

## Billings City Administrator Weekly Report

March 24, 2022

1. **Wi-Fi in the Parks** - In December of 2021, The Parks and Recreation Department received approval to utilize Community Development Block Grant – Coronavirus (CDBG-CV) funds for 11 park improvement projects totaling \$1,023,000. In accordance with the grant requirements, these projects are all located at parks in low-income areas with the goal to reduce the spread of COVID-19 by implementing touchless features and other elements in park facilities. Some improvements may also positively affect mental health by encouraging socially distanced exercise and outdoor activities. One of the projects included is to install Wi-Fi in 8 low-income parks. After careful consideration, the Parks and Recreation Department is recommending not to move forward with the project to install Wi-Fi in the Parks due to several concerns that we believe either cannot be resolved, or the potential risks outweigh potential benefits. Our largest concerns stem from a perspective of public safety, funding, and the ability to filter internet content.

Over the past couple of months, Parks and Recreation staff has had numerous conversations with our Parks Police Officer and law enforcement officials who believe that this will attract more nefarious activity to the parks, increase transient camping/loitering, and increase drinking and drug use in the parks. We also share concerns that providing a service that will cause park users to become distracted by their electronic devices will create additional opportunities for park users to become victims of crimes. In addition, the locations where Wi-Fi would be able to be installed are often near high-use areas of parks, including picnic shelters, pools, playgrounds, and buildings that house our youth summer camps. We are concerned that providing Wi-Fi in these locations may provide an excuse for those looking to conduct an illegal activity to be closer to vulnerable park users, including children. In the statistically valid survey conducted for our Department Comprehensive Master Plan, only 59% of respondents said they feel safe in a city park, leading to the hiring of a dedicated park police officer. Although we have made significant strides to make parks safer, many of the problems that led to the hiring of a police officer still persist, and both Parks and Police staff feel that free Wi-Fi may exacerbate some of these issues. Because of these reasons, the Billings Police Department supports the Parks and Recreation Department's decision to not move forward with the Wi-Fi in the Parks project.

The Parks and Recreation Department has remained adamant about having the ability to filter web content to exclude adult websites, including pornography, in order for this project to work. In the legal opinion that we received from the City Legal Department, and as indicated by Library staff, it appears that we would be required to provide the opportunity for park users to "opt-out" of web filtering to prevent any infringements of their constitutional rights. The Parks and Recreation Department feels strongly that providing an "opt-out" option negates the effectiveness of web filtering and is counterproductive to providing parks that are safe and friendly for children and families.

In our internal discussions with park staff, a common theme brought up was concerns of increased trash and vandalism in the parks and the impact it will have on our operations. We need to be especially sensitive to this given the seasonal staff shortages that we have increasingly experienced over the years. Last year, the Parks Division was only able to hire half of their usual seasonal staff. This leads to full-time staff backfilling duties typically performed by a seasonal (such as trash pickup), often at the expense of more technical maintenance tasks, such as pump maintenance. Parks also does not have funding/staff to increase monitoring of these sites for issues if problems arise.

Finally, the CDBG-CV agreement would require the Parks and Recreation Department to maintain Wi-Fi service for 5 years once implemented, otherwise requiring repayment to HUD. While we have funding for the first 3 years, the remaining 2 years are unfunded. We have considered the possibility of private

donations and the use of potential future CDBG funding to help fill this gap. However, we currently do not have any secured private commitments, nor have we been given a guarantee that the remaining 2 years can be funded with CDBG money. Entering a 5-year commitment also eliminates any flexibility to remove Wi-Fi from a location if there is an uptick in the matters previously stated. With uncertainty surrounding park funding, we must be as fiscally responsible as possible.

The Parks and Recreation Department is grateful for the opportunity to work with Community Development on these projects and for the improvements CDBG-CV funding will provide to our parks. We are excited to advance the 10 remaining park projects that will not only improve our Parks but also help close gaps in services in parks located in low-income areas. Unfortunately, the Wi-Fi project is one that we do not feel comfortable.

## **2. Council Orientation Schedule**

- Friday March 25 – 9:00 – 11:00 Fleet and Facilities, BOC Conference Room, 4848 Midland Road, Information Technology, (BOC)
- Friday, April 1 - 9:00 – 11:00 Parks, Rec. & Public Lands, 390 N. 23<sup>rd</sup> Street
- Friday, April 8 – 9:00 – 11:00 Public Works, Billings Operation Center, 4848 Midland Road

**3. Questions and Answers Section** – This new section of the Weekly is to compile the questions our staff receives from council members. City staff is including responses to emails received this week, so other city council members have the information.

### Question 1 (CM Gulick):

As residents with 300 gallon bins transition to 90 gallon bins, can we communicate what the options are for cardboard recycling? With an increasing amount of online commerce as well as Costco-type shopping, there is a lot more cardboard in the waste stream. I've gotten questions from constituents on where to recycle cardboard. My only response has been Earth First Aid, but I believe there are other locations.

Also, a constituent has pointed out that many of the residents on his alley did not see the message that the 90 gallon bins should be placed on the same side of the alley as the 300 gal bins, and he's concerned that they're going to be overflowing with trash soon (and become his problem) because they weren't picked up. Can we reiterate where the bins should be placed?

### Question 1 Response:

We can certainly do some outreach regarding recycle opportunities.

We understand there will be some people that are moving their containers to the wrong location, but we will do extra collection for a bit to get people used to it. When we see a container in the wrong location, we will tag it and inform the property owner that it needs to be moved to the appropriate location to be collected in the future. If you know his address, we can go tag the container now to make sure it gets in the correct location.