From: Matt Loomis
To: Grp. City Council and City Web Site
Subject: Parks Fees Increases
Date: Tuesday, January 11, 2022 9:19:17 PM

Missoula City Council:

I am a 25-year Missoulian who understands the taxing structure that our community has. I am not only a supporter of Missoula Parks & Recreation (MPR), but a facility user, a partner, a donor, employee, and more. You've heard me speak during Public Comment portions of public meetings, and I feel compelled to write to you requesting a seriously hard look at the MPR Proposed Fee Increases for 2022.

I'm *not* simply complaining about costs going up, and I'm not foolish enough to think that all city services will be completely free. But I do take issue with these annual increases, for what I believe are good reasons; reasons that you all should be aware of and strongly take into consideration.

Increases in MPR expenses have gone up- I am not questioning that. I question, though, if MPR is simply being tasked with doing too much, with too little. As the city grows, there are new parks, trails, open space, pedestrian facilities, sports fields, landscaping, bridges, walking paths and more added to their portfolio, while the number of users grows, as well. Many of these additions are due to Missoula policy (like subdivisions, etc.) that require additional public/park features. For decades this has added undue burden on MPR, as maintenance and operations of numerous facilities has essentially been dumped on them.

In some cases, these are planned additions, like Fort Missoula Regional Park. The problem with this case is that no additional funding was allocated for maintenance and ongoing operations. To respond to Council's comments from their January 10 meeting, I am aware of how funds from a public bond can and can't be spent, and that bond funds cannot be put into an operations fund. However, it was shortsighted of the city to not increase MPR's budget in the wake of the new park.

MPR is tasked with maintaining so many different things, yet their budget has not grown to keep up with that pace. While the city has done an admirable job of trying to give employees better wages and benefits, partially at City Hall's direction, the budgets to pay those costs have not covered those increases. To my knowledge, this affects all departments, but since we're talking about funding things, let's talk about funding. If Council is going to direct/suggest departments to spend more on wages, then that funding should be made available. Due to so many reasons like this, MPR has to spend more money, and now they have to **FIND** more money. This isn't right. Please keep in mind that in December, 2021, during an MPR Advisory Board Meeting, MPR Director Donna Gaukler actually agreed with my statements and sentiments to this affect. ***City Council should be allocating funds for these additional costs, just as they do for other departments.*** The fact that MPR could not give Council a cost estimate (or just a guess as to how much money in additional fees would be necessary) is disconcerting, and I hope you all ask for more answers before issuing a rubber stamp approval.

MPR has minimal ways to increase revenue, and the main avenue is through increasing facility rental rates. This is essentially double-taxing users, by the way. If I want to use a public trail – which requires maintenance, and other significant investments – I don't have to pay a fee to use it. But if I want to use a field, I *do* have to pay extra?? Plus, the 2022 proposal has an

average suggested increase of **10 PERCENT!** By MPR's own admission (or lack of explanation), there is no formula or qualification for this amount. It's essentially random. Contrary to what MPR has stated, there is and was not feedback from user groups prior to forming these annual rate increase proposals – the groups were informed of the pending fee increases, but there was no opportunity for discussion. Turf users, I'm told, were NOT completely on board with this. Specific to the 2022 proposal, there was a roughly five-minute Fort user group meeting where said groups were informed of the pending increases. That was it. And frankly, not all user groups get what they're paying for, so increasing fees makes zero sense. The services provided do not justify these increases, let alone the existing pricing structure. It's a much easier pill to swallow when one actually receives the service they are paying for. Just one example: Users pay for a "Site Facilitator" from MPR, which is a mostly-unnecessary position in many cases, and a driving cost factor for these proposed increases. In the past few years, this position has gone unfilled on multiple occasions, and many more times the staffer is simply not available when needed. I would be happy to provide more examples of services not being provided, if anyone is interested.

