

LONG BEACH

Audit: Parks, trees show poor oversight



WHAT THE AUDIT FOUND

26,000

Number of park trees in Long Beach.

27 percent

Percentage of park trees that are dead or in poor or critical condition.

29 percent

Percentage of trees in fair condition.

PHOTOS BY SCOTT HARLEY — STAFF PHOTOGRAPHER

A tree is taped off at Long Beach's El Dorado Park. An audit, valuing the city's trees at over \$112 million, cites the poor condition of many.

Report: City auditor cites numbers of dead, dying trees and poor maintenance

Reaction: Parks department director points to drought and lack of funding

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A quarter of the trees in Long Beach are dead or in poor condition. Seven of 10 sports groups who use city fields say conditions expose players to injuries. And irrigation problems at local fields often cause flooding and water-logged turf.

These are some of the findings in a scathing audit released this week by City Auditor Laura Doud, who studied operations of local parks over a two-year period. Despite additions to the city's park inventory, Long Beach has not allocated any more funding to maintain them — putting a strain on contractors who have been unable to manage

the workload, Doud said. Marie Knight, director of the Parks, Recreation and Marine Department, said the department generally agrees with Doud's findings, but she said some recommendations cannot be addressed due to a lack in funding and resources.

"We are glad (the audit) is shedding a light on some of the issues and concerns we have had and that we've been working on," she said.

A lack of funding coupled with the state's historic drought, which led to severe watering restrictions, has created challenges to maintain city parks and trees, she added.

The audit — the first of its kind conducted in at least a decade — encompassed a two-



An egret walks through a creek at El Dorado Park in Long Beach on Tuesday. A lack of funding, along with the state's historic drought and severe watering restrictions, has created challenges to maintaining city parks and trees, officials say.

Inside: Why did Long Beach workers cut the tops off the trees in Bluff Park? PAGE A6

Audit

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year period, from Oct. 1, 2013 to Sept. 31, 2015. During that time, the city has added 16 new parks and made park improvements at 18 other locations.

Doud referenced a 2015 park tree inventory study, detailed in the audit, that produced some "alarming" results. Of the city's approximately 26,000 park trees, 27 percent are dead or in poor or critical condition, the study found, and another 29 percent are in fair condition. The study, which looked at nearly 90 percent of the city's park trees, estimated their overall value at over \$112 million.

Doud recommended the city establish an Urban Forest Master Plan, as well as adopting a five-year park tree-trimming frequency schedule. But the department argued that such a frequency schedule is not financially feasible.

"I am concerned about the city's business-as-usual, shortsighted approach to maintaining our parks and trees," Doud said in a statement. "Parks play a critical role in creating healthy, livable communities in Long Beach. We want to ensure the quality of our parks are sustained for future generations. This requires effective stewardship and innovative efforts to acquire new resources."

Vehicles not used

Doud also found the department "mismanaged expensive vehicles and equipment" that have been unused in a city yard since being purchased for approximately \$215,000 in 2013.

Finance Director John Gross said the vehicles and equipment were acquired as part of a dissolution agreement with a former contractor, and some of the items, such as mowers and edgers, are items the city would not typically buy. But because title documents were not obtained at the time of sale, the city was unable to sell the vehicles or put them into service.

The auditor's inquiry triggered action by the city to secure the necessary documents to utilize the vehi-



SCOTT VARLEY — STAFF

A large pothole remains unrepaired in a parking lot at El Dorado Park.

cles and trailers, Doud said. Gross said five of the six vehicles and trailers are now being used by the water department. Mowers and edgers valued at about \$108,000 are still waiting to be auctioned off, he said.

"It was sort of a breakdown in communication," he said. "We didn't have a procedure for equipment that just arrived in our lot and it took us too long to resolve it. It isn't cool it happened, but it has been taken care of."

Among the other findings in the report are two items related to "lax oversight" that resulted in the city paying nearly \$81,000 over 16 months for maintenance service that was never performed in addition to payments related to nearly \$300,000 in supplemental work that lacked sufficient back-up documentation needed to substantiate the work.

Changes in store

Knight, who took over the department in late March, said staff is working to implement several changes to oversight and inventory controls, including a new contract compliance and monitoring program that was rolled out in two phases over the past eight months. Now, she said, all city workers have tablets with access to contracts and checklists, streamlining the maintenance process.

She said the department also made some changes in the renovation process for sports fields, which are frequently used by leagues and teams throughout the city.

"It's not 'business as usual here,'" she said. "We are moving forward and we are making changes. It

was recognized long before the audit that some changes needed to be made in our practices and procedures so we are on that track."

Still, Doud said she is concerned the city rejected "reasonable" recommendations to explore alternative funding sources, such as offering naming rights to city parks and facilities and seeking out grant money for future parks and projects.

In addition to lacking funds for day-to-day maintenance operations, the city needs to secure one-time funding for several large projects, including an estimated \$113 million to renovate its "antiquated" irrigation system and \$6.2 million to remove dead trees, according to the report.

Knight said looking for one-time funds to free up funding for maintenance operations is not a sustainable option.

"It's like plugging one hole to free up another," she said.

But Doud said most of the needs identified are immediate, and short-term.

"Nowhere in our audit report did we assert that these funding ideas are a viable way to structurally fund day-to-day park maintenance operations," she said. "Rather, expanding resources for one-time improvements can actually free up funds for ongoing park and tree maintenance."

City spokeswoman Kerry Gerot said thanks to a 1 percent sales tax increase approved by voters June 7, the city has earmarked funds for the parks department that will be doled out over the next three years, beginning in January. The tax measure is expected to raise an additional \$384 million in the 10-year life of the increase, which decreases to a half cent tax in its remaining four years.

"Measure A will provide nearly \$20 million in funding to address many of the critical issues raised in the audit, including tree trimming, facility repairs and modernize irrigation systems," Gerot said in a statement. "Increasing park space is one of the city's proudest achievements of the last decade and we are committed to maintaining and improving these assets for future generations."