

PARK VIEWS

Park Operations Uncertain In A Time Of COVID-19

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Park Operations, Are They Essential or Not, It Just Depends Upon Who You Ask

The response to the COVID-19 pandemic in California is changing everyone's lives in many ways. It seems each county and community have reacted in somewhat different ways based upon their unique local situations in efforts to discourage travel, group gatherings and maintain physical distancing while still providing some opportunity for residents to exercise and get outside in their neighborhoods. But to the largest extend the strategy seems to be close places. To close parks.

Of concern to the Board members of the Development and Operations (D & O) Section of the California Park and Recreation Society (CPRS) is the apparent unevenness of the closures and the imbalanced impact to the delivery of basic park maintenance the seems founded upon different definitions of essential services being applied across the state.

In some counties and communities there has been an almost complete closure of parks and stoppage of park operations. For others, it is selective closure of facilities/amenities and services while keeping more passive recreation activities available with minimum (essential) maintenance only. What seems certain is that the standing of park maintenance departments and personnel will continue to be dynamic in response to the changing political, economic and health related concerns of the day.

The [California State Association of Counties has prepared a website with COVID-19 resources including an interactive map linking to all current County Emergency Declarations](#), and that incorporates changing essential services lists. The declarations are updated as conditions change so check back periodically.

In This Issue

- *Park Operations, Essential or Not...a changing definition*
- *Park Ops in a Time of Covid-19. Survey Says....*
- *Framing Park Operations as an Essential Service*
- *Park Ops, What Now?*
- *A Time for Positive Outlook, Innovation, Dexterity and Purposeful Action*
- *Creative Response to COVID-19 Results in "Pop-up" Parks and Expansion of Park Systems to Include new Linear Recreation Opportunities.*
- *Finding Inspiration During 'The Pause'*
- *New Park Vocational Library*
- *Bottom Line, Safety Is Our First Concern*

Park Operations in the Time of COVID-19. Survey Says...

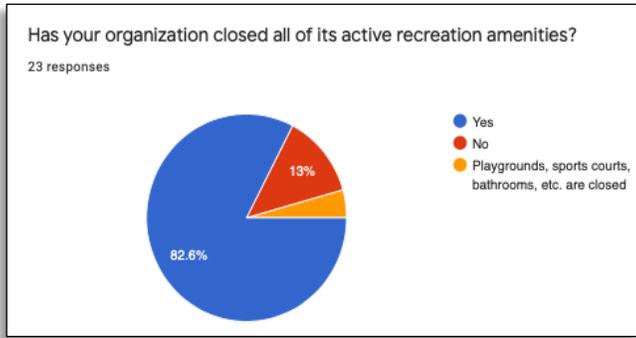
"In Orange County parks our visitation has increased dramatically. With these high numbers we have seen an increase in trash, vandalism and graffiti. In addition, staff are working parking lot closures and keeping busy with storm cleanup. We are also seeing homeless populations beginning to migrate back into our parks" according to Sue Stoffel, Maintenance Inspection Specialist.

While in Redwood City, much like other Bay Area peninsula agencies all park maintenance, including mowing, had all but stopped for a few weeks based upon emergency declarations from San Mateo County and the City, according to Assistant Director Lucas Wilder. "We have been able to re-start some basic services after surveying other city park departments to establish that

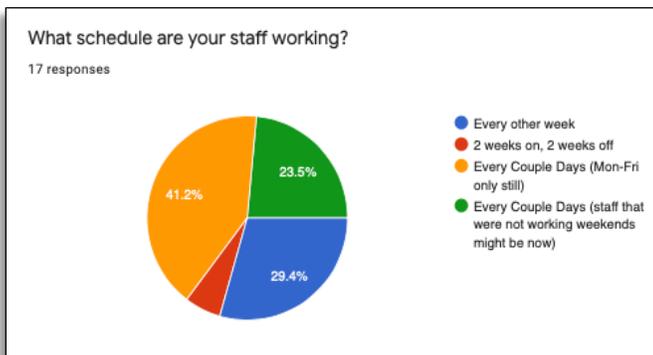


basic park maintenance was been performed elsewhere in our vicinity."

Imaginatively, Wilder [conducted a cursory survey](#) of Covid-19 modified maintenance strategies with over 20 city and county agencies responding.



