

Palisades Park

A Tragedy of the Commons



“We fancy that industry supports us, forgetting what supports industry.”

—Leopold, 1974

To: RPC Commission

RE: Proposed Staff Regulatory Changes for Palisades Park

Meeting: June 20, 2013

The staff of RPC has proposed changes to their original recommendations for Palisades Park trainers. I write to raise concerns about these changes and urge the Commission to reject them. I request the Commission abides by their original adoption.

Original Proposal:

- 1) **Class Size:** *Allow private and semi-private (1-on-1 and 1-on-2) commercial fitness instruction only*
- 2) **Equipment:** *prohibit all exercise equipment weighing over 25 lbs.*

New Amended Proposal:

- 1) **Class Size:** *Staff proposes now to allow larger training camps, up to 15 members, and with potentially 20 groups at one time.*

The Tragedy of the Commons¹

I believe the new proposal will negate any previous effort to ameliorate the ongoing degradation to Palisades Park's environment. It is a tragedy of the commons. This degradation occurs primarily to the soils and grasses. The consequences of this degradation threatens not only the health and complexity of a fragile Park's biota, it threatens the very integrity of the Park as a whole.

¹ "In economics, the **tragedy of the commons** is the depletion of a shared **resource** by individuals, acting independently and rationally according to each one's self-interest, despite their understanding that depleting the common resource is contrary to the group's long-term best interests." - wikipedia

The Fragility of Palisades Park



Back in 1892 when the founders of our city, Senator John P. Jones and Colonel Robert S. Baker, donated the property to the city, they didn't think it was fit for residential use.¹ The bluffs were barren and wind swept, the soils thin and unstable. It was a changing landscape, prone to slides and erosion.

The land teetered precariously on the edge and the only way to save it from eroding was to build a park. So they added soil and planted trees, and created one of the most stunning parks in the world.

In a city where beachfront property is highly coveted and increasingly privatized Palisades Park has become a cherished public treasure.

Clinging to the Edge: The Ever-present Existential Threat from Erosion



In 1895 the first trees, cedar and eucalyptus, were planted to stabilize the bluffs.



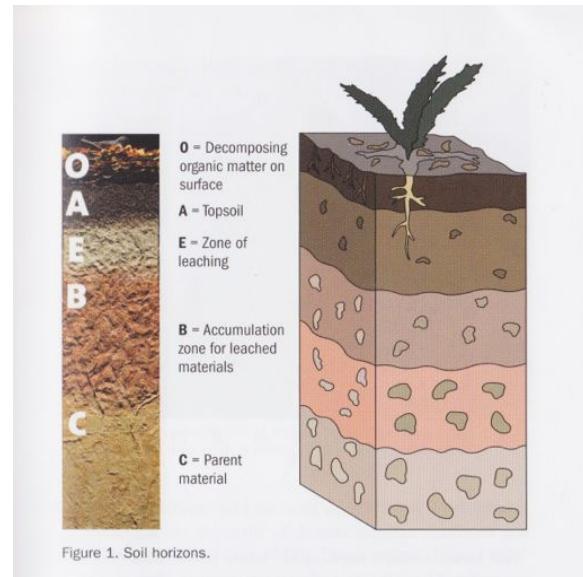
Palisades Park is under constant threat from erosion. Every year some of the Park's characteristically thin soils fall over the edge, taking plants and trees with it. The stairs at Montana and Idaho are, for example, frequently closed in the winter. If it were not for the soil and roots of this agave plant, it wouldn't survive—and does so precariously. Over the years the Park will get thinner. It is a loss, an existential threat Palisades Park will never escape.

How do you protect a Park from unhealthy erosion? **BUILD SOIL!**

Over the years the stewards of Palisades knew there was one good way to protect Palisades Park from the ceaseless existential threat of erosion: *create a living sustaining natural habitat, a complex integrated biome with rich textured soils.*

“Texture is an important characteristic of soil. It determines how readily water percolates, how easily roots grow, and how much air can move in the spaces between particles.”

