

## Parks fund

***Eagle River taxes itself for parks projects; Anchorage should, too***

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The Eagle River-Chugiak area has proved there's a better way to keep up and improve parks, trails and recreation facilities.

Will Anchorage dare to follow the lead of its northern suburb and do the same? It should.

Parks in Eagle River-Chugiak and parks in the Anchorage Bowl are both under city management but are run separately. Each has a park service district.

Bond propositions for a park district require citywide approval, even though property outside the district is not taxed to repay the bonds. Voters in the Anchorage Bowl and Eagle River-Chugiak areas used to kill each other's parks bond projects regularly.

Here's how it worked:

In 2002, voters in the Anchorage Bowl approved \$8.9 million in park bonds to repair high school pools, fix ice at Ben Boeke and add some new facilities. Eagle River voters defeated it, dragging the areawide vote down below 50 percent, even though Eagle River property taxpayers would not have had to contribute to the bonds payback.

In 2003, Eagle River voters approved a \$1.9 million proposition for their area. Anchorage Bowl voters went against it, and it failed areawide.

The result: Nobody got anything. Pool repairs were delayed again and again. Roof repairs? Not a chance.

Then the Eagle River-Chugiak voters decided to charge themselves an annual tax levy to take care of parks projects on a pay-as-you-go basis. Their park improvements no longer require the approval of Anchorage Bowl voters.

It's worked well by all accounts.

"We've done so many improvements to so many different parks, American Legion ball fields, Mirror Lake, you name it," says John Rodda, Eagle River parks and recreation manager. "I don't see a downside."

Eagle River-Chugiak voters added a half mill to their annual property taxes for a parks capital fund in 2004. That amounts to \$150 per \$300,000 worth of property. It now raises \$1.6 million per year, and the amount rises as new subdivisions are built or property increases in value.



A long crack on the Tony Knowles Coastal Trail west of Lyn Ary Park is an example of repairs that don't get done in city parks and trails.  
(*BROOKE BLESSING, Municipality of Anchorage*)

With that money, the Eagle River parks board has been working through a list of projects that had been piling up: improvements to the Beach Lake chalet, resurfacing of the town square park, building a trail connection from the business district to the Glenn Highway and more.

The Chugiak High Pool has been repaired, while Anchorage Bowl pools are still waiting. As are projects like upgrading the Goose Lake building, with its inadequate bathrooms and iffy electricity.

Some Anchorage officials have begun talking about the idea of using the Eagle River tax system in Anchorage.

"It would give us the ability to schedule out improvements over a long period of time," said Mary Jane Michael, city economic and community development director. "We can really have a plan for the future."

In the Anchorage Bowl, the goal would be to raise between \$4 million and \$5 million annually to spend primarily on taking care of existing facilities, said Michael. That would take .2 mills, or \$60 for a \$300,000 house.

A majority of Anchorage voters have generally been favorable to parks bonds. The Anchorage Assembly should give Bowl voters a chance to say "yes" to a steady, reliable parks improvement program.

**BOTTOM LINE:** Eagle River and Chugiak are doing a better job of keeping up parks. Anchorage should adopt their approach.

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