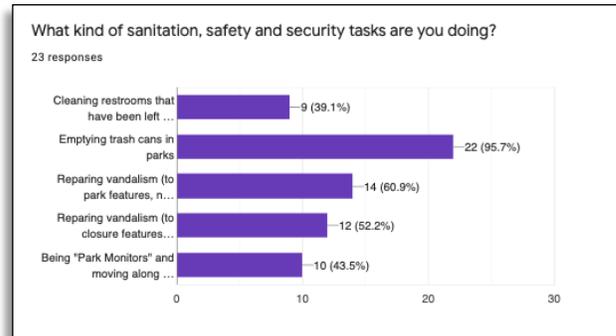
Wilder found that 84% of agencies responding to the survey had closed some, or all of their active recreation amenities. The survey shows that 42% of agencies are still regularly mowing turf areas while more than half have significantly reduced their mowing and some had even ceased mowing altogether in response to local agency’s interpretation of the “essential services only” mandates at the city and county level. Nearly 100% of agencies, however, continue to provide litter and trash pick-up. [Be sure to check out the most recent full results here.](#)



Nick Franco, reports from San Luis Obispo County that [“Parks were included as an essential function within the San Luis Obispo County Emergency Declaration.](#) Our staff is fully

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working and has done overtime shifts to assist with food bank distribution and an alternate care site set up at Cal Poly. We have actually seen an increase in park use and that has necessitated some adaptive management such as limiting the number of vehicles in the park in order to maintain appropriate physical distancing.



Additionally, one park has been closed and modified to house COVID positive homeless people in isolation and another campground has been modified as a safe parking location for other non-positive homeless people. Our campgrounds are closed, beach parking closed, but otherwise operating and extremely busy.”

COVID-19 and Park Development and Operations, Are We An Essential Community Service or Not?

This all serves to beg the question of what is an essential service and why are park services generally not considered essential. Why is litter and trash pick-up seen as critical, but mowing and landscape maintenance to protect green infrastructure is not? What are the possible short and long-term budget and operational ramifications for parks departments resulting from park closures and staff furloughing resultant from the way park operations are viewed and categorized in the lower echelon of municipal services? Maybe there is a justification after all to move park operations to public works departments as a means to enhance respect and better assure the livelihood of park professionals.

The danger is that Covid-19 response may influence policy makers view of the essential nature of park operations and further erode its status the way it may be impacting recreation services. The concern is that the dexterity and creativity by which many recreation departments have moved to virtual recreation centers and programming may be a paradigm shift, the dawning of a new, more cost-effective service delivery strategy. Will responsive recreation departments be the architects of their own demise having demonstrated how programming can be delivered from the desktop to the living room or backyard rather than from bricks and mortar facilities?



For now, at the Federal level, the Department of Homeland Security has included landscape services as part of the list of essentials services needed to support Public Works and Infrastructure Support Services in its [“Memorandum On Identification of Essential Critical Infrastructure Workers During COVID-19 Response.”](#) Just about 30 days ago California Governor Gavin Newsom took a measured approach in defining essential services giving [county health officers](#) the latitude to be more specific in defining essential services based upon the unique characteristics of their organizations, geography and constituent base.

As a result, there is great variety in the definition of essential services throughout the State. In some instances, park organizations have been able to navigate the essential services definition to find the room they need to continue to operate in a way that assures the health, safety and well-being of patrons and the environment. Agencies are also looking to the other affiliated green and landscape related industries to find justification for continuing park maintenance as an essential service. The golf and landscape contracting industries are good examples.

In Sacramento, San Luis Obispo and Placer County golf courses have been open for business, but no place else in the state could you tee up. But then organizations like the California Landscape Contractors Association, National Association of Landscape Professionals, the California Professional Golf Association and the golf course owner’s association began working quietly in “measured, nuanced and supplicant ways” to inform and encourage county health officers to allow the reopening of golf courses, this according to one representative of the USPGA. The efforts seem to be effective in [Ventura County were golf courses reopening opening on April 19](#) and courses in the [Coachella Valley](#) and Orange County will open soon. This all begs the question of whether CPRS and park professionals (D&O Section) should be a part of this green industry collaboration building on strong park operations standing elsewhere.