What possibly concerns me the most about this is that an increase in fees for individuals and groups to use PUBLIC PARKS leads to a smaller population able to use them. "Recreation" is literally in the department's name, yet much of the general public is essentially "priced out" of being able to do that. That's great they're adding this new discount policy, but… why does it need to be necessary? Don't make these ridiculous increases and then you can have less policies. While I hear and respect what MPR has said about increasing fees on user groups who use facilities, MPR should not be a revenue driver, nor is it set up to be one. Proper budgeting and support could allow MPR to handle basic expenses (like increased overhead) on their own- or at least without annual fee increases. It should also be noted that the reason there was no fee increase for 2021 was for two main reasons: 1) It was seen to be in incredibly poor form, as we were still (as a community) struggling to figure out how to keep going during the pandemic; and 2) City Council covered all of MPR's losses due to their pandemic-truncated 2020 season.

MPR states on their website that "…Equity is about ensuring everyone receives the appropriate investment for where they are…The same principle is true of park use and access. Missoula Parks and Recreation works to ensure all residents have equitable access to programs and services, regardless of ethnic origin, socioeconomic level… etc.". These fee increases disregards socioeconomics and equity, and raises strong concerns about fairness.

MPR has mentioned "The Law of Diminishing Returns", and I agree with the statement made during the January 10 City Council Meeting. But the more that people have to pay to use their public facilities, the less people will use them. All three adult softball organizations, for example, as well as MPR's own adult football league, have seen a correlated drop in players whenever these user fees go up. One softball league has folded due to fee increases, another league has a small fraction of teams they had since before fees started spiking, and the other has seen a 20%-30% decrease in teams and players since fees began spiking. The MPR adult football league has folded, due in part to their increased fees. While MPR has a nice Youth Scholarship Program, it shouldn't have to rely on fundraising in order to allow kids to use these parks and programs – and there isn't such a program for adults.

While there is a concurrent plan to add an expensive addition to the batting cage area at The Fort, it's really not a good look to raise rental rates ten percent at the same time. Even if these two are independent of each other, it's just bad optics.

I feel it necessary to mention that I understand that the city can't just fund everything. I get

it. I also understand that some activities, facilities, etc. simply require additional fees to use them. City Councilors mentioned that since the entire Missoula population doesn't use The Fort, then not everyone should pay. I don't disagree. However, that same argument could be used for sidewalks, bridges, walking paths, and other public amenities- yet everyone does pay. There are between 50-60 Missoula City Parks currently (it is tough to pin down an exact number), and the amount is growing every year. Personally, I probably utilize less than ten percent of these public parks, yet I do pay (through property taxes, Parks District, etc.) for their upkeep and maintenance. I, like thousands of others, pay for tennis courts, swimming pools, sports fields, and walking trails that we may never even see, but that is one of the tradeoffs for living in Missoula: we are a community that likes to take care of our public investments. So please don't stop now. Please, City Council, properly fund MPR, instead of continuing to pass exorbitant and ever-increasing fees on to user groups. **PLEASE, DO NOT SUPPORT THIS PROPOSAL AND ASSOCIATED FEE INCREASES.** Thank you.

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P.S. I am a user at The Fort throughout the year, but especially in the Spring and Summer months playing softball. City Council should be aware of a few softball field-specific issues brought up with the proposed fee increases. It should be noted that the rental fees for softball fields are for the entire evening- no exceptions. If a user wants to rent a field for two hours, they have to pay for the entire night. Softball leagues can't utilize fields 6 & 7 because the fees are higher per game than the lighted fields. There used to be nearly a dozen softball tournaments each year, but they have either shut themselves down or moved to other counties and fields due to pricing increases and other facilities issues. That is lost revenue for not just MPR, but for the whole community. As far as staffing costs during leagues, the available staff was essentially useless this past year. The fields are locked when not reserved for league use, which is an incredible waste of such a facility. This amazing facility is essentially wasted and goes vastly unused, due to numerous reasons I'd rather not put in a publicly-posted letter.