that residents can use as they like. Most residents engage with the parks for active or passive recreation, and we will continue to make sure they are receiving the service and care that residents expect. There are five main issues on which the public usually engages with the City regarding parks: 1) Maintenance requests, 2) Reservations and permits, 3) Requests for capital improvements, 4) Recreation and events, 5) Advocacy and fundraising. The administration will work to make it as easy as possible for the public to interact with the City on these areas, and will describe below how the process will work. Please note that for all these issues the Department of Public Services will serve as the first and main point of contact, and the main administrative contact for the Parks Division will be able to connect residents to the specialized support they need.

1. *Maintenance requests:* This is described in detail in the Administration's plan and was discussed at the first Neighborhood and City Services meeting. Maintenance requests will be taken by the DPS admin staff and assigned a work order, with automated and additional communication updating residents on the status of their requests. In most cases, this will be completed by the DPS maintenance staff in the Parks Division within two weeks, and information about larger requests will be communicated through leadership in the Parks Division as needed. This system adds additional points of contact and redundancy for reporting concerns, as well as a system with a paper trail for tracking issues and their responses.
2. *Reservations and permits:* The Parks Commission is the final permitting authority, and routine permits will be able to be completed by their designee. The DPS administrative staff liaison will

be able to take all questions on permits and prepare the list of permits for the Parks Commission to approve. All DPS admin staff will be trained in answering questions on permits and will be able to update the Parks Division's calendar. This will provide additional assistance to residents looking to complete permits and scheduling in the parks, with the overall structure of permitting and scheduling largely staying the same for users.

3. *Requests for capital improvements:* Many residents come to the City with ideas for how to improve the parks, or join in efforts to add new features like accessible playgrounds or athletic courts. The current structure, in which it is the Parks Commission that has responsibility over the improvement of parks, will stay the same. If residents have ideas, they can begin by speaking with the administrative staff at DPS, who will make sure it ends up on a Parks Commission agenda with the appropriate background information so the Commission may deliberate effectively. They can also speak directly with a parks commissioner, or bring their request to the Mayor's Office who will make sure it is brought to the appropriate place. If there is already an effort underway to make improvements to a park, then the resident will be connected to the assigned project manager for that effort.
4. *Recreation and events:* The City intends to continue to have events and recreational activities continue in the parks, and the DPS administrative staff will have the information about the events and activities, even if they are not directly managing them. As stated originally in the plan, Youth Services will be the main contact for recreation activities, although the Council on Aging is also expected to be involved with some programming in the parks, as well as new intergenerational programming between NYS and the COA. Events will be expected to be run by a number of entities, including the Parks Commission, the new Friends Of type group, and the Mayor's Office, and local businesses and residents will be connected to the organizers or each event as appropriate.
5. *Advocacy and Fundraising:* The best contact for residents interested in advocacy and fundraising for the parks will be the new Friends Of type group. This group will be in constant communication with the parks maintenance staff, Parks Commission, and staff from the Mayor's Office, and if residents talk to any of these entities, they will be able to be connected to the Friends Of type group. The City's 2020 Open Space plan lists incorporating new Friends Of type

groups as a goal for strengthening the city's parks, and this is an excellent opportunity to proceed in this direction. Having multiple stakeholders involved in these different projects will ultimately lead to a stronger relationship in which each group has the resources to achieve their own distinct responsibilities and all will have a better idea of what each is responsible for.

### **Who will be responsible for leadership of the parks and for creating a vision for their future?**

This is an important question that we have received from many residents. The original plan as well as this document show how these responsibilities will be accounted for under the new structure and that the importance of the parks will not be lost.

The leadership and vision of the City's parks rests with our Parks Commission, with input from residents. We are lucky to have a dedicated, thoughtful, and talented group of people who serve on our Parks Commission. This reorganization plan is an opportunity to better empower the Commission as the vision definers and policy makers of our parks, in a new and enhanced way to help them further define, develop, and accomplish their goals with the appropriate support. A below section expands on the role of the Parks Commission and has additional information.