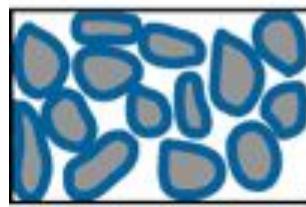
From: University of California Press “Introduction to Earth, Soil, and Land” David Carle



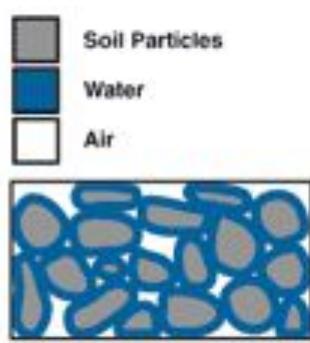
Excessive Human Activity Compacts Soils, Degrades the Environment

Soils Have Trouble Breathing

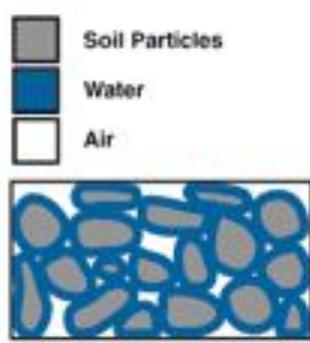
If you tread heavily on the soil, if you pound it repeatedly, if you jump down in the same place, you'll eventually pound the air out of it.



Non-compacted



Compacted



Compacted

Treating Soil Like Dirt

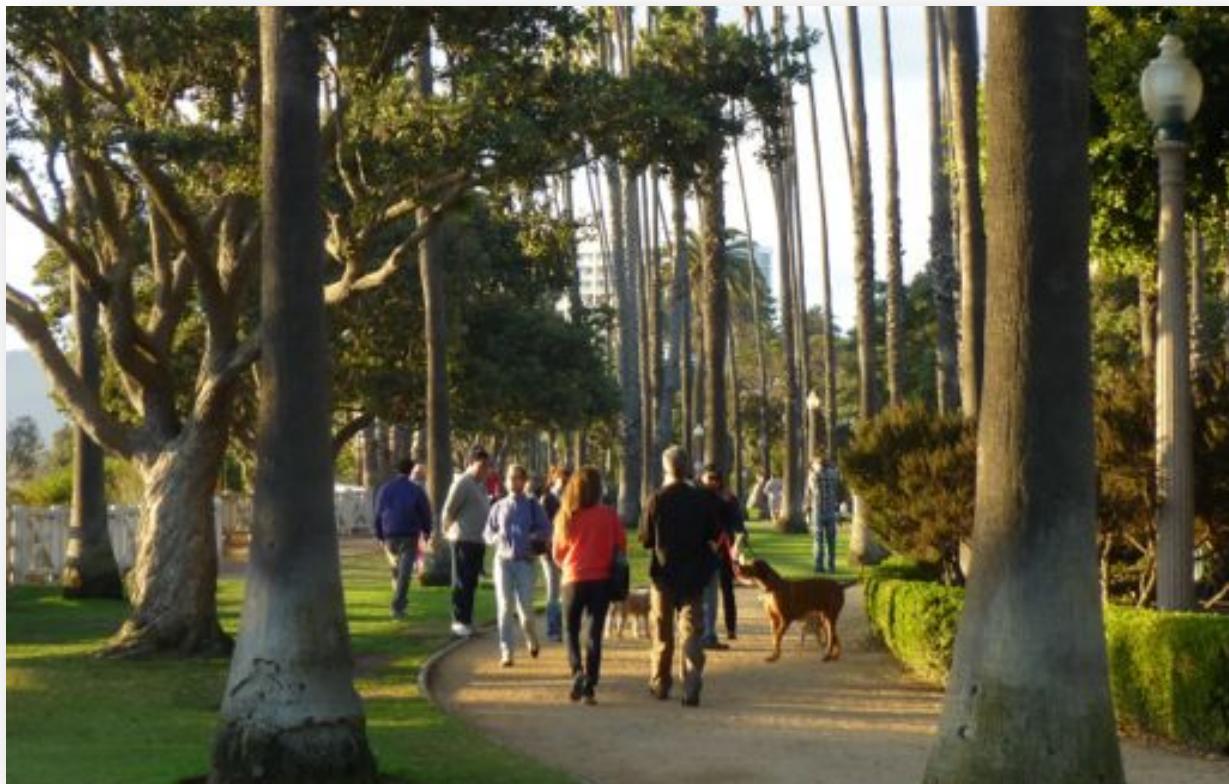
Excessive human activity compacts soils. When soils are compacted they lose their texture, microbiological processes cease to function, and the grasses die.

