

TAKE BACK OUR PARKS – 2011 Mayoral Questionnaire

JOHN AVALOS

1. Currently RPD management is seeking to convert the Department into an enterprise agency and end General Fund support, effectively making a commodity out of the commons.

a. What is your thinking about removing the Recreation & Park Department from the General Fund and transforming it into an enterprise agency?

I do not support that; I believe that one of the most important functions of government is to provide general support to our public institutions like parks and recreation. Parks are a public good and it is our government responsibility to ensure that they remain open and free to everyone.

b. Will you continue this RPD privatization strategy?

No. I have actively sought to prevent our parks and their services from privatization.

c. If you oppose this strategy, what would be your approach to funding the RPD?

As Mayor I will pursue innovative solutions to our cash flow problems, and have already begun the charge with my Real Estate Transfer Tax on high-end commercial buildings, which was passed in 2010. This year alone, it has brought in \$45 million in new revenue, and without it we could not have balanced the budget.

As Mayor, I will fight to maintain free access to our public parks, and therefore will not seek to fund the RPD with entrance fees; General Fund dollars are the essential for securing revenue. Recently, the Parks budget has acted as a slush fund for the Mayor's Office – the parks are always the first place that the City taps for funds to fill other priorities in bad budget years. As Mayor, I want to create a new funding stream for our parks, through a combination of parcel taxes, or by increasing the fees for out-of-town users.

d. Do you believe the RPD operations should be supported by tax dollars?

Yes.

2. The Department recently fired its recreation staff who delivered services to children and families, hired supervisors to outsource programming, and added a highly paid property management team to lease out recreation and park facilities.

a. Do you think this model should be reversed, and if so, what would be your plan to providing those services?

Yes. As Supervisor I have fought to preserve those very services, and as Budget Chair for two years, one of my top priorities was to protect the RPD from draconian cuts, while making targeted appropriations for increased open space and recreational opportunities. We were successful in preventing the immediate layoffs of the City's Rec directors, funded workcreation jobs for young people, and added community gardens, new recreation

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facilities, and playgrounds. As Mayor I will seek to generate revenue through a combination of taxes, as mentioned above, and will seek to re-implement those outreach services.

3. According to figures gleaned from the Controller's office, in 2009 the City laid off nearly 2,000 employees who were the interface with the public and whose average cost to the City was \$37,000 for a "savings" of \$70 Million, and at the same time added 779 management employees whose average pay was \$147,000 for a total cost of \$115 Million.

a. Would you reverse this practice and reduce management and use the savings to hire employees who provide direct services to the people?

Yes.

b. Are you aware that RPD is hiring hundreds of outside recreation providers who are limited to 16 hours/week with no benefits to replace former recreation directors? Do you approve of this policy?

Yes, I am aware of this, and no I absolutely do not approve.

4. The Recreation and Park Department has been aggressively marketing and leasing out clubhouses to private entities. In many cases this has resulted in loss of clubhouse use for the neighboring communities.

a. How would you ensure that neighboring communities have regular access to clubhouses?

I do not support the privatization of essential government services or the outsourcing of public and private sector jobs. More and more of our parks are being leased out to private entities, which unfairly impedes public access and goes against everything that I believe about what our public spaces should represent! As Mayor, I would work closely with volunteer community park groups; they play an important role in the support, maintenance, and upkeep of our parks, as well as serve as some of our parks' greatest advocates. Through volunteer groups, we've been able to win challenge grants, and build green spaces, playgrounds, and park amenities, and as Mayor, I would give them a lot of input in ensuring the surrounding communities have regular access.

5. The Recreation and Parks Department has proposed to develop the western end of Golden Gate Park by building a large artificial turf soccer sports complex with 60 foot tall stadium lights. This project will destroy the naturalistic landscape character of the western end of Golden Gate Park. The woodland character of the western end of Golden Gate Park is supported by both the 1998 Golden Gate Park Master Plan and the 2004 National Register of Historic Places application. Both of these documents were written by the Department of Recreation and Park and yet, they are being violated by this project.