The Parks Commission will continue to listen to feedback and requests from community members regarding parks alterations, uses, and policies, through their monthly public meetings, as they always have. Through residents' advocacy and participation in the democratic process, values and vision are translated into action and the physical improvement of our parks. Volunteer commissions are a major part of ongoing work throughout the City and this would be no exception. The Cultural Council, Commission on Disabilities, Human Rights Commission, and others are responsible for important issues in the city, and they are able to keep the city's focus on the salience of their policy matters and make progress in different areas. The Parks Commission, Mayor's Office, and City Council will continue to work together to advance key issues for the City's parks.

The vision for such an important part of our City should not lie solely with one person but should be democratized and discussed in an open and public manner, for which a public body is best suited.

### **What will happen to grant writing for the city's parks?**

Many constituents have asked how the City will continue to secure grant funds in the absence of the Parks Director. The City employs a part time grant writer and will continue to do so in order to identify and obtain grant funding. In the past, the parks commission and planning office have also contributed to

grant writing. Kim Turner, the Special Projects Manager, has secured millions in grants in her time with the parks commission, and will also assist on grants as needed.

### **Who will be responsible for fundraising for the parks?**

The Administration is proposing a new structure to manage fundraising and recommends that fundraising be coordinated with but not directed by a city employee. The new structure must comply with city policy and state law, and it will allow for either a Friends Of type group or the current Conservancy to meet with City leadership and recommend allocation of funds, which then will be subject to Mayoral and Council approval. The outside group will be informed of city priorities and then work in collaboration to suggest uses of funds. The Administration would recommend the limited use of donor directed funds to avoid situations in which the Council and donors disagree on how funds will be spent.

An additional aim of the Administration is to limit the amount of maintenance and support that needs to come from supplemental funding. While fundraising to support the parks is valuable and an excellent way to involve the community, the Administration is looking to improve the efficiency and quality of maintenance and capital project execution and reduce the amount of funding needed to ensure proper upkeep of the parks. The City will also look to reduce the amount of time spent by city officials on supporting fundraising activities, such as building and installing the memorial benches. This labor time was often not accounted for in determining whether a donation was benefiting the department, and a full accounting will be included in future fundraising activities.

### **How will parks remain a priority of the City within DPS?**

The Department of Public Services already has a structure wherein within the department there are divisions. Currently, there are 3 divisions: water, sewer, and highway. Each of these divisions has its own budget as well as its own divisional leadership. The Water and Sewer Divisions work with the Water and Sewer Commission whereas the Highway division generally works with the City Council and its respective committees. Parks will become a fourth division of DPS with its own budget, its own resources, and its own divisional leadership. It will be able to tap into shared higher leadership, systems, and equipment but will retain its identity. Structurally the reorganization is built to protect Parks and ensure not only that they aren't lost but that they are enhanced and strengthened.

**Who will be responsible for coordinating volunteers?**

The city has engaged passionate volunteers, and we want to continue providing opportunities for them to be involved in parks improvement. The Parks Commission would be a reasonable entity to take on this work, considering their role in overseeing parks activities. This group is already a volunteer commission, and we should be conscious of the additional activities they are asked to take on.

Additional assistance in coordinating volunteers can come through the DPS administrative staff, the Mayor's Office, and from the fundraising group for the parks, be that the Conservancy or a new Friends Of type group. In addition, the Administration's goal is to reduce reliance on volunteers for typical parks maintenance tasks and would focus volunteering to special annual clean-up events.