The fact that such erosion is now evident throughout Palisades Park suggests we must take immediate action to abate the degradation. We must restrict, rather than expand, activity.



The Passive – Active Conundrum

The critical dilemma facing Palisades Park is how we define it. It's a real true life identity crisis.



For decades Palisades Park has been defined, experienced, appreciated—and indeed managed—as a “**passive park**.” It is only until recently, with the advent of organized trainers, when we’ve started treating it as an “active park.” In 2007 the “City’s Landmark Assessment Report” said the area shown above “is less formal and more spacious due to the tranquility and calm of the natural setting. “



What’s a ‘Passive Park’? It “is that which emphasizes the open-space aspect of a park and allows for the preservation of natural habitat. It usually involves... rustic picnic areas, benches and trails. Passive recreation typically requires little management ... trails for physical activity in the form of walking, running.... or sedentary activity such as observing nature, bird watching, painting, photography, or picnicking.”

—Wikipedia

The Original Passive Design

The first landscape architect to plan Palisades Park was L.G. Le Grande.

He wanted to create a park: “European in flavor with formal gardens, walkways, fountains...”² in other words, a “passive park.”



To preserve and protect a natural habitat, or a fragile city landmark, city planners often assign the “passive park” designation.



For example, the city of **Palos Verdes** uses the designation “passive park” to preserve a delicate natural park called Abalone Cove Shoreline Park.

So What is an “active park”?

An Active Park “is that which has an urban character and requires intensive development...” It “typically involves intensive management, maintenance, and high costs.”

—Wikipedia

² From the book, *Palisades Park: Panorama* by Fred E. Basten, 1987

Why Not Make Palisades Park Active?



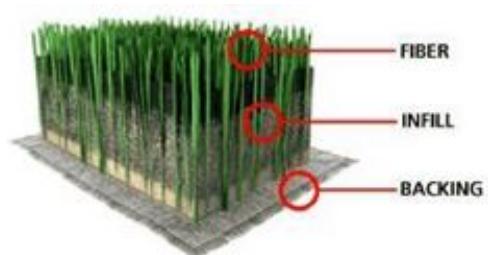
If we want to make Palisades Park an “active park” then we would manage it as an ‘active’ park, similar, say, to a sports field.

The Crux of the Issue: Passive Management vs Active Use

This difference between active and passive parks goes a long way to explain our city’s conundrum: It explains why the city’s Landscape Division seems powerless and unable to respond to the Park’s ongoing degradation. They simply don’t and never have managed the Park the way the city has today allowed it to be used—i.e., as an “active park.”

Sports Turf Management

If we were to manage Palisades Park as an active park the first thing we’d want to consider is sports turf. The natural habitat of grasses at Palisades Park’s aren’t really suited for active use. “Sports turf” is bred and designed and maintained to take active impacts. There are many specially designed high impact turfs the city could acquire, all with intensive management strategies, including frequent replacement, multiple aeration, and soil enhancements. Synthetic turf has significant advantages over natural lawns for endurance and longevity.



Both natural and synthetic “sports field turf” maintenance is intensive and very expensive. The maintenance required of a sports field is far more intensive than anything the city’s Landscape Division offers Palisades Park. They just aren’t equipped for active use. Palisades Park is not maintained as a sports field.

The erosion at right would probably never be tolerated at an intensively managed “sports park” such as a soccer or football field, or a golf course.

Thus we have our conundrum: the city maintains Palisades Park as a “passive park,” but authorizes “active” use.



If the city permits active use, shouldn't it manage the Park for active use?

Making a Passive Park Active — The Staff Proposals

Our city is clearly grappling with the active-passive issues. Originally the staff’s recommendations were developed in recognition that the city is really in no position to intensely maintain Palisades Park as an “active park.” Their original proposal allowed a lighter footprint, smaller groups, and time for the land to restore itself.

But the staff has now added amendments that vastly expand active use: they propose to allow larger 15 member groups, with permission for 20 groups at a time.

No Remediation?

Despite the proposed increase in sports activity (and in glaring denial of the current degradation) the staff offers no new strategies for restoring or stabilizing the Park's grasslands. Surprisingly, the staff makes no comment on the Park's natural environment at all. No note on its habitats, on soil types, or soil quality.



No Assessments, or measurements, or data?

