

Parks doing well despite budget problems

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While struggling with the effects of a diminishing budget and adverse weather conditions this year, the Montgomery County Department of Parks made cost-effective changes in its operations and added services to bring collect additional revenue, according to its semi-annual report.

The Department of Parks are saving over \$200,000 annually with space management, use of fees and tax funding, reducing energy consumption, making money on the event centers through active marketing,

“We stay busy despite the budget situation,” said Mary Bradford, the director of the Montgomery County Department of Parks. “Our commitment continues to honor our core mission which is ‘an enjoyable, accessible, safe and green park system that promotes a strong sense of community through shared spaces and experiences and is treasured by the people it serves.’ It’s a mouthful, but it certainly encapsulates everything we do.”

The majority of the PowerPoint presentation the Dept. of Parks provided for the County Council revolves around financial struggles. It has been able to save over \$200,000, but encountered the following hurdles in 2011:

- Elimination of 63 valuable staff workers and positions
- Second year of temporary pay reduction program (like furlough)
- Variety of maintenance and other contracts eliminated
- Increased health and retirement costs
- Unfunded federal mandates require considerable resources

“A lot of it is about money right now and about trying to keep our parks clean and safe,” said Bradford. “Like everybody else, we have the same challenges that the whole county has.”

The Dept. of Parks took a tremendous hit from the earthquake and Hurricane Irene this year. On top of financial issues, it has had to manage:

- Storm-related expenses over \$100,000 in FY2012
- A maintenance backlog of approximately \$9 million
- Aging equipment and dwindling supplies
- Demands for new and more diverse facilities and programs
- Population served continues to grow

"Our storm damage has been pretty high already this year. Normally, he have to wait until the end of snow season, but it's been a strange summer. The earthquake damaged many of our historic structures."

To increase profitability, the Department of Parks has been trying to use more parks as wedding venues and showcases the venues with "Brides on the Bus" tour. "The Agricultural History Farm Park has proved remarkably popular," said Bradford. "A lot of people want to get married amidst the barns and the pigs and the stalls and the most important thing - the scenery. It's beautiful and it's been a success in our portfolio. I have the most creative staff in county government, I have to say."

Over \$300,000 has been awarded to the Department of Parks since April 1, 2011 and are currently working with \$3 million in total active grants. More than 8,300 individuals in FY 2011 are volunteering for the Montgomery County Parks, which is over \$1.6 million in value. In addition, over half a million dollars in Park field revenue returned to date from Community Use of Public Facilities.

"It's great to talk about great management and great parks," said Councilmember Craig Rice. "It's another when you talk about community interaction. I have to tell you how pleased I am."

Montgomery Parks also restructured four nature centers, including Black Hill: water ecosystems, Wheaton: Urban ecology, Cabin John: curricula-based outreach schools, and Rock Creek: raptors, environmentally-based outdoor teen programs.

"We're giving each one of them a focus," said Bradford. "We're trying to grow their role in respect to Maryland's new environmental literacy requirement for school students."

Public-Private Partnerships was also a FY 2011 success for the Dept. of Parks. "We just opened the Tai Chi Court at Cabin John and the Miracle League field with the Washington Nationals and Bethesda Kiwanis the Department of Recreation and a number of other partners," said Bradford. "That's for

children with disabilities so that they too can play baseball on a very special surface.”

The park police also showed positive results this year. The park police uncovered a car at Cabin John Region Parks on a routine patrol at the Martin Luther King, Jr. dedication - the person inside had a lot of fireworks. The park police were able to stop an incident in this case before it even occurred, and council members weren't shy about expressing their appreciation.

“You're doing a terrific job and our parks system is not only one of the best in the country, it's one of the best managed,” said Councilmember Phil Andrews. “You have implemented numerous innovative projects and public-private partnerships during your tenure and so I continue to be very impressed with your leadership and the work of everybody in Park and Planning.”

“I just wanted to tell you how much we all appreciate the work that you do,” said Councilmember Nancy Floreen. “We know that it's moving well and smoothly. Thank you.”