



**Parks Task Force 2019  
Final Report**

**Submitted to the RAP Board  
December 12, 2019**

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Summary

# Parks Task Force 2019 Final Report

December 12, 2019

## EXECUTIVE SUMMARY

The Parks Task Force 2019, commissioned by Riverside Avondale Preservation to assess our neighborhood park space, is pleased to submit our final report. This report is best described as a current state of the parks, a compilation and consolidation of data collected from numerous sources, and a starting point with initial conclusions and recommendations for a future standing Parks Committee, should RAP determine this is warranted. Riverside Avondale is fortunate to have extensive green space in the form of numerous named parks and considerable ‘other’ semi-maintained green space. Our parks have historical prominence and reflect the lifestyle expected and enjoyed by our community. Our parks attract a significant number of local and out-of-town visitors to planned events or for just a ‘picnic in the park’. While all of our parks are beautiful, there are both pockets of great success and areas where improvement is needed to ‘activate parks’ through capital projects, infrastructure upgrades, tree replacement, landscaping, and general maintenance. Activating park space is a concept used by cities to transform public spaces into vibrant spaces for recreation, enjoyment, and thoughtful contemplation. In addition, this report identifies various opportunities for engaging community support of parks, improving the visibility of parks through effective communication, and collaboration among stakeholders – City of Jacksonville, residents, merchants, and other benefactors. The primary recommendation is for RAP to serve as the primary advocate for our parks just as RAP has done so for other initiatives in our community.

## INTRODUCTION

Two quotes in the local paper capture the value and vision for Jacksonville’s parks:

*“Jacksonville has a wonderful climate for the cultivation of parks. I see no reason why this city shouldn’t have the best park system in the country...”* (1927, Theodore Worth, superintendent of parks for Minneapolis MN on a tour inspecting park systems in Southern cities)

*“A park system should be provided that would enable citizens to get away from the feverish activities of the city and enjoy the innumerable natural advantages afforded by our streams and wooded areas. Such a park system would impart to Jacksonville a distinctive personality.”* (1929, George W. Simons, Jr, Jacksonville City Planner)

In addition to our historic architecture, distinctive merchants, tree canopy, and vibrant entertainment districts, the Riverside Avondale neighborhood is uniquely defined by 26 parks which total approximately 75 acres. This park space is an asset we need to preserve, promote, and effectively use to connect our community and attract visitors. Currently, however, much of the park space is underutilized, out of date, and, in need of more regular maintenance compared to park space in more progressive cities. Memorial Park which has a local nonprofit organization, Memorial Park Association, for the restoration and preservation of the park is one exception to the rule and is a model for a successful and effective public-private partnership for local parks. Additional examples of resident participation in Riverside Avondale local parks, include Boone Park South, Community Garden at the Willowbranch Memorial Rose Garden, John Gorrie Dog Park at Riverside Park (Dog Park), and Native Park #1. Beautification and activation of

our parks has the potential to better connect our neighborhoods, promote a healthy and active life-style, be a source of pride, reflect the history of our community, and serve as an asset that can attract economic growth to our neighborhood.

The City of Jacksonville (COJ) Department of Parks, Recreation and Community Services (Parks Dept.) current definitions of park space in Duval County do not adequately describe the parks in Riverside Avondale:

**Active Parks** – Are intended to serve a neighborhood that is accessible given no more than a five-minute driving time. Some will be parks in the urban core that are primarily walk-to facilities. These parks, generally under 14 acres in size, provide primarily athletic facilities including ball fields, courts, pools, and playgrounds. Many of the sites are located adjacent to schools or major housing/apartment units.

**Passive Park** – This is open public land on to which one may step without a pass or fee. Typically, there is no theme or structure of declared purpose.

**Neighborhood Parks**- (1-20 acres) Neighborhood parks are larger in size and offer recreational opportunities that will attract visitors from a two-mile radius. They are primarily walk-to, bike-to parks with limited vehicular parking. Active recreational uses are found at these parks and may include playgrounds, playing fields, pools, splash pads and shelters. These parks may also include a walking trail or small natural areas.

Some parks in Riverside Avondale have ‘active portions’ and ‘passive portions.’ Further, these definitions do not capture the historic aspects of the parks nor how they are embedded within our residential neighborhoods. Park staff stated that these definitions are used for descriptive assessment of parks. Although these definitions may not be critical to how the parks are used, maintained, or funded, it is important to understand how future development could potentially be influenced by these designations.

The task force reviewed two COJ documents about parks that are consistent with many of the recommendations of this report. The 2030 Comprehensive Parks Plan for the City of Jacksonville (updated December 2013) sets the goal of 1.93 park acres per 1,000 residents. Early developers in Riverside Avondale knew the value of park space and today the historic district has approximately 5 park acres per 1,000 residents, 2.5 times more than the 2030 goal. The Plan describes the need for gaining volunteer support, improving visual attractiveness of parks, promoting public/private partnerships, and funding at levels consistent with other large cities. Further, the Plan states the need to rate each park in order to prioritize maintenance and enhancements to park space. Another COJ report, the Special Committee on Parks final memorandum (dated June 2018) reports that volunteers contribute to maintenance in city parks and calls for a comprehensive plan for maintenance. The Committee initiated a parks security program that increases security presence in parks.

From the RAP community focus group survey conducted in 2017, it was apparent there is strong interest in the outdoor space in Riverside Avondale. Sixty percent of respondents said that access to nature and natural assets were a desired community advantage and they wanted more of it. Subsequent visioning at the RAP Board retreat earlier this year, included ‘connecting and energizing our park space’ as one of the top 5 strategic initiatives for the coming years.

## PURPOSE AND SCOPE

RAP commissioned this task force in March 2019 to assess the state of the parks in Riverside Avondale and recommend to the RAP Board actions to proactively maintain our historic parks for current and future residents. The scope of this report includes all named parks in the Riverside Avondale Historic District that are owned by the COJ and under the authority of the Parks Dept. While this report does not include other green spaces, such as unnamed green spaces, easements, or medians, these areas might be included in future assessments by RAP.

This task force initiated the process of assessing the current state of the parks, gathering information about past and current efforts, and recommending opportunities and ideas for making our local parks great. This report will make recommendations for further work to refine the assessments in order to confirm and prioritize recommendations.

This report is for internal discussion purposes only and will be used to inform the board of directors of RAP as they develop strategies to enhance the parks of Riverside Avondale. The content of this report is a candid assessment by this task force and intended for the RAP Board only; however, selected portions or a summary can and should be extracted for discussions with the COJ, the Parks Dept., Public Works, City Council members, and other stakeholders.

Members of the task force include:

Pamela Telis – Team Lead and Boone Park South connection ([patelis@bellsouth.net](mailto:patelis@bellsouth.net))

Jennifer Taylor – Boone Park North connection

Michele Luthin – RAP Board Member and Memorial Park connection

Alison Miller – Local resident and staff member of Parks Dept.

Brooks Andrews – RAP Board Member and Dog Park connection

Reviewers of this report were Rick Pariani, Cathleen Murphy, Kim Clontz, and Carmen Godwin. We appreciate their valuable input.

## METHODS

The task force gathered historic and recent documents about the parks, interviewed those who support parks, and conducted site visits to parks. The goal was to learn about each park's history, its original purpose, how it has evolved over time, and to record current use and demands in our neighborhood parks. These findings are considered an initial effort and further investigation and data gathering of park history and current conditions are recommended.