**Will the City continue to work with the Morrill Foundation?**

In accordance with its charter, the Morrill Foundation has made generous gifts to the City of Newburyport to assist with the completion of parks improvement projects including at Joppa Park, Patrick Tracy Square, and the Bartlet Mall. The Administration is committed to continuing this relationship and prepared materials for their annual meeting in early September during which the Foundation considered new projects to support. The Administration has provided the Foundation with information on progress made on previously funded projects and will continue to do so in the future. All gifts made by the Morrill Foundation, like any private gift, must comply with city policy and state law requiring gifts above \$500 to be approved by the Mayor and the City Council. The Council has approved these annual gifts of approximately \$110,000 each year, and the administration is confident they will continue to support this arrangement moving forward.

**We have so many projects going on in the parks right now. Who will manage them?**

The City has a number of talented project management capable positions and will continue to assign them on a project by project basis. Currently the City's Director of Planning and Development is managing the Market Landing Park project and has advanced the project through major design milestones and overseen the approval of phase one funding through the Community Preservation Act. The Senior Project Manager in the Planning Office and Manager of Special Projects in the Mayor's Office are also available as project managers and have experience with the types of projects the division is expected to take on.

### **What will happen to adult recreation?**

While the Parks Director was responsible for adult recreation, such as the hiking club and volunteer-led activities like tai chi, the City will still be able to offer adult recreation moving forward. The plan states that the Youth Services department is the best home for organizing and advertising these activities, since it already has a platform for activity registration. Some recreation programs may also be organized by the Council on Aging. The administration plans to move forward in this direction and will make similar offerings available for recreation activities in the parks.

### **Can you provide more information on the role of the Parks Commission in this reorganization?**

Our Parks Commissioners are the stewards of Newburyport's parks. Under the Code of Ordinances, the Parks Commission oversees the improvement of the parks, approves the issuing of permitted activities, and sets rules governing the parks' use.

Through this lens, the Commission's role can best be thought of as having two responsibilities: the improvement of the parks and overseeing their use. The Commission's work in recommending and approving capital projects, requesting maintenance projects, and setting the long-term vision of the parks is all consistent with this mission. The Commission currently identifies long term priorities for funding by sources including the Morrill Foundation, the Community Preservation Committee, and the general fund. The Commission oversaw a master plan process that determined key actions needed to improve the parks for the future. While there are many entities that are involved in making these decisions for funding and prioritization, including the Mayor, City Council, and funders themselves, the Commission is the entity charged with exercising leadership over the future of the parks and their maintenance and improvement.

The Commission currently fulfills its responsibility for oversight of parks activities by approving of permit applications and setting rules for the use of the parks. In recent years, the Parks Director has approved of routine or pro forma permit applications. The Administration would recommend that authority for approving these routine applications be given to the Department of Public Services Administrative Assistant who will be working with the Commission. This Commission will be asked to codify which applications are routine and to agree on what would cause this staff person to instead bring applications to the Commission for approval. Most of the applications received can be resolved through administrative means, and this staff person will also keep the master calendar for parks. The other administrative staff in the DPS will also be trained on the schedule, so that we will have redundancy in



case this one staff person is absent. The Commission's role in setting hours and regulations for parks will go unchanged, and the Commission's determination of which permits should be approved pro forma will help free up their time to focus on more visioning and strategic planning for the parks, with the appropriate support.

The Commission began a long-term master planning and visioning exercise in early 2021, but it was never fully completed, and the administration would like to provide the Commission focused assistance to fully realize the master visioning plan of the Parks Commission. This reorganization plan would allow for concentrated support, working with the Parks Commission, to revision our parks and open space and make them even stronger. Because this focused support is well-aligned with Capital Improvements and Strategic Master Planning, the administration feels the Manager of Special Projects would be a good fit to provide the necessary support for this exercise and would also provide a strong connection back to the Mayor's office.

In order for the Parks Commission to fulfill their role, it will be crucial that they receive regular updates and correspondence from all those involved in the parks, and that they receive staff assistance so they are prepared for their monthly meetings. Monthly meetings will include an update from the Parks Manager within DPS, as well as an update from the Mayor's Office so that they are kept aware of progress on capital projects and other changes. The Director of Public Services or their designee will also be invited to attend meetings as needed. The Mayor will determine their designee to meetings, and at this time it is recommended that it be the Manager of Special Projects because of their work with capital projects and coordination across the DPS, Planning, and other offices.

