

## **Questions for Jesus Aguirre for Confirmation as Superintendent of Seattle Parks and Recreation Department**

### **1. What are your major goals for the Department of Parks and Recreation (DPR) over the next four years? What do you see as the primary challenges facing the DPR over the next four years?**

The Seattle Department of Parks and Recreation Department is poised to become the best in the nation. We have received an unprecedented support from our residents through the creation of the Seattle Park District, enjoy a robust and high-quality portfolio of facilities and amenities, implement hundreds of programs and activities in every community, and have the benefit of almost 1000 dedicated staff and hundreds of partners and volunteers that support our work. As we look to next four years, we must leverage our strong position and focus on:

- Strong implementation of the Seattle Park District;
- Implementation of a comprehensive and transparent performance management system to better focus our efforts and track and communicate our progress;
- Embedding the tenets of the Race and Social Justice Initiative throughout our operations and programs; and
- Developing and implementing a strategic plan for our community centers that reflects our city's changing demographics and needs.

As we do this, we must develop our organization and systems to support our initiatives. Organizational development goals include:

- Enhancing our stakeholder engagement process to ensure our work is aligned with the needs of our customers through regular, proactive engagement, including regular community discussions, surveys, use of social media, annual reports, and program evaluations;
- Implementing an efficient process for policy development that maximizes engagement while reflecting the changing needs of our residents as well as our long-term goals for the city and the agency;
- Monitoring our operations to maximize efficiency and effectiveness and implementing technical solutions to modernize our systems including an asset management and life cycle cost management systems;
- Streamlining our internal communications systems to ensure responsiveness and accountability both internally and externally;
- Streamlining our systems for partnerships and volunteers to maximize the support we receive while making it easier for individuals and organizations to assist us; and
- Continuing to invest in our human capital through providing authentic professional development opportunities and building talent pipelines within the department.

Our agency plays a vital role in the development, vitality and sustainability of our city. Over the next four years, our greatest challenge will be to confirm that our efforts are aligned with the changing needs of our residents, and that we are in fact working to meet the needs of all residents.

We will continue to be challenged as our city grows by an estimated 120,000 residents over the next 20 years – as a city and as a department – to ensure that we are meeting the needs of all of our residents. Parks and recreation systems play a vital role in the overall development of healthy neighborhoods and healthy cities. We have a significant impact on economic development, on the physical and mental health of our residents, on their education, their safety and security, and of course, we have great responsibility in terms of the sustainability of our city.

As cities change and grow – and few are growing faster than ours – parks and recreation agencies are being asked to do more. As school systems take on the challenges of more academic rigor, we step in when out-of-school activities and physical fitness activities are cut in schools. As residents and health providers move towards prevention, parks and recreation steps in and provides healthy activities. As cities grow and more and more residents come in, we step in to support new residents as they become part of the community – and when they demand their parks.

As cities continue to grow, parks and recreation steps in and supports the many social service needs of our residents. Whether it's providing a safe and clean place to reflect, or before- and after-school care for children, or an activity that provides critical social interaction for our seniors, or simply an event to distract residents from the daily grind. Parks and recreation steps in.

And because we are in every community, we must also be leaders in ensuring that all of our communities truly benefit from the services and opportunities that we as a larger community provide. As such, we also step in when certain communities have greater needs as we work to ensure that our provision of services is done so in a just and equitable way.

A clear consequence of our rapid growth and changing demographics is a need for great focus on ensuring that no communities get left behind.

**2. What is your general philosophy for how to most effectively work with a City Council? How will you be responsive to Council requests, in particular regarding priorities that differ with those of the Executive branch?**

My general philosophy in terms of working effectively with the City Council is that we must establish a collaborative relationship based on regular, open communication and

an unwavering commitment to responsiveness.

The key to an effective working relationship between Seattle DPR and the City Council is to establish a framework of regular communication between the two entities. This should be anchored in regular meetings scheduled to brief councilmembers on the status of planning and implementation of the various DPR programs, and to respond to questions and concerns. Additionally, the plan should include a commitment to providing advanced briefings whenever possible to Councilmembers of any issues potentially impacting their district to so that Councilmembers can be responsive to constituents. Furthermore, DPR must be committed to being extremely responsive and provide accurate and clear information as quickly as possible when requested.

