
From: Jennifer Tanaka <jletanaka@gmail.com>
Sent: Wednesday, August 7, 2024 12:54 PM
To: PARKS COMMISSION; GRUNER, BRIAN
Cc: PACS Comments; FARRELL HARRISON, LORI ANN; STEPHENS, JOHN; HARLAN, JEFFREY; sustainable2020@gmail.com
Subject: Harper Park Letter to PACS
Attachments: Harper Park Letter to PACS August 2024.pdf.pdf

Members of the PACS Commission and Director Gruner:

Last evening at City Council the public received a much appreciated update on Harper Park from City Manager Farrell Harrison (copied). I want to highlight the issues raised in her update for your attention as I believe it falls within the PACS Commission's purview as the residents' representatives regarding park affairs.

As the park ranger staffing issue also indirectly affects other Costa Mesa parks and in particular Fairview Park, I have copied Mayor Stephens, Mayor Pro Tem Harlan, and Fairview Park Steering Committee Chair Erik Roberts on this email as well for visibility.

Best,
Jenn Tanaka
321 Broadway
Costa Mesa, CA 92627

Sent from my iPhone

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August 7, 2024
Via Email

Parks and Community Services Commission of the City of Costa Mesa
Brian Gruner, Parks & Community Services Director
77 Fair Drive
Costa Mesa, CA 92626

Dear Members of the Parks and Community Services Commission and Director Gruner:

At the City Council meeting earlier this week, Mayor Pro Tem Jeffrey Harlan requested and received an update from City Manager Lori Ann Farrell Harrison regarding the status of Harper Park. As you may be aware, Harper Park was the subject of a six-month pilot program that required full-time patrols by park rangers to police interactions between parkgoers and the occupants of the adjacent Newport-Mesa Unified School District (NMUSD) buildings. This six-month pilot program expired in May 2024, and the park ranger patrol was reassigned.

According to the City Manager, the City, in coordination with NMUSD, is now planning to **(1) reinstate the full-time park ranger patrols at Harper Park at the beginning of the Fall academic school year, and (2) explore “a more permanent infrastructure fix” to address the issue.** While the City Manager was quick to emphasize that such infrastructure fix would “not quite [be] a fence”, she indicated that she and Superintendent Wesley Smith had discussed some kind of physical separation between the city park and the NMUSD fields.

Despite repeated requests for updates from both the public and Mayor Pro Tem Harlan in the past few months, to my knowledge this is the first time the public has been made aware of these specific changes. This is unfortunate. As I, alongside a number of other Harper Park neighbors, raised last year (see attached letter sent to you and to the City Council dated June 6, 2023), Harper Park was the subject of a serious breakdown in public engagement when the temporary fence was installed, which in turn **undermined public trust in the City Council, the Parks and Community Services Commission, Costa Mesa City Staff, the NMUSD Board of Trustees, and NMUSD Staff.**

I write today to implore you to use your platform to ensure this does not happen again.

First, I do not believe that the City Manager should put our scarce park ranger resources at NMUSD's disposal without first consulting with the PACS Commission. The PACS Commission receives (unfortunately now far less frequent) reports regarding park ranger enforcement activities at all our parks. **Therefore the PACS Commission is the residents' voice with respect to the equitable distribution of enforcement resources.** And, at the moment, our parks across the city are facing serious enforcement challenges, including reckless motorbike riding, overnight camping and graffiti/vandalism. Are full-time patrols at Harper Park, aimed mostly at ticketing technical leash law violations, the right way to deploy our scarce park ranger resources in light of these challenges?

It would also be appropriate for the City to brief the Fairview Park Steering Committee (FPSC) of these deliberations, given that enforcement at Fairview Park will be directly impacted by this decision. To this end I have taken the liberty of sending a copy of this letter to the Chair of the FPSC.

Second, any “infrastructure fix” for Harper Park should be reviewed and approved by impacted residents, the PACS Commission and the City Council. I am aware that the field space is NMUSD property, and that this means the NMUSD Board of Trustees has broad discretion to make infrastructure changes. But there is no way to escape the fact that any such change will fundamentally alter the character and use of Harper Park. Harper is a *city* park and the only one easily accessible by hundreds of Eastside residents. So **it is up to the City to represent the residents’ interests and rights under our joint use agreement (JUA) with NMUSD**, which governs use of the Harper fields by city residents. Total or constructive deprivation of the use of the fields by Costa Mesa residents would violate the spirit (if not the letter) of the JUA.

Accordingly, I would like to request that the Costa Mesa Parks and Community Services Department and the PACS Commission undertake two actions, which were also requested under the Prior Letter:

1. Promptly initiate a public, collaborative effort between the City Council, the Parks and Community Services Commission, City Staff, NMUSD and relevant stakeholders, ***which must include resident representatives***, to develop a comprehensive plan for the future use and preservation of the playing fields and Harper Park.
2. Conduct a public review of the joint use agreement between the City of Costa Mesa and NMUSD to determine how to maximize the ability of residents to use school fields for recreation and enjoyment purposes while respecting NMUSD’s security and maintenance concerns.