San Luis Obispo County has recognized park and recreation activities as an essential service in their Mandatory Shelter at Home Order. Specifically, the Order states that the following is an Essential Activity: *to engage in outdoor activity, provided the individuals comply with Social Distancing Requirements...such as...walking, hiking, running, bicycling, swimming or camping (household members only).* “This order has meant that we continue to provide our park and recreation services to our community,” says San Luis Obispo County Parks Director Nick Franco.



Framing Park Operations as an Essential Service

It seems clear that construction work, and by extension, park construction related work is an essential service as expressed in the state and most county essential service definitions. We feel it can be strongly argued that park and landscape maintenance work is more conducive to being performed under today’s Covid-19 guidelines than construction work and that the varied nature of park operations includes plumbing, carpentry, electrical, sanitation, hazard mitigation, disaster response, safety, security and infrastructure preservation. In addition, we now have examples from around the country and around the world where park operations are ongoing and even expanded to meet the need to “pop-up” public open space.

As golf course professionals have shown, park maintenance work is performed outdoors, in small teams or individually, with limited public contact, with masks and is in complete compliance with emergency orders. Park work would seem to pose a very low risk of spreading COVID-19 and the risks to public health and safety in not performing the work seem much greater in comparison.

Consider that park professionals maintain and protect native and developed landscapes around government facilities, residential areas, parks, schools, and more; protecting public safety and preserving infrastructure by:

- performing regular maintenance to mow, prune and control weeds,
- inspection and repair of the communities green, blue and gray infrastructure,
- securing of parks, buildings and facilities and providing an active presence on-site to mitigate against potential crime and vandalism. Areas that are not maintained are magnets for vandalism and other criminal activity. A closed and non-maintained area is at risk of increasing blight in neighborhoods,
- inspecting for safety issues,
- providing controls to reduce the spread of dangerous and deadly diseases through pests like mosquitoes, ticks, and fleas,
- removing fallen trees and mitigating overhead hazards from wind effects,
- providing maintenance and plant removal for fire abatement and habitat protection; and
- keeping public roads and pathways free from obstruction and potential risk.

And parks departments play an important role in keeping people healthy and employed and supporting the economy.

Park Ops, What Now?

For decades park agencies nationwide have faced deferred maintenance issues. It is important that agencies and park professionals actively work to prevent erosion of completed work and further infrastructure deterioration that would add to an already overwhelming maintenance backlog and financial costs. Parks that are closed and/or partially closed provide the best opportunity to give much needed attention to restore turf and landscape areas and mitigate what would certainly be increased future maintenance or even replacement costs. Not mowing turf for an extended period of time may make the turf area unrecoverable and necessitate a costly full replacement in the future when the park reopens.

Rather than reducing maintenance, now is the time to complete much needed work while the public's presence is reduced. While some in the public may wonder why park staff are out working, it is important to communicate that these parks are the public's backyard and it is "essential" we maintain them for the demand that will be there once we are through this pandemic. We cannot let the short-term issues unnecessarily harm our future recreation resources.

As Koko Panossian, Deputy Director City of Glendale put it, "We have been pretty much business as usual. The entire team has been in the front lines. In the short-term I will be placing my team on a 4/40 schedule, with 3 days in the field for 10



hours per day and the 4th day serving 10 hours on call (stay home). Each Section will have two crews to allow for this schedule to work efficiently while providing coverage five days per week. We are attempting to use this time when fewer people are in the parks to complete scheduled and even additional renovation work ahead of what we know will be more intense use perhaps later this summer or fall."

This "pandemic pause" provides the opportunity for parks organizations to temporarily repurpose their resources, show creativity, demonstrate "outside the park" thinking in the establishment of interim park amenities and resources. This is a time like no other to complete those long delayed and deferred projects. Work like preparation or updating of asset inventory's and assessments;

painting public facilities and equipment, sports turf renovation, small scale capital projects; planting trees and shrubs, repairing and replacing playground equipment; renovating sports fields, striping courts, irrigation repair and replacement. These are projects best done when the public is not around. And then there is the need for safety and equipment training. And how about those personnel evaluations that we are loath to complete.



A Time for Positive Outlook, Innovation, Dexterity and Purposeful Action

This is the time to develop organizational capacity and agility, to improve our ability to navigate the unknown and uncertain and to detect, assess and seize changes in the political and economic environment in ways that are focused, decisive and premised on the goal of becoming better at how we serve our constituents, becoming essential and institutionalizing that idea where, and with who it matters.