Given the critical nature of requests from Councilmembers, my expectation would be that I be direct point of contact for Councilmembers, and my Deputy Superintendent would serve as a back up. My entire leadership team will also be committed to being responsive, and we will closely track requests and queries from Councilmembers to ensure follow through.

Regarding Council requests that involve priorities that may differ from those of the Executive branch, I would approach those with an open mind and a commitment to seek common ground. My general assumption is that given the clear nature of the work that DPR does, and the robust conversations that occurred with residents during the process leading up to the creation of the Park District, priorities for our work should already be broadly aligned between the Legislative and Executive branches. Of course my role would be to attempt to bring all requests in alignment with existing goals and priorities.

Finally, I am aware that DPR has a clear process for working with Councilmembers during the development of Statements of Legislative Intent and we will continue to work within that process in a responsive and collaborative manner.

**3. How will you ensure that Council members and Legislative staff receive timely information needed from your department for Council to make sound policy and budgetary decisions?**

The department will continue the regular meetings with the Committee Chair, and we will ensure that a clear communication pathway exists as described above.

To ensure that Councilmembers and Legislative staff receive timely and accurate information, we will establish a clear process for receiving and tracking these requests. I will serve as the lead point of contact in Council requests and my deputy will serve as a back up. Additionally, our Director of Policy will be our third tier responder to ensure no requests are missed.

During the development of key policies as well as deliberations with budgetary impact, the department will provide proactive briefings to Council whenever possible.

**4. Describe a process for engaging internal and external stakeholders in implementing the new Seattle Park District services. How do you propose to balance stakeholder input with your goals for the departments?**

The creation of the Park District provides an incredible and unique opportunity for DPR as we work to achieve our mission of serving all Seattle residents. The supplemental funding provided will allow us to re-establish some programs previously eliminated, address millions of dollars of deferred maintenance that currently exists in our portfolio, and assist us as we implement our long-term Parks Legacy Plan. Additionally, the supplemental funding will support our implementation of the community center strategic plan currently being developed.

As we work to implement the projects and services outlined in the Park District, communication and engagement will be critical. Internally and externally, we must ensure that all stakeholders have a clear understanding of the items included in the initial year of the Park District plan as we ramp up implementation, as well as our plan in subsequent years of full implementation. For example, given that the first year of implementation will have limited scope due to the reduced first-year funding available, we must clearly communicate to all stakeholders the limitations of this scope and provide regular demonstrations of work completed whenever possible.

Engaging internal and external stakeholders will occur in large part through

- The newly formed Community Oversight Committee
- The application process for the Major Project Challenge Fund (starting at the end of 2015 or early next year)
- Preparation of Parks' annual report on performance measure and expenditures of District funds, and
- Engaging the public in the six-year planning cycle beginning in 2021.

The Oversight Committee is a 15-member community advisory group appointed by the Mayor and City Council, representing a diversity of expertise and perspectives that will inform all decisions.

During the initial year, we will support the establishment of the citizen oversight committee and work closely with the City Council as it provides regular oversight. We should expect to receive much public testimony regarding the park district implementation as residents continue to share their input on facilities and services they would like to see as well as feedback on the facilities and programs we currently provide or plan to provide. We must be committed to taking all input into account, but we must

balance this input with the fact that the Parks District Plan as adopted is very detailed and already has clear deliverables. Regular updates regarding these deliverables will be very important.

Policy issues will also continue to be vetted through the Board of Park Commissioners public process.

As the stakeholder input received during the initial development of the Park District will drive the first six years of our implementation, subsequent input received will be inform the quality of our initial implementation, and must also be cataloged and used to inform the development of our next six-year plan.

We will also use our many communication tools to provide updates on implementation. These include:

- The Parks public and internal websites
- The Parkways blog
- Posts on social media, including Facebook and Twitter
- Our external newsletter (Explore More) and internal newsletter (Grassroots)
- The Superintendent's report in our quarterly recreation brochures, which reach a wide audience of our community center, pool and summer camp patrons

As I understand it, the goals for the Park District, and for the department, were part of the voter-approved Proposition 1 package. The Park District includes four major Initiatives – Fix It First, Maintaining Parks and Facilities, Programs for People and Building for the Future – each with its own key outcomes and deliverables. The department and the Parks Legacy Oversight Committee developed these with approval by the Mayor and City Council. These will continue to be our guiding goals. Of course we are still open to stakeholder input as projects move from the drawing board into specific parks, parkland and city neighborhoods.

