

Western Gateway Recreation and Park District

Summary

Western Gateway Recreation and Park District is a special district in Nevada County. As such, it is governed by a Board of Directors which is responsible for its management.

Two years ago there was public outcry about the condition and management of the Western Gateway Recreation and Park District. Board meetings were contentious, complaints about the upkeep of the park were mounting and negative newspaper articles began appearing.

After the 2008 appointment of the current Board Chair, the Western Gateway Recreation and Park District started to deal systematically with its most important issues. As a result of these efforts, members of the public are now actively involved in all aspects of the Western Gateway Recreation and Park District's governance. Mandatory financial audits are now being completed. A Master Plan was developed and approved by the Nevada County Planning Commission and the Nevada County Board of Supervisors last year. Among other things, this approval allows planned changes to be implemented with proper permits and in compliance with the building code. Management, staff and volunteers are now communicating better and coordinating their efforts much more effectively. The conduct of the Board of Directors is much improved, as is overall management. Personnel policies now exist; financial records are in order and computer systems have been upgraded. Facilities have been expanded and improved.

Overall, the Nevada County Grand Jury found that the governance of the Western Gateway Recreation and Park District has undergone a positive transformation over the past twenty-four months due in large measure to the knowledge, skill and persistence of the Board Chair and new Board members. All of those involved in this transformation, including the public, volunteers and the District staff, should be very proud of this significant accomplishment.

Reasons for Investigation

As part of its oversight function, the Nevada County Grand Jury (Jury) chose to investigate the Western Gateway Recreation and Park District (District).

Background

Special districts are a form of local government created by a community to meet a specific need. Most of California's special districts perform a single function such as sewage, water, fire protection or park management. There are approximately 2,300 independent special

districts in California (twenty-four in Nevada County), each governed by its own board of directors.

The District was formed as a special district in western Nevada County in 1974. This independently-operated District comprises 123 square miles, the core of which is eighty-seven acres known as Western Gateway Park (Park). The District is governed by a five-member Board of Directors (Board), which is responsible to the voters residing in the District. There are four people on staff, all part-time.

Nevada County exercises no direct control over the District except when safety codes, building and construction permits and other legal requirements may apply. The Park is open every day of the year from sunrise to sunset and offers a variety of attractions and amenities.

Two years ago the District was experiencing many problems: the public was not happy with the condition of the Park, complaints about the upkeep of the Park were mounting, Board meetings were contentious and negative newspaper articles began appearing. The Nevada County Board Supervisor representing the 4th District mediated the situation and offered guidance to the District's Board. The Park had no master plan, audits had not been done for several years, personnel issues were languishing and volunteers were taking it upon themselves to make improvements to the park without permits and/or Board oversight. Board members did not function as a team and, in fact, one Board member quit in the middle of a public meeting and walked out. If not for a small group of dedicated volunteers, the park could have fallen into further disarray.

Procedures Followed

The Jury's investigation included interviews with members of the District's Board, park users and volunteers and an inspection of park facilities.

Facts

1. The District is governed by a five-member Board, elected to four-year terms.
2. The District's budget is approximately \$160,000. Almost 70% of the budget is funded through a \$12.94 parcel tax on property owners in the District. The remainder of the budget is funded through user fees and mitigation fees.
3. The District received approval of its Master Plan on August 26, 2010. The Master Plan describes existing facilities and planned changes to the Park. All changes to the Park are now done in accordance with the Master Plan.
4. The District qualified for over \$90,000 in Proposition 40 monies as a result of the approval of its Master Plan. The District used those funds to build new Americans with Disabilities Act (ADA) compliant lavatories. This lavatory construction could not

have been done legally without a Master Plan. The new lavatories meet federal regulations and eliminate the current expense for temporary toilets.

5. Other facility improvements at the park include the turf at all ball fields, the off-leash dog park and the repair of the irrigation pumps.
6. Recently the District passed an outside financial audit for fiscal year 2007, its first in several years. Audits will soon be completed for fiscal years 2008-2010.
7. All facility improvements are now made with the required permits.
8. All volunteer activities are now coordinated by the Board.
9. Using an upgraded financial system, the Board Chair reviews and approves expenses and invoices prior to sending them to an outside professional bookkeeper.
10. The District worked with LAFCo¹ to complete a badly-needed update of its Sphere of Influence.
11. The Park has thirteen separate facilities for rent. Rental contracts for Park facilities are projected to increase by 17% during the current fiscal year.
12. Personnel policies and procedures are now in place.
13. Community organizations and the public are now actively engaged in Park activities, including participation on District committees, at public forums, mixers and at budget workshops.

Findings

The Jury finds that significant, positive changes have taken place at the Western Gateway Recreation and Park District in the following areas:

- **District governance:** a Master Plan has been approved; facility improvement permits are approved and an updated Sphere of Influence is in place.
- **Personnel management:** policies and procedures have been put into effect and communication between staff and volunteers has improved.
- **Financial management:** a new financial system is being used; an independent outside bookkeeper has been hired; the 2007 audit is complete and the audits for 2008-2010 are in process.

¹ LAFCo (Local Agency Formation Commission) develops and updates Spheres of Influence for districts. The Commission reviews and updates a district's sphere every five years. A Sphere of Influence considers four factors: present/planned land use, present/probable need for services and facilities, service/facility capacity and relevant social/economic communities of interest.

- **Relations with the public:** the Board encourages the community to volunteer in the maintenance and development of the Park and to participate in District committees and workshops.
- **Facilities:** new ADA-compliant lavatories have been installed; the water pumps have been repaired and the turf at the ball fields is green.
- **Park utilization:** has increased significantly, including a projected 17% increase in rental contracts.

Recommendations

The Jury commends the District for its significant achievements and recommends that the District continue to follow its current positive direction.

No response required