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- a. As mayor, would you oppose changing the Beach Chalet fields into a soccer complex with artificial turf and 60 foot lights?**

Yes. I believe care should be taken not to create unnecessary conflicts between protecting our open space and expanding recreational opportunities. This philosophy is behind the legislation that I introduced this week to close the golf course in Sharp Park. The City is subsidizing the golf course, as well as facing the threat of lawsuit from environmental groups, and by closing the golf course and returning the natural state of that area of the park, we reduce the city's liability, protect two endangered species, and provide more recreational opportunities for everyone, not just golfers.

- b. Would you direct the Department to renovate the Beach Chalet soccer fields with real grass and no lights?**

Yes.

- c. Renovating the Beach Chalet fields with real grass will save bond funding that could be used in other parks. Would you direct the Department to use the remainder of the bond funding to fix up other parks?**

If possible.

- 6. The Recreation and Parks Department is allowing the SF PUC to build a 40,000 square foot recycled water plant in Golden Gate Park, in the area north of the Murphy windmill, contrary to the Golden Gate Park Master Plan.**

- a. Do you support Golden Gate Park as a landscape park as described in the Master Plan?**

Yes.

- b. Do you oppose any more new buildings in Golden Gate Park?**

Yes.

- c. Would you direct the Recreation and Park Department and the SFPUC to find other locations for the water treatment factory outside of Golden Gate Park?**

Yes, I would direct the Department to find another location for this facility.

- d. If the SFPUC refuses to move the project, would you uphold the charter and put a measure on the ballot to vote on the placement of this building in Golden Gate Park?**

Yes.

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7. The Historic Preservation Commission has proposed to make Golden Gate Park a Historic District. Do you support this proposal, and why or why not?

I would most likely be open to that.

8. On May 11, 2011, RP Commission President Mark Buell explained to a Commonwealth Club audience that he views the RP Commission as primarily responsible to respond to RP Department Staff. There was no mention of focus by the Commission on the public's proposals. The Commission has not demonstrated a track-record of incorporating public feedback.

a. How would you make the RP Commission more responsive to the public?

I would have commissions appointed by the Board of Supervisors.

9. What, if any, changes would you make to the management and priorities of the San Francisco Recreation and Parks Department?

I would discontinue the practice of hiring part-time, highly-paid contractors, and hire those park employees who focus on outreach to children and families. The RPD has also become too top-heavy, and I would hire more gardeners and rec staff to maintain the beauty and accessibility of our parks.

10. Currently the Mayor appoints all seven members of the RP Commission and the General Manager, which has resulted in near 100% approval of staff proposals and nearly uniform dismissal of citizen objections.

a. Do you support a more balanced approach to appointments to the Recreation and Park Commission, such as split appointments between the Board of Supervisors and the Mayor?

Yes.

11. The non-resident entry fee to the Arboretum has proven to be a financial failure and resulted in a dramatic reduction in visitation by both non-residents and by residents.

a. Have you reviewed the data and concerns of the public about the fee and this path to privatizing the Botanical Gardens?

Yes.

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b. Would you be willing to introduce and support legislation to eliminate the fee?

Yes, and I have already introduced a measure to do so. One of my most recent legislative efforts was to use revenue from my Real-Estate Transfer Tax to attempt to repeal the visitor fee for Golden Gate Park's Botanical Garden.

12. Implicit in past public support for the Recreation and Parks Department has been a promise that our parks will continue to be free and our clubhouses will remain open to everyone.

a. Would you willing to place a higher priority for General Fund support to the Rec & Park Department?

Yes.

b. Can you explain why we are being denied what we have already paid for, with fees for park entry and new rental charges for clubhouse use?

Recently we have been paying too much for the creation and the renovation of new parks and subsequently we've had less access to existing parks because they are being leased out to private entities. If elected I would throw the full weight of the Mayor's office behind opposing new entrance fees to our public goods.

13. Should you become mayor, would you continue the policies of committing tens of millions of tax dollars in subsidies to the wealthy like Larry Ellison and Twitter and continue to deny sufficient general fund money to hire more gardeners, custodians and recreation directors to maintain our parks and staff our playground clubhouses?

No!