**5. How will you ensure that DPR goals and decision-making processes are transparent to the public DPR serves? How will you communicate with and be accountable to the public?**

I am a strong believer in transparency for public agencies and public officials and plan to step up the department's engagement with the public including with communities that are underrepresented at typical public meetings and public processes.

I have heard often that we as a department have not been successful in reaching all our constituents in meaningful ways. We therefore must seek out new ways of engagement, including rethinking the times, locations, and formats of our engagement opportunities to better reflect the communities we are seeking to reach.

As an important first step I plan to hold a pair of open house meetings in the community this fall, one in the north end and one in the south end. I hope to publicize this to a broad diversity of the community – not just the familiar faces – by doing some legwork in advance in targeted communities. Additionally, I plan to provide other opportunities for initial engagement such as a “Twitter Town Hall,” as well as a “Telephonic Town Hall.”

These will be opportunities for community members to get to know me and vice versa, but it will also be a chance for me to learn about how people regard their parks and recreation programs and facilities. I plan to ask them three questions: 1) What was the last park you visited and what was your experience? 2) What does Seattle Parks and Recreation do well? and 3) What can we do better?

This ties in with my passion for ensuring that public services and facilities serve every city resident in a truly equitable way, now and in the future. One of the most appealing aspects of this job as I was considering the magnitude of the move across the country for me and my family is Seattle’s commitment to race and social justice principles as a focus of city services.

I am accountable to the Mayor and City Council, of course, but I am ultimately accountable to the people of we serve and all the residents of Seattle.

**6. When funding is limited, how would you ensure that services are equitably provided to all of Seattle’s residents while also addressing each neighborhoods most immediate park and recreation needs?**

Seattle is a city in the midst of a great deal of change and growth. In addition to the significant expected population growth, our political landscape is also changing as we move to Council elections based on districts. These issues will apply additional pressure on our systems as we work to address the unique needs of all residents in all 38 distinct neighborhoods.

My approach will be to resist a cookie-cutter approach to providing services and facilities and work to be responsive to the uniqueness of our various communities. However, I recognize that we have responsibility to protect and provide for all residents as well as a fundamental responsibility to the integrity of park system. As such, finding the right balance between honoring the uniqueness of each of our communities with responsible stewardship of the entire system will drive my efforts.

We have the responsibility to provide a baseline level of service and opportunity to all of our residents, and we must commit to creating an ongoing dialog with our customers regarding the provision of our services. In the cases where there are gaps, we must analyze the nature of the gaps and provide remedies that balance the best interest of

the system as a whole with the expected impact of the existing gaps. Of course, it will be critical that these decisions are made through the lens of our Race and Social Justice efforts.

**7. What is your approach to ensuring that park services are high quality and actively used by Seattle residents? Explain how you have set and measured performance targets in your past jobs. What specific and measurable outcomes should the DPR look to when measuring success?**

Ensuring that the services we provide are of high quality and are utilized by our residents will drive the development of our performance management system. We must align our mission, our goals, our strategies, and our outcomes around the ideas that we are a service organization engaged in improving the lives of Seattle residents. As we do this, we must measure our effectiveness and make modifications when the data and results demand it. At a fundamental level, if residents are not actively using our facilities and services, we are doing something wrong.

As we create and implement our performance management system, regular and robust community feedback must drive our learning and revision of our programs and facilities development plans.

In the past, I have created performance management systems that align front-line strategies with broader organizational performance outcomes. To do this, there must be clear alignment and understanding of the goals and strategies we seek to achieve, relevant data and systems to collect and manage the data must be developed, and we must have a feedback system based on review and use of the results to make revisions.

As we move forward with setting performance targets at DPR, we must have targets that are aligned with our mission and organizational goals, developed through meaningful input from our staff, based on our community needs, and that are clearly used for ongoing improvement.

Although my plan is to listen and learn a great deal as I initially immerse myself in the work of the department, I imagine we would set performance targets around relevance (to our residents) and quality of our programs, quality of the engagement we have with our customers through a customer service focus, efficiency of our operations, and equitable and just distribution of our programs and facilities.

The Mayor's Performance Seattle program will establish a broad framework for these outcomes, but these must cascade to all levels of the organization and the fundamental drive must be whether we are providing high quality recreational opportunities that our residents tell us are important to them.