As a park profession, we all must pull together to help each other make it through this period by sharing information, ideas and opportunities to build resilience, capacity, in or personnel and departments. We also must pull together to protect the infrastructure investment that the public has made in our park and recreation facilities, so that they will be there when this crisis passes. We need to spread the message that park and recreation resources are essential for our physical and mental health and maintaining the parks departments are vital in providing these services.

Maintaining parks and facilities that are closed gives a morale boost to the public to remind them that life will return to normal and we will still be here for them. It provides some visual certainty of normalcy at a time when many things are uncertain.



Creative Response to COVID-19 Results in “Pop-up” Parks and New Linear Recreation Opportunities.

New York journalist and urban planning researcher John Surico, writing on April 6 in the CityLab blog about the [Power of Parks in a Pandemic](#). Surico points out that “the [multiplicity of benefits](#) parks have always offered us — [physical and mental health relief](#), [community building](#), and free public open space in tight, [increasingly privatized](#) urban quarters — seem not only like an added bonus right now, but rather, a critical lifeline for cities and their residents. While NYC Mayor Bill de Blasio [closed 10 out of the 2,067 playgrounds](#) across the five boroughs at the height of pandemic. New York State and City parks [remain open and the public is being encouraged to practice social distancing](#) and use the passive areas (not developed facilities) for active and passive uses.

Shortly thereafter the de Blasio administration announced that it would implement [a pilot program](#) to pedestrianize four streets in Manhattan, Brooklyn, the Bronx and Queens, for New Yorkers to have space for social distancing. Advocates say that’s not enough and that more streets should open to pedestrians. While cities and counties in California are closing state, county and local parks and beaches, while some cities (New York, Denver, Kansas City, Vancouver, Calgary, Melbourne) are maintaining their parks open and are redeploying their park operations personnel to close streets to traffic and turn them into passive open space. They are expanding their park systems and creating new [“pop-up linear recreation spaces”](#) as in New Zealand where the government is funding pop-up bike lanes.

Finding Inspiration During ‘The Pause’

Not motivated while sheltering in place? Scott Wentworth, President of Wentworth Landscapes, asks Jim Paluch, President of JP Horizons, where green industry professionals can find the inspiration and energy to take action on those great ideas we know we should be doing, and move past the obstacles that so often appear and hinder our follow through. The result is an inspirational and practical hour of exchanging ideas that will help us all establish the next steps we need to take during “The Pause” to do the things we know we should do. This [webinar](#) is brought to you by CLCA in partnership with Landscape Ontario and National Landscape Association Executives.

New Park Vocational Library

In response to the opportunity to provide educational resources for our fellow professionals sheltering in place as a means to enhance their professional knowledge, sharpen the day to day skills and respond to the need for a source of quality vocational educational resources, the Development and Operations Section is compiling a library of online educational resources from business, government and association websites. It is our hope that these resources can be used by park operations and development industry professionals in fulfilment of personal goals and organizational needs and work requirements. The library will be located on the [WWW.ParkDevOps.info](#) website in the [Vocational Library](#) pages beginning the week of April 19, 2020. The links will lead to free and paid materials on park operations related industry websites. We will continue to add materials to the library through the period of the pandemic shelter in place orders.

Should you have an links to quality educational resources you would like to share please forward those suggestions in an email to info@parkdevops.info



Bottom Line, Safety Is Our First Concern

Park professionals should take resident and employee safety very seriously, employing regular safety training during this time of Covid-19 and enforcing strong safety standards on the job. We see that public agencies in general, and parks organizations specifically are putting a growing list of safety measures in place in response to COVID-19, including social distancing, flexible work times, remote work, increased sanitation, and more.

The CPRS Development and Operations Section encourages all departments and organizations in our industry to follow all CDC, and Federal, State, and local health and safety guidance and regulations. For the most recent information use the State of California, [Coronavirus \(Covid-19\) In California website](#).

Let's look this as a time for taking a new look at the value and importance of parks in their many facets and expand our community's understanding of how parks function as a part of the infrastructure of our communities and what an [important and varied role our parks, facilities, community centers, parking structures and lots have played in this emergency](#) and those to come.

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