



PARKS & RECREATION COMMISSION CITY OF MERCER ISLAND

PRC 24-14
November 7, 2024
Regular Business

AGENDA BILL INFORMATION

TITLE:	PRC 24-14: P-Patch Program Operational Update	<input checked="" type="checkbox"/> Discussion Only <input type="checkbox"/> Action Needed: <input type="checkbox"/> Motion <input type="checkbox"/> Recommendation
RECOMMENDED ACTION:	No action. Receive Report	

STAFF:	Ryan Daly, Recreation Manager Katie Herzog, Recreation Supervisor
EXHIBITS:	1. P-Patch Rules

EXECUTIVE SUMMARY

The purpose of this staff report is to provide the Parks and Recreation Commission (PRC) with an update on the operational status of the Mercer Island P-Patch Community Garden Program and staffs operational intentions following the adoption of the P-Patch Rules (Exhibit 1) on October 5, 2023.

- City of Mercer Island staff are responsible for the coordination and management of the P-Patch program. In spring and summer 2023, staff initiated a review to evaluate the program, identify areas where participation required clarification, and establish clear guidelines.
- Staff sought the PRC’s advisory capacity to assist in the development and establishment of the P-Patch program purpose and objectives, and to align those with the goals identified in the 2022 Parks, Recreation, and Open Space Plan.
- Staff engaged and actively solicited participant input ahead of PRC review and encouraged public comment at PRC Meetings.
- Deliberation and input on the P-Patch Rules took place over (2) public PRC Meetings: [September 7, 2023](#) and [October 5, 2023](#). These meetings culminated in a PRC vote to endorse the P-Patch Rules, including a program purpose statement and objectives.
- Following endorsement, staff began informing program participants on plans to align participation with the P-Patch Rules and continued that coordination throughout the year.
- Staff have scheduled a participant meeting for November 13 to provide program guidance and address participant questions leading in to the following season. Following this meeting, staff will meet individually with participants to help evaluate their plots, confirm locations and dimensions, and discuss any items that may require attention.
- Staff developed a series of objectives leading into 2025 with a goal of aligning participation with program rules and expanding access for new participants.

BACKGROUND

The City of Mercer Island P-Patch was established behind the former Mercer View Elementary School in conjunction with the Earth Day Movement of 1977. Now located behind the Mercer Island Community and Event Center (MICEC), within Luther Burbank Park, the current P-Patch occupies approximately 49,000 sq. ft.

(1.1 acre) of park space. The P-Patch includes approximately 50 - 60 plots that vary in size, slope, and visual appearance which are cultivated by participants. Mercer Island Parks and Recreation staff are responsible for the coordination and management of the P-Patch program, which includes establishing guidelines, assigning plots, communicating with participants, collecting program fees, and performing routine area maintenance such as delivering wood chips, providing access to irrigation, trash and debris removal, and maintaining pathways.

In the spring of 2023, staff began to identify challenges with the program which included:

- Environmental impacts of plastic fencing, paint, and impervious ground coverings.
- Plots expanding beyond established boundaries.
- Individuals utilizing multiple plots.
- Construction of large structures and fences.
- A lack of consistency in program administration.
- Inability to move waitlist participants into the program.

The challenges experienced with the program were attributed to inadequate program guidelines and staff failing to consistently and actively manage and coordinate the program. These issues were compounded by limited communication through staff turnover during the Recreation Division reset following the Covid-19 Pandemic.

Developing Program Rules

The purpose of the Parks and Recreation Commission is to serve in a policy advisory capacity to the City Council and any other board or commission of the city on matters involving the Mercer Island parks system, recreation programming, and the Mercer Island Community & Event Center and to provide a forum for the community to express their views on parks and recreation programs, services, and facilities.

Establishing program rules and guidelines is a function of staff. In the fall of 2023 staff began a process to re-establish the program in a more consistent manner, reflective of the goals and values within the 2022 Parks, Recreation, and Open Space Plan (PROS). As an initial step, staff sought to engage the PRC in an advisory capacity and to utilize its meetings as a forum to transparently and collaboratively develop a program purpose statement, program objectives, and program rules to guide program administration and participation.

The PRC accepted public comments and input over the course of (2) regular meetings and collaborated with staff to develop a new set of program rules that aligned with community goals and values for parks as well as with guidance provided by the Washington Cities Insurance Authority. Those rules were endorsed on October 5, 2023. Following the establishment of the new P-Patch Rules, staff began informing participants that following the 2024 season participation in the program would align with those requirements.

ISSUE/DISCUSSION

Throughout the past 5 years the Parks and Recreation divisions have experienced significant staff turnover, changes to operations, and at times shifting priorities which have impacted the consistency at which the P-Patch program has been administered. The loss of historical knowledge in program administration, compounded by inadequate documentation and differing standards for individual participants created a situation which requires staff to coordinate the program in a more effective and efficient manner.