The staff proposal offers no attempt to assess the impacts of increased activity. There are no tools, or measurements, or monitoring. But an active sports park manager depends on data: soil samples, compaction levels, root health are all critical to maintaining a healthy turf.

Group Training Areas

The staff proposal shows some recognition of the possible degradation from physical activity. They propose to restrict trainers to four areas. But these areas are so large and the regulations so vague it is hard to see how they would deter further degradation or restore damaged areas.



Respite for the Turf?



The staff proposal suggests that each Group Training Area is intentionally large “so that the groups could be moved around on occasion to provide respite for the turf” and “staff maintenance could formally close off areas for repair.” This is purely wishful thinking. There is no evidence that this has or will ever take place.

Currently under the city’s “passive” maintenance system park grassland closure is never utilized. At best a placard will be placed on the degraded lawn, which users can choose to ignore. After a while it’ll be taken down with no respite and no recovery to the lawn.

From time to time the Park’s Maintenance team will toss a handful of dirt on a degraded area, general with no aeration or physical adjustments.

This is a minimalist approach reflecting the philosophy of passive managers. It suggests that the Park grasslands need little intervention or assistance. The soils should take care of themselves. Soon this sign will be removed whether the soil has improved or not.



Aerial Photo vs. What's Happening on the Ground

Staff proposal offers aerial photos of each Group Training Area. Unfortunately these provide little information on what's really happening on the ground. Below I compare views and offer comments.

Zone #1: Palisades Avenue north to Alta.

Aerial Photo



Group training location #1. Palisades Avenue north to Alta; grass areas, not paths

Zone #1: Palisades Avenue
north to Alta.

Ground Photo



Notes: If the city has not yet begun to monitor the impact of sports activities on Palisades Park this would be the place to begin.

Its grasslands are the best in the Park and it's soils only moderately compacted. In such a study this would be "before" the degradation commences.

Zone #2: Montana Avenue north to Palisades Avenue

Aerial Photo



Zone #2: Montana Avenue north to Palisades Avenue

Ground Photo



NOTES: Throughout the day Palisades Park at Montana is a great hub of aerobic activity. The “Montana Stairs” provide easy access to the ocean and great athletic opportunities. I myself run the stairs or jog north along the path.

But many prefer the lawns, for running and yoga and calisthenics and weights. What once was spongy turf is now hardened and compacted clays. The grasses are eroded and dying. Today this area deserves more than a respite. Restoration efforts should begin immediately.

Zone #3: Immediately north of Idaho Ave**Aerial Photo**

Zone #3: Immediately north of Idaho

Ground Photo

Notes: As with zone 2 the area north of Idaho is severely impacted by active sports. The broad limbed trees provide shade and the views are spectacular, making this area a favorite among athletes.

I used to do sit-ups after a run in this area, but the ground is now so degraded by weight lifters and large group workouts it feels like a concrete drive.

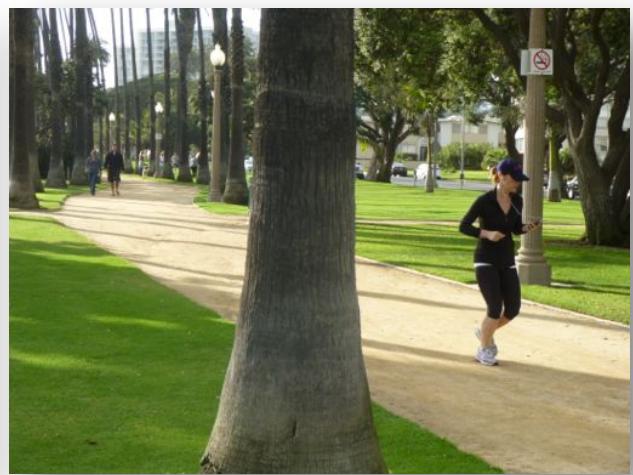
This is the southern edge looking north of the proposed group training area.

Intervention and restoration appear to be the site's biggest need, not more activity.



Zone #4: Wilshire north to the public restroom**Aerial Photo****Ground Photo**

Notes: This area is smaller, thinner, and perhaps more manageable. But the soils here too are seriously compacted and rainwater has no ability for water to percolate. Drains are provided instead. Its proximity to the bluffs and heavy traffic from tourists makes it a very precarious area for group workouts.

A lighter footprint: the environmentally conscious athlete

Many runners in the Park know that a lighter more sustainable footprint belongs on the paths. They spare the lawns, knowing, as Leopold would say, the land will sustain their industry if they sustain the land.