**8. Give an example of your strategic planning abilities and describe an experience using strategic planning.**

I have had the opportunity to successfully engage in strategic planning for several organizations during my career. My work at the District of Columbia Department of Parks and Recreation provides a relevant example of this work.

I was charged by the Mayor at the time to transform what had been a historically underperforming agency into one that was high performing and results-driven organization.

My initial focus was to learn as much as possible about the organization, about our staff, and about our customers and their expectations. I sought to learn about our history, the status of the organization's culture, our employees' motivations and morale, the perceptions held by our internal and external stakeholders, the regulatory environment within which we were working, our operational status, and organizational values.

As I learned more about the organization, it became clear that we had an ambiguous mission with unclear goals, significant operational ineffectiveness, and a lack of understanding regarding our customers' needs. Further, I found an organization that had made little to no investment in its people in terms of professional development and had little organizational knowledge base about our the specific work of the parks and recreation industry. Finally, there were no clear programmatic outcomes.

As a result, there was low staff morale, poor program quality, poorly maintained facilities, and an overall low expectation of our work by our customers.

I launched an internal process to develop a new, refined mission as well as new organizational core values. I led discussions with staff at all levels of the organization and ensured that all employees had an opportunity to participate. We successfully created a new mission statement that was clearer and focused, and a set of organizational values that we all agreed to adhere to and be bound by.

To address the poor program quality and lack of outcomes as well as operational ineffectiveness, we launched a robust professional development plan anchored in annual professional development conferences for all staff and a weekly professional development academy. The annual conferences were the first ever held at the agency and all facilities were closed to ensure all staff could participate. Additionally, I worked to reengage the agency and our staff with the experts in our industry and we began to participate in and present at professional development conferences organized by our local, regional, and national recreation and parks organizations. We also streamlined our program focus areas and led staff through a process that analyzed every program we offered utilizing a logic model. This ultimately produced a new outcomes-based



programmatic framework and a clear link between program inputs and outputs that drove conversations about budgets and operations.

To ensure our plans included input from our external stakeholders and partners, we launched a master planning process driven by program discussions but also informing the development of our physical infrastructure. This process included significant community input through community meetings, key stakeholder, partner and expert advisory committees, on-line stakeholder feedback including surveys and mind-mixer technology, analysis of the current state of programs and facilities, and a randomized telephone survey to maximize the quality of the information received. The process yielded a ten-year master plan that further refined our mission and broad program goals and informed our long-term facilities master plan.

Finally, to further solidify our work and ensure that we were utilizing best practices, we also launched a process to achieve agency accreditation by the national Commission on the Accreditation of Parks and Recreation Agencies (CAPRA). This two-year effort resulted in our agency receiving accreditation for the first time in its history and we became one of only the top four percent of the more than 3,000 parks and recreation agencies nationally to be accredited.

Although the current state of the Seattle DPR is not the dire state that I found in my previous work, the process employed and the lessons learned can greatly benefit the work of taking the agency to the next level as we strive to be the best parks and recreation agency in the nation.

**9. City of Seattle is currently implementing the Race and Social Justice Initiative to address racial and social inequities. In your position, how will you support and implement the Race and Social Justice Initiative? Can you provide some specific examples?**

Seattle's Race and Social Justice Initiative (RSJI) has great potential in ensuring that our city is providing truly equitable services to all of our residents. The RSJI aims to eliminate inequities and injustices that exist in our policies and operations so that all of our residents truly benefit from the services that our city provides. At DPR, I am committed to furthering these goals by viewing all of our programs and operations through the RSJI lens.

As we develop budgets, establish policies and create programs, RSJI provides a framework to ask critical questions about equity and justice. This framework will guide how we modify or completely revamp our operations and programs to ensure that our communities and constituents that have been underserved, or mis-served, receive real benefits to support their success. Some examples may include:

- Our human resources systems and policies can be modified to ensure that we are providing opportunities for all of our residents and that our workforce mirrors the population we serve
- Our procurement practices and policies can be examined to provide contracting opportunities for disadvantaged firms or those led by under-represented individuals
- Decisions about program offerings and subsidies made through the RSJI lens will ensure that our neediest residents receive the programs they need to support their success

**10. The City currently is re-evaluating its policy for uses in natural areas and green belts. What issues would you consider when evaluating whether or not active uses such as mountain biking should be allowed in natural areas and green belts?**

My understanding is that Seattle DPR is not proposing to change, revise or amend the City's Greenspaces Policy. Rather, DPR is producing a Supplemental Use Guidelines document aimed at providing a transparent tool to evaluate use proposals in Parks classified Natural Areas and Greenbelts. This tool will include a checklist of criteria that will allow for low-intensity, passive and active recreation activities while minimizing adverse impacts on the environment. It will provide criteria to determine the compatibility of activities in these areas, their design character and level of use, while providing access, opportunity and sustainability.