This proposed structure will allow the Commission to fulfill its role in the ordinances and return leadership functions to them regarding the improvement of parks, while also providing them the necessary support. The Administration is willing to work with the Commission and the Council to make any needed changes to the Ordinances to support this structure and is committed to collaborating with the Commission if it wishes to further refine its role.

## **Part Two: Adjustments to the Original Plan**

*A number of details have been discussed since the original presentation of the Reorganization Plan, many of which are in response to public feedback. The administration is presenting the below section so that residents can see any changes to the plan and better understand how it will work. These are still in line with the original document and should not require a change in the reorganization process.*

### **1) Definitive Point of Contact**

The Administration heard concerns about who could be contacted for different issues in the parks and wanted to clarify that the Department of Public Services administrative staff could be contacted for all issues and would, in turn, direct residents to the appropriate responsible party. This allows for redundancy in scheduling and maintenance requests and will ensure that all other requests are brought to the right entities. This provides a single point of contact for all Parks related matters.

### **2) Programming and Recreation**

The Administration is adding the Council on Aging as a potential organizer for programming and recreation in the parks, particularly for senior and intergenerational programming. This would supplement the current proposal providing for strong programming potential across various age ranges in the City.

### **3) Morrill Foundation**

Because of the importance of the Morrill Foundation and the unique role they play in strengthening the City's parks, the Mayor will be the lead contact with this organization. This is an update to the original plan, which stated this role would be filled by the Mayor's office. This direct approach will ensure that this relationship is strong and direct.

### **4) Advocating for Parks in Budget Process**

The original reorganization plan described the preparation of the annual budget but did not discuss the importance of advocating for parks projects and insuring they are given the resources they need as a part of the budget process. The Parks Commission will drive the goals, priorities, and needs of the parks, and this will be used by the Parks Manager, Business Manager, and Mayor's Office to write the Division's budget. This same group will advocate for the budget during the hearing

process, with additional information on projects handled by individual project managers.

**5) Use of Savings**

The Mayor is committing that, subject to appropriation decisions by the Council, the first three years of net savings anticipated under this plan will be allocated toward the parks, mainly for parks improvement projects. This would represent roughly \$315,000 over three years. These savings could be spent on high priority capital improvements, auditing and implementing accessibility measures in the parks, and meeting the needs of residents for additional recreational facilities. Accessibility measures, in particular, are a major goal of the City's 2020 Open Space plan and would be an excellent use of funding in the near term.

**6) Director of Public Services**

Since the release of the full plan, a vacancy has opened for the Director of Public Services position. The position's supervisory responsibility for the parks and their management will be added to the job description for the position, and the screening process for the new director will include assessment for the ability to take on these functions. The Mayor has committed to a comprehensive search for the next director of the department.

**7) Strengthening the Parks Commission to support its visioning**

While we believe the reorganization plan is consistent with the current duties of the Parks Commission, it is clear that there is a significant amount they are responsible for, and additional staff assistance would be welcome. We are committing that a representative from the Mayor's Office, the Parks Manager, and a representative from those running recreation programs for the city will be present at Commission meetings to assist the group. We are also recommending that a representative from the new Friends Of type group will be in attendance at Commission meetings, at least quarterly, to improve collaboration and coordination.

## **Conclusion**

The administration is committed to making this transition as smooth as possible and will be happy to answer additional questions as needed. The Parks Division within DPS will be able to carry out the essential tasks to ensure the proper maintenance of the parks, and the remaining leadership and other responsibilities will be accounted for as described above and in the Reorganization plan. This will allow us to make sure the parks remain a special and dedicated resource for the people of Newburyport. While change is difficult, this will result in minimal changes in the daily operations of the maintenance staff and will delegate responsibilities to well qualified and competent individuals across the city.