Staff recognize that many participants have been involved with the program for several years and that the process of change can be challenging. During the past year staff have focused efforts on engaging participants, educating on the program rules and expectations, reviewing the program area, and evaluating

current participant practices. Staff intends to work collaboratively with participants to align participation with the rules, and to engage in a transparent process which provides equitable access to the program and designated park space for eligible Mercer Island residents.

P-Patch Plots:

Staff have identified 58 individual plots, with some of these having been combined, divided, and/or allowed to become overgrown. Individual plot sizes range from approximately 400 sq. ft. – 4,000 sq. ft. Plot size and allocation are determined by staff, though over time some plots have expanded or encroached on neighboring vacant plots or areas of park land without staff knowledge or approval.

Staff have begun a process to document current plot designations and is working with plot holders (and the Parks Maintenance Team) to define appropriate dimensional plot allotments in line with the established rules and program objectives. This process includes updating the plot inventory maps and registration documentation, as well as reviewing the program waitlist for accuracy.

Initial review has found that at least (5) participants hold multiple plots, have plots which have been combined with adjacent plots, or have plots that greatly exceed original dimensions. Staff will be reviewing these situations on an individual basis to determine the appropriate amount of park space that should be allotted to the individual plot holder.

In the last year some misunderstandings have arisen regarding the size allotment for plots being a required 10ft x 40ft (or half plots being 10x20) footprint, this has created concern with some plot holders that they would be forced to this standard. Staff does not intend to create a uniform standard, but will utilize the program rules, purpose, and objectives to determine how to address unique situations. Additionally, staff will seek to provide designated plot space that is appropriate in relation to the typical size of other users and which accounts for topographical inconsistencies. Options will include combining smaller plots, dividing extremely large plots into multiple plots, and/or holding a participant accountable to a single appropriately sized plot.

P-Patch Registration and Waitlist

In 2023, several vacant plots were divided into smaller sections to expand access for those on the waitlist. The P-Patch program will conclude the 2024 season with 49 registered participants and a documented waitlist of 47 households, with some on the waitlist since March 2021. Previous reports indicated approximately 20 households on the waitlist however that is now believed to be inaccurate. Staff will confirm and update the waitlist prior to the 2025 season to ensure accuracy moving forward.

The registration process over the past year has not captured adequate information and the plot maps used for the program have not been appropriately updated to show plot dimensions and changes that have occurred over the past 2 years.

During the Water Emergency in spring of 2024, staff suspended the addition of new participants to the program to conserve water resources.

Available Plots

Current maps show 58 plot sites, though this number is approximate due to recent plot divisions, some participants using multiple plots, and certain plots becoming overgrown. Staff estimate that 10 – 12 plots are currently vacant and could potentially be available for participation, pending necessary maintenance and preparation. However, further review is required to determine whether these plots are suitable for assignment.

Promotion and Marketing of Program

As staff progress on documenting and enhancing procedures for the P-Patch program, including managing and confirming current participation, the waitlist, and plot availability, it is anticipated that participation opportunities will be more broadly communicated in conjunction with other city coordinated recreational offerings.

Staff contend that the P-Patch Rules provide a tool for equitable access for the Mercer Island Community to participate in the program, and that these rules align with community expectations for the management of park spaces and recreation program participation.

NEXT STEPS

Staff's primary objective is to establish consistent operational and maintenance processes, including defining and mapping an inventory of plots within the program to ensure equitable access for the Mercer Island community. Staff are dedicated to collaborating with and actively engaging both current and prospective participants to provide an optimal experience that aligns with the program's purpose, objectives, and guidelines.

Initial work has begun in preparation for the 2025 season. Staff is taking steps to align participation with the program rules by confirming eligibility, documenting plot inventory, addressing safety issues, and establishing a process and timeline for participant alignment with program rules.

Below, staff has provided a timeline of objectives leading into 2025 season.

- Host informational meeting (November 13) with current and prospective participants
- Meet individually with current participants to document and establish plot dimensions for 2025
- Update annual program registration process
- Accept applications for 2025
- Confirm participation, accept program fees, establish and document participant timelines for aligning participation with program rules
- Identify vacant plots and prepare spaces for participation
- Transition waitlist participants into vacant plots
- Evaluate and communicate with participants throughout the year to assist in plot alterations.

Most current participants will not have their experience adversely affected by aligning participation with the program rules, other than addressing certain aspects of their plots like size, height, and the use of plastic fencing or tarps. The full alignment with program rules will be a documented process over a period of time.

Staff are prioritizing safety enhancements, program eligibility, and space allotment to immediately enable additional participation and efficiency of program delivery. Issues pertaining to established fencing, structures, impervious coverings, and height restrictions will be documented and staff will collaborate with participants on an appropriate timeline based on circumstance and the program purpose and objectives.

RECOMMENDED ACTION

No action. Receive report.