

City's parks falling apart

Report criticizes upkeep, tracking

By Dan Laidman, Staff Writer

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While Los Angeles spends millions of dollars to develop new sites, hundreds of older parks are deteriorating for lack of upkeep, and maintenance is especially poor in the San Fernando Valley, city Controller Laura Chick said in an audit released Monday.

The report faults the Department of Recreation and Parks for not adequately tracking its facilities - including 390 parks, 176 recreation centers, 13 golf courses and 30 senior centers - and for lacking a proactive maintenance plan.

"The way we are maintaining our assets now is we wait for them to break down, then we go in to fix them," Chick said.

The audit caps a trio of reviews of the Department of Recreation and Parks that General Manager Jon Kirk Mukri said he asked for when he assumed his post less than two years ago. Previous audits looked at programming and finances.

"Mayor Villaraigosa has directed the Recreation and Parks Department to provide him with specific plans to ensure that (all families), regardless of where they live, have access to park and recreation facilities," said Janelle Erickson, a spokeswoman for the mayor.

Mukri called the latest audit helpful.

"What this audit shows is the problem that started with Proposition 13 - the problems of 20 to 30 years of deferred maintenance," Mukri said.

The Valley has the fewest park maintenance workers per acre of any part of Los Angeles, according to the review.

Auditors from Matrix Consulting Group looked at a sample of 10 sites, scoring Chase Park in Canoga Park the lowest. The report criticized the condition of its lawns, trees, walkways and benches while giving higher marks to the playgrounds.

"We've definitely seen a concern in these parks," said Michael Cortez, president of the Canoga Park Neighborhood Council.

The audit notes that of 54 municipal swimming pools, six are closed and 24 have very poor infrastructure. Cortez pointed to the pool at the Lanark Recreation Center, also in Canoga Park,, which has been closed for years although city officials have been wanting to reopen it.

"Every year the community doesn't have a pool is another year that young people don't learn how to swim or enjoy an activity that maybe more affluent neighborhoods do," Cortez said.

The audit also calls on the department to conduct more preventive maintenance of roofs, plumbing and electrical systems, heating, ventilation and air conditioning.

The report calls the agency's inventory of sites inadequate and suggests that workers could be shuffled so more are performing core maintenance duties.

Mukri said progress is being made on an automated system to keep track of resources and to assess maintenance needs. He pointed out that the reactive approach to maintenance, although criticized in the audit, was to some degree explained by last year's heavy rains and the resulting damage.

Councilman Tom LaBonge plans to hold hearings on the audit in the Arts, Parks, Health and Aging Committee, which he chairs.

"There are many, many good things about Recreation and Parks but also, from this audit, some serious challenges," he said. "We must commit more toward maintaining the existing park system that we have."

Dan Laidman, (213) 978-0390 dan.laidman@dailynews.com