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Local program volunteers help spruce up city parks

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Local program volunteers help spruce up city parks

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by Jackie Bartz
Saturday, July 10, 2010

ANCHORAGE, Alaska -- The budget for the city's Department of Parks and Recreation took a big hit last year, but the department says it's determined to not let it show. All summer, the city is hosting cleanup days at parks around the city, and it's relying on volunteers more than ever.

Spending a drizzly Saturday painting wasn't 11-year-old Connor Shilaha's idea. But Shilaha and dozens of other volunteers gave up their lazy Saturday to lend the city a helping hand.

"Because my mom had to let me come here, she forced me here," Shilaha said. "Community service -- weird."

"The park needs to be cleaned up, and I just wanted to," said volunteer Ruth Mead. "I live in the community, so I wanted to come out and help clean up the park -- I enjoy it, I use the path to walk my dog, it's a nice little park."

The department's Neighborhood Park Fix-Its program cleans up parks around town. This week it focused on Creekside Park in Northeast Anchorage.

"We're trying to clean up this park, fix it up, get it back to being able to be used again," said Northeast Community Council President Kevin Smestad.

Anchorage is home to 235 parks, spread across 11,000 acres. The high number puts it the top 10 percent of city parkland totals in the country -- but it's in the bottom 10 percent when it comes to city funding, with a budget between \$15 million and \$20 million.

Directors say they worry the department's belt will only get tighter next year, but that doesn't mean the parks will suffer.

"Our municipality has a little bit of money to fix up parks, and we maximize those funds by having volunteer support from the neighborhoods where the parks are, to actually double the value of our money that we have to fix up, do major maintenance of our parks," said department planner Suzanne Little.

The department says it's not just about cleaning up, it's about keeping it that way - and when people volunteer, they have a sense of ownership.

"I'll feel great, and I hope it stays this way," Mead said. "We don't have to come back next week and look at the graffiti again."

"Many people in our city, parks are their backyards; it's their one opportunity to get outside and really enjoy our environment," Little said.

But even for those who didn't work voluntarily, there's a life lesson to be learned.

"And if you're doing a small job, it does big things," Shilaha said.

In just a few hours the volunteers performed a massive makeover, giving the park a clean slate and giving themselves something to smile about.

The Park Fix-Its program is also funded in part by the Anchorage Park Foundation



Neighborhood Park Fix-Its program volunteer Ruth Mead says she uses Creekside Park in Northeast Anchorage to walk her dog, and just wanted to help clean it up. (Carolyn Hall/KTUU-DT)



Northeast Community Council President Kevin Smestad says community members are trying to get the park cleaned up and ready for use again. (Carolyn Hall/KTUU-DT)



Anchorage Department of Parks and Recreation planner Suzanne

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and recreation planner Suzanne Little says volunteer labor doubles the value of every dollar spent on park maintenance. (Carolyn Hall/KTUU-DT)

and the state Legislature.

Contact Jackie Bartz at jbartz@ktuu.com



Connor Shilaha says doing small jobs in the program makes big things happen. (Carolyn Hall/KTUU-DT)

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