Issues for consideration when evaluating whether or not an active use, such as mountain biking, should be allowed in a particular natural area or greenbelt might include:

- Soil stability analysis,
- Habitat and vegetation assessment,
- Access point review,
- Opportunities for education, habitat restoration and community stewardship,
- Alignment with the City's Bicycle and Pedestrian Master Plans,
- Critical areas assessment.

Seattle's population is expected to increase by 120,000 people over the next 20 years. As we respond to this population growth, DPR must:

- Provide opportunities to contemplate and build community.
- Preserve and enhance forest habitat, tree canopy and water quality, and
- Provide recreation opportunities for our changing population.

**11. Discounted rent is provided in some park buildings for tenants (such as for the non-profits and artists in Magnuson Park's Building 30) that are considered to provide public benefits to City residents. How would you balance the approaches of charging**

**market rental rates to maximize revenue for park services versus providing discounted rent in return for public benefits?**

As the stewards of our parks system, we must balance the needs of our entire system with the benefits provided through a specific initiative. As we look at leasing our facilities to specific user groups, we must strike the right balance between charging market rates that generate the revenue required to maintain our facilities with supporting specific non-profit organizations with noble and important missions.

It is important to note that as office rents increase in Seattle, nonprofits, arts groups and others small public benefit organizations may be driven out of the city and our residents lose the benefit of their services.

In some instances, we may determine that a specific service being provided by an organization fully supports DPR's mission and fills a gap in providing a service we deem essential and that we are unable to provide. In these instances, it may be appropriate to consider a below-market lease rate on a case by case basis. However, any public benefit offsets provided as a rental-offset credit must be documented and reconciled with the financial position of the organization to ensure we can afford the investment.

A current example at Magnuson Park is the Sand Point Tennis Center, which provides free/reduced-fee tennis lessons for low-income children. In this case, a below market rate is acceptable as the tennis center provides programs for a high-need population that we are not able to provide internally. Another example is Sail Sand Point, which offers free and reduced-fee sailing lessons and water access to Lake Washington for underserved/low-income people. In these examples, the activities are aligned with our mission meaningful outcomes that can be documented in a creditable way.

**12. The Department of Parks and Recreation will respond to a Statement of Legislative Intent outlining next steps for improvements to the Lake City Community Center – an interim report by June 1<sup>st</sup> and a final report in early September to coincide with the Community Center Strategic Plan report. Lake City holds Seattle's only 2010 U.S. Census tract north of the Ship Canal with over 20% of its households considered extremely low income – at 30.27%. What are your thoughts on possible improvements to the Lake City Community Center providing an example of how Parks can better serve Seattle's underrepresented communities?**

The density and demographics of the Lake City neighborhood are unique in north Seattle, although perhaps not unique to the city as a whole, which allows us to learn from what is working in other similar neighborhoods.

I agree with the current Seattle Parks and Recreation strategy of looking at the Lake City facility in the context of the citywide strategic plan for community centers. As you know,

the strategic plan will be informed by a recreation demand study, which is assessing recreation demand trends over the next 20+ years. This information will be very helpful in determining a strategy for serving the recreation needs in Lake City (and other neighborhoods) and how this facility is best utilized in accomplishing the goals. Capital and operating budget impacts and strategies could then be developed for the preferred alternative. Then we begin the difficult policy discussions about priorities for resource allocations.

In the meantime, it is important that Parks continue implementing services that increase access and opportunity to all residents, regardless of ability to pay.

As Superintendent, I would work towards this kind of equity for programming and facility investments in all our lines of business – not just our community centers.

I am also aware of planning efforts under way with the Associated Recreation Council (ARC) to develop parameters for the Recreation Scholarship Fund – a new initiative funded through the Park District to support scholarships for low-income program participants system wide. This is aimed at providing free- or reduced-cost access to our programs for our neediest residents.

Two other Park District funded initiatives, Recreation Opportunities for All and the Get Moving Fund, which ramp up in 2016, will also provide opportunities to increase service to underrepresented communities.