

Donors step in for city parks

Rasmuson organization, private contributors have surpassed expectations

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Anchorage voters have trashed the idea of paying for city park projects with bond money during three elections in recent years, but private donors and volunteers are partially making up the difference this year, Parks officials say.

The city created the Anchorage Park Foundation late last year to give those who want to donate money for park improvements an easy way to do it. The foundation is a nonprofit fund tied to the Parks and Recreation Department.

The goal was to raise about \$500,000 the first year, said Jeff Dillon, who is Parks Department director and a foundation board member. Instead, he said, because of contributions from the Rasmuson Foundation charitable organization and a widening circle of individual donors, the foundation should reach about \$1.2 million this year.

Former Anchorage Mayor George Sullivan, businessman Larry Carr and Anchorage Parks and Recreation Commission member Victor Molozzi are among the givers, Dillon said.

The Park Foundation has yet to launch a citywide fund-raising effort. This fall, it will likely do that, with a Christmas wish-list approach, Dillon said: A person could buy anything from a park bench to a sign to an entire park as a gift for the system.

"I would think it's a reasonable goal to raise \$1 million per year," Dillon said. "Every \$5 adds up."



Boys and Girls Club volunteers Karimah Shine, 10, and Jazzman Carr, 10, paint wooden posts surrounding Roosevelt Park in Spenard on Wednesday. The girls were part of a large group of young volunteers pitching in for the Anchorage Park Foundation Clean and Green program. *(Photo by JIM LAVRAKAS / Anchorage Daily News)*



While young volunteers scraped and painted the wooden posts behind him, Anchorage Parks & Recreation director Jeff Dillon picked out a new set of swings for Roosevelt Park in Spenard. The new Anchorage Park Foundation is refurbishing and sprucing up local parks with recently donated money and grants. *(Photo by JIM LAVRAKAS / Anchorage Daily News)*

The foundation is spending the money raised so far this summer mostly in \$40,000-and-under projects restoring long-neglected parks, Dillon said.

Volunteer labor is extending the dollars. For example, about 60 kids attacked tiny Roosevelt Park in Spenard with paintbrushes and rakes on a sunny, hot day last week.

Teenagers and younger children, volunteers from a summer program at the University of Alaska Anchorage and from the Boys and Girls Clubs, spiffed up the wooden posts that surround the park with brown paint and brought order to the grass and weeds.

"It's just to, like, help building a strong community," said Ashley Bowen, 15, who's going to a summer program at UAA to prepare for college. She and Nicole Faiupu, 14, raked unruly grass in Roosevelt Park, at Taft Street and Roosevelt Drive.

Dillon, meanwhile, sat at a picnic table browsing a play equipment catalog with some of the younger ones.

"We want something we can climb to the top of," said a boy who looked 9 or 10 and is clearly no couch potato. The park is due at least a swing set, Dillon said.

Some other parks with fix-up work planned or already accomplished this summer are Margaret Eagan Sullivan Park around Westchester Lagoon; Valley of the Moon; Lyn Ary, along the Tony Knowles Coastal Trail in Turnagain; Minnesota Park, which has skate park equipment; Taku Park; Goose Lake; Pop Carr Park; Connors Lake; Cutty Sark Park in Jewel Lake; Fairview Lions Park; Oceanview Park; and Forsythe Park in South Anchorage.

The Rasmuson Foundation, Alaska's largest philanthropic organization, gave \$400,000 last year to get the Park Foundation going. Now it has promised an additional \$410,000, mostly to match one-for-one the grants from other individuals and groups that want to do specific projects.

"These are supposed to be grass-roots projects, projects that neighbors and individuals around parks and trails are wanting to see happen," said Jeff Clarke, Rasmuson Foundation administrative officer and a Park Foundation board member.

As part of its initial grant, the Rasmuson Foundation board required that the Parks Department hold community meetings to ask residents what kind of park improvements they wanted, Clarke said. The city did that in February and March.

Clarke said Parks and Recreation has been underfunded in Anchorage for years and maintained a low profile in city government until about a year ago.

The lack of money and attention resulted in declining services and fraying facilities, he said, and much of the public lost confidence in the parks system.

"The customers were saying, 'We're not finding value here,' " he said.

Community meetings, surveys and interviews with park and trail users were conducted to help change that, Dillon said.

He didn't push for a parks bond proposition in the April city election because he needed to find out what the community wants first, Dillon has said.

The city is now refining priorities, from an irrigation system for the Town Square flower gardens to completion of the Cuddy Midtown Park near Loussac Library. Dillon will recommend a parks bond proposition for the April 2006 city election but hasn't yet decided which projects to include, he said.

The city also gets parks money, often tied to specific projects, from the state and federal governments.

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FOR MORE about the Anchorage Park Foundation:

www.anchorageparkfoundation.org

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