

Despite leaner budget, Parks and Rec Department is thriving

By MELISSA DeVAUGHN
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On a sunny day in June, a group of Anchorage Parks and Recreation class members lined the hill in front of the Kincaid Chalet and gently pulled the lines to giant parafoils that would lift them off the ground. With an instructor nearby, a few managed to fly for a few seconds, just a couple feet above the ground. Others sailed higher for five to 10 seconds before landing gently back on the hill.

They were exhilarated, even though they'd barely sampled what paragliding is about. Jake and Amy Malous were convinced they had found their new favorite sport.

"We'd never had any contact with the sport before, and after the class we got excited about maybe getting into something like this later," Amy Malous said.

Diane Peterson got the sampling she wanted, too, at a price she could afford.

"It's very adrenaline-rushing; you've got wings," she said. "Once was enough for me, but I liked it."

This is a familiar scene in and around Anchorage these days. From nordic trekking to adventure racing to packrafting Campbell Creek, Anchorage Parks and Recreation -- despite continued budget cuts -- seems to be everywhere.

In our city, an outdoors enthusiast can affordably learn how to skijor, paraglide, mountain bike, ski or kayak. She can choose from such health and fitness programs as water aerobics, all-day backcountry treks or rollerskiing races. She can go orienteering, learn the sport of geocaching or take part in a fly-tying class.

"We have less money now than we had five years ago," said Parks and Recreation director Jeff Dillon. "Ten years ago, we had about 5 percent of the overall municipal budget. This year, we have 3 percent."

But rather than shrink, Parks and Recreation is expanding. Anchorage parks use is rising. Volunteer hours are up. And programs -- especially those that get folks outdoors -- are thriving.

It started, said Mari Steinbach McGourn, senior recreation superintendent, with a little reorganization. Steinbach McGourn left a similar position in Grand Junction, Colo., to join Anchorage Parks and Recreation last August. Because the department is limited financially, a reorganization took some employees away from administrative desk jobs and put them into the community without changing the amount of money being spent on salaries and operations.

There are now seven "programmers" in the city, each responsible for coming up with programs and activities -- from outdoors to education to arts and crafts.

Next, Steinbach McGourn and Dillon split the park into five districts so the programmers could work with a smaller population.

"You're trying to align your resources and strategically place people based on their strengths and weaknesses," Steinbach McGourn said.

"We were able to see more clearly what interests people had, and ... match them to their location and their expertise."

Also new to the department is the creation in 2005 of the Anchorage Parks Foundation, which has set up a trust through private donors such as the Rasmusson Foundation that helps fund the growth of greenbelts and public recreation facilities.

Dillon said the foundation already has already raised \$2 million.

POPULAR OFFERINGS

Sixteen-year Parks and Recreation employee Ronn Randall is one of the city's new programmers, focusing on the outdoors. The job allows him to use his love of the outdoors to come up with such programs as paragliding and packrafting -- courses that have never before been offered by the department.

"We're doing well because we're doing what we like," he said. "The department is better than I've ever seen it."

For Randall, that involves outdoor fitness, especially skiing. His background is in alpine skiing, and his daughter, Kikkan, is a two-time Olympic cross-country skier.

This summer, he began advertising nordic walking, a European fitness craze that involves hiking or fast walking using modified ski poles.

The activity increases cardiovascular fitness, while adding stability, balance and rhythm for preseason training, he said. He saw its popularity while in Europe watching Kikkan compete and thought it would be a great option for Anchorage, especially in years when the snow is slow to arrive.

"It took a while to get going because no one knew what it was," Randall said. "But once we started that group, I couldn't believe how excited people were."

Steinbach McGourn called the program "far and away a huge hit."

After the summer session ended, Randall added a fall session for participants who wanted to keep going. A race category for nordic walkers has been added to the ever-popular Tuesday Night Race series, and an introduction to nordic walking course is in the works to make room for participants on a waiting list.

Another popular European event Randall decided to offer is rollerskiing, which is considered a training method in the United States but a competitive event in Scandinavia. Parks and Recreation offered two rollerski events during the summer -- a sprint race at Cuddy Park in Midtown, and a longer race last month at Kincaid Park. That event attracted some 60 participants, including many of the area's most competitive athletes.

"Ronn is doing a phenomenal job -- this is a niche for him," Steinbach McGourn said. "With all of

our programmers, we said, 'Be creative, make this stuff happen.' And that is what they are doing."

Other popular outdoor options offered included a disc golf clinic at Westchester Lagoon, with instructors from the Alaska Disc Golf Association, Steinbach McGourn said. It sold out. A second class sold out, too.

"They held three or four clinics through the summer," Steinbach McGourn said. "Everyone was thrilled. If nothing else, (it increased) awareness of disc golf and the awareness of, 'Hey, there's a course there. I know it's there now and I know what it is.' "

Just a few hundred yards away was another popular program, also sponsored by Parks and Rec. The "Wild Waterfowl: Walk and Watch" event took place two nights a week, and passers-by could meet Audubon Society members who used spotting scopes and guidebooks to help identify waterfowl and other birds flying around.

"We forged a strong relationship with Audubon and we utilized Westchester Lagoon in a way it hadn't been used in the past," Steinbach McGourn said. "Again, we're growing an appreciation for our community."

Victor Mollozzi, chairman of the Anchorage Parks and Recreation Commission, said the changes come at a critical time. For years, Parks and Recreation has been one of the last departments to receive funds, he said, and it has been forced to do more with less.

"We're really never fully funded," he said. "We have a tremendous amount of volunteers. One of the nice parts about the (new) park districts is that we can really get out there and solicit comments for what would make us better. It hasn't cost us more, but it has helped us."

Dillon, the Parks and Recreation director, said Parks and Recreation volunteers logged 5,000 hours three years ago. This year, they accumulated 12,000 hours.

The help is critical, he said. Last year, an estimated 6 million visitors came to Anchorage parks to hike, bike, swim, take a class or just enjoy the greenery. That number is expected to grow.

"We hope to hit 18,000 (volunteer) hours next summer, because we'll need it," he said.

DOUBLE-EDGED SWORD

Steinbach McGourn said it is exciting to see the reorganized staff excited. Classes are filling up. Visitors are noticing the improvements. This fall's municipal activity guide is filled with classes the department has never offered before.

But she worries that with the improvements will come apathy, or rather an expectation, that parks and recreation can do more with less funding. She knows her employees are working harder than usual, probably more than a 40-hour workweek. And while that zeal has improved Parks and Recreation, it can only last so long, she said.

"What we are here to do overall is to build community," she said. "When we build community, then that builds further support and advocacy for what we are trying to accomplish. Then the community can take ownership and feel a sense of pride."

Amy and Jake Malous took a class to learn more about a new sport, but they never would have spent the thousands of dollars it takes to outfit themselves with paragliding equipment and training. Instead, they paid the \$30 fee and got a taste.

"We got a baby sitter and it was our date night," Amy Malous said. "It was a great introduction. I would have spent twice that to learn what we did."

Steinbach McGourn likes to hear such things.

"The fundamental idea behind Parks and Rec is to provide people an opportunity to try new skills," she said. "You never know; 10 percent might go, 'What's the next step for me to learn more about this activity?'"

Others might be satisfied with the one-time experience.

"It can be an hour of your time or (become) a lifetime hobby," Steinbach McGourn said. "And it starts with us."

Daily News reporter Melissa DeVaughn can be reached at mdevaughn@adn.com.

NEW GUIDE AVAILABLE

- The municipality's Parks and Recreation Department Fall Activity Guide is now available. Some of the outdoor course highlights include Under the Full Moon Walks, Geocaching clinic, Fly Tying, Avalanche Awareness, Nordic Skiing, Cardboard Sledding, Snowshoeing, Ice Fishing, Nordic Walking and more. Go to www.muni.org/parks/activityguide.cfm or your local library for a copy.

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