Alternative Proposals to Staff Amendments

1. Retain original proposals: specifically limit physically active groups to sizes no larger than 1-2.



2. Designate Palisades Park a “passive” park. It is not a gym but a natural living environment, a land prone to erosion with fragile soils, a land that requires a lighter footprint, a more sustainable use. It is a cherished city landmark and deserves to be restored and preserved.

3. Develop alternatives sites for trainers and large groups

There are many alternative options for trainers and their large groups. There is one incredible site with wonderful views and unbounded space. It is only yards away from Palisades Park. Many trainers already use it. They know that here at the beach they have little or no impact on the environment.

For a truly soft lawn experience there is also the meridian on Forth St, north on Montana. Here the soils are deep with thick green carpets of grass.



4. Recognize the true economic value of Palisades Park

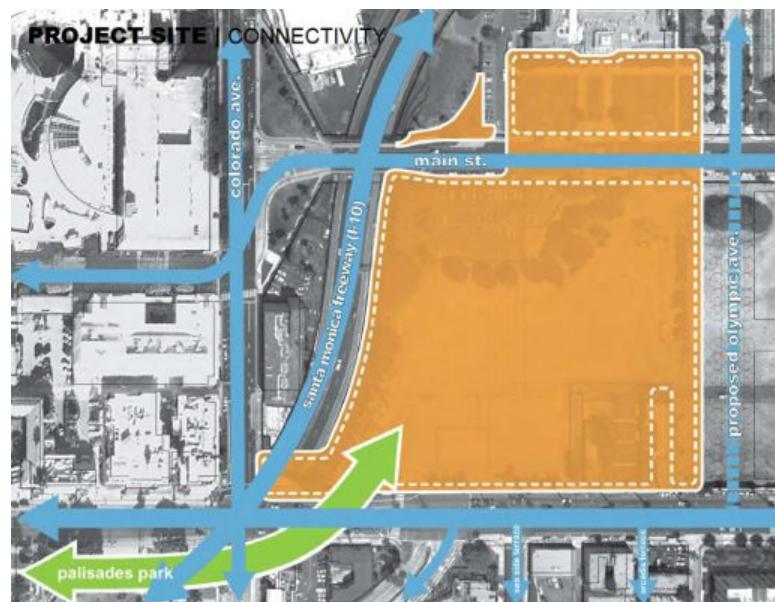
While the city may receive some revenue from trainers who use the park, a far larger industry, one critical to the economic viability of our city absolutely depends on the Park: **tourism**.

According to The Santa Monica Convention & Visitors Bureau:

- 7.3 million visitors come to Santa Monica each year from outside of LA County.
- 1.53 billion dollars is generated by tourism each year.
- 12,200 jobs are supported by tourism in Santa Monica.
- Over 70% of hotel visitors do not use a car once they arrive in Santa Monica.

The majority of hotels that service this 7.3 million visitor are located near or adjacent to Palisades Park, where visitors can enjoy the best ocean perspectives in the city. Here they may find a happy respite from shopping. They may picnic on the grasses, take in the view, or stroll for miles in the shade of beautiful trees, a truly breathtaking and memorable experience.

Our city's planners actually envision the flow of traffic from downtown. It will pass through Tongva Park and head over to Palisades Park. See schematic at right.



5. Gather critical scientific data on the Park's health and wellbeing

In the age of big data and advance scientific monitoring it is a wonder to me why there is data available on the Park's health and wellbeing.

As I mentioned earlier, sports park managers depend heavily on data. They gather soil samples, analyze compaction levels, and monitor the viability of grasses. Soil life, fertility, and root development are also critical to a successful turf management program.

At Palisades Park there is far too much at stake for the city council not to demand rich scientific data from which they can base their policies. To make critical decisions without this data, to allow activities that will impact a valuable city asset without knowing the extent of that impact is both foolhardy and irresponsible.

In the end, this issue is not about our trainers or whether we support our active citizens. As a local resident I have great admiration and respect all our city's athletes. They are at the forefront of a national movement towards health and wellbeing. I myself am a triathlete and often train in and around the park, but I do so sustainably for, in the end, it's not about me, it's about Palisades Park.

Thank you for your time and consideration.

Sincerely,

Brian Burke
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