The pilot program initiated last year was an emergency fix to address the poorly planned and horribly executed installation of temporary fencing at Harper Park, which Mayor Pro Tem Harlan correctly deemed **“an epic fail”**.

Please help the City to not make the same mistake twice.

Sincerely,

Jenn Tanaka
321 Broadway
Costa Mesa, CA 92627

CC:

Lori Ann Farrell Harrison, City Manager
John Stephens, Mayor
Jeffrey Harlan, Mayor Pro Tem and City Council Representative, District 6
Erik Roberts, Chair of the Fairview Park Steering Committee

Exhibit A

June 6, 2023
Via Email

Costa Mesa City Council
Parks and Community Services Commission of the City of Costa Mesa
Jason Minter, Parks & Community Services Director
77 Fair Drive
Costa Mesa, CA 92626

Dear Members of the City Council, Members of the Parks and Community Services Commission, and Director Minter:

We write to express our strong opposition to the recent installation of a temporary fence by Newport-Mesa Unified School District (NMUSD) between the playing fields and the playground/park area of Harper Park. As residents of the surrounding neighborhood, we are deeply disappointed by the decision to physically separate these two areas without any public engagement or consultation with our elected and appointed officials.

Harper Park holds a special place in the hearts of many residents as a beloved community gathering spot. Its best feature is the combination of playing fields and city park, which has fostered a sense of unity and freedom for residents and visitors alike. Young adults (and the young at heart) play pickup soccer and flag football games on evenings and weekends. The park's small playground and picnic area receives heavy use by the many young families that live nearby. **In fact, Harper Park is the *only* neighborhood playground and playing field in the lower Eastside that does not require residents to cross busy and dangerous arterial roads like 17th Street, Irvine Avenue or Newport Boulevard.** It is the epitome of a walkable, bikeable park.

The fence has undermined Harper Park's value as a community asset by making these uses more difficult, more crowded, or completely impossible. The sudden introduction of this eyesore – the temporary fencing is cheap, hostile, and unwelcoming in every respect – negatively impacts the aesthetic appeal of both the playing fields and Harper Park, which have previously been valued for their natural beauty and open atmosphere. Cutting the fence directly through some of the most beautiful trees in Eastside Costa Mesa feels like an insult. And the visual impact of the fence, and the lack of respect for residents and their park it implies, not only disrupts the overall ambiance but also has the potential to deter residents from utilizing the park as frequently as before.

All of this could have been avoided. The abrupt installation of this fence, much to our shock and dismay, was done without any prior resident outreach or consultation with the residents. Even our relevant elected and appointed officials, such as our representatives on the City Council and Parks and Community Services Commission, were left out of the loop.

In particular, the "resident-last" posture by City staff is deeply troubling and unacceptable. We have been told that NMUSD has been complaining to City staff about off-leash dogs in Harper Park for some time now, and that the fence was installed by NMUSD with the City Staff's blessing as a potential solution. That's all news to us. There have been only 8 citations for leash law violations in the park since Park Ranger reports resumed post-COVID in October 2020, over 30 months ago, and the last violation

was in July 2022. And furthermore, we do not recall anyone from the City or any relevant signage pointing out the difference between school and park property. In other words, we have seen no recent efforts to change resident behavior either through education or enforcement. And certainly no one has approached the residents to discuss how to address conflicting uses. The lack of transparency and failure to engage the community by City staff in this affair – *and to instead work through NMUSD* – not only undermines trust but also disregards the voices and concerns of the residents who utilize and cherish these spaces.

In light of these concerns, we urge the City Council and the Parks and Community Services Commission to take immediate action to address this matter. **We respectfully request the following actions be taken:**

3. Work with NMUSD to immediately remove the temporary fence between the playing fields and Harper Park, reinstating the open and interconnected space that has long been enjoyed by the community.
4. Promptly initiate a collaborative effort between the City Council, the Parks and Community Services Commission, City Staff, NMUSD and relevant stakeholders, ***which must include resident representatives***, to develop a comprehensive plan for the future use and preservation of the playing fields and Harper Park.
5. Conduct a review of the joint use agreement between the City of Costa Mesa and NMUSD to determine how to maximize the ability of residents to use school fields for recreation and enjoyment purposes while respecting NMUSD's security and maintenance concerns.

It is essential that our elected representatives and city officials prioritize the well-being and satisfaction of the community they serve. We implore you to carefully consider the impact of the fence on the residents and their ability to enjoy these valuable ***public*** spaces.

Thank you for your attention to this matter. We eagerly await your prompt response and actions.

Sincerely,

Jenn Tanaka
Andrew Nowobilski
Mike Lingle
Michael Reynolds
Lily Reynolds
Karyn Banner
Jim Fitzpatrick
Mohammed Elayan
Eric Wayman
Jon Garner
Karen Peca
Tony Peca
Wendy Leece
Summer Jarratt
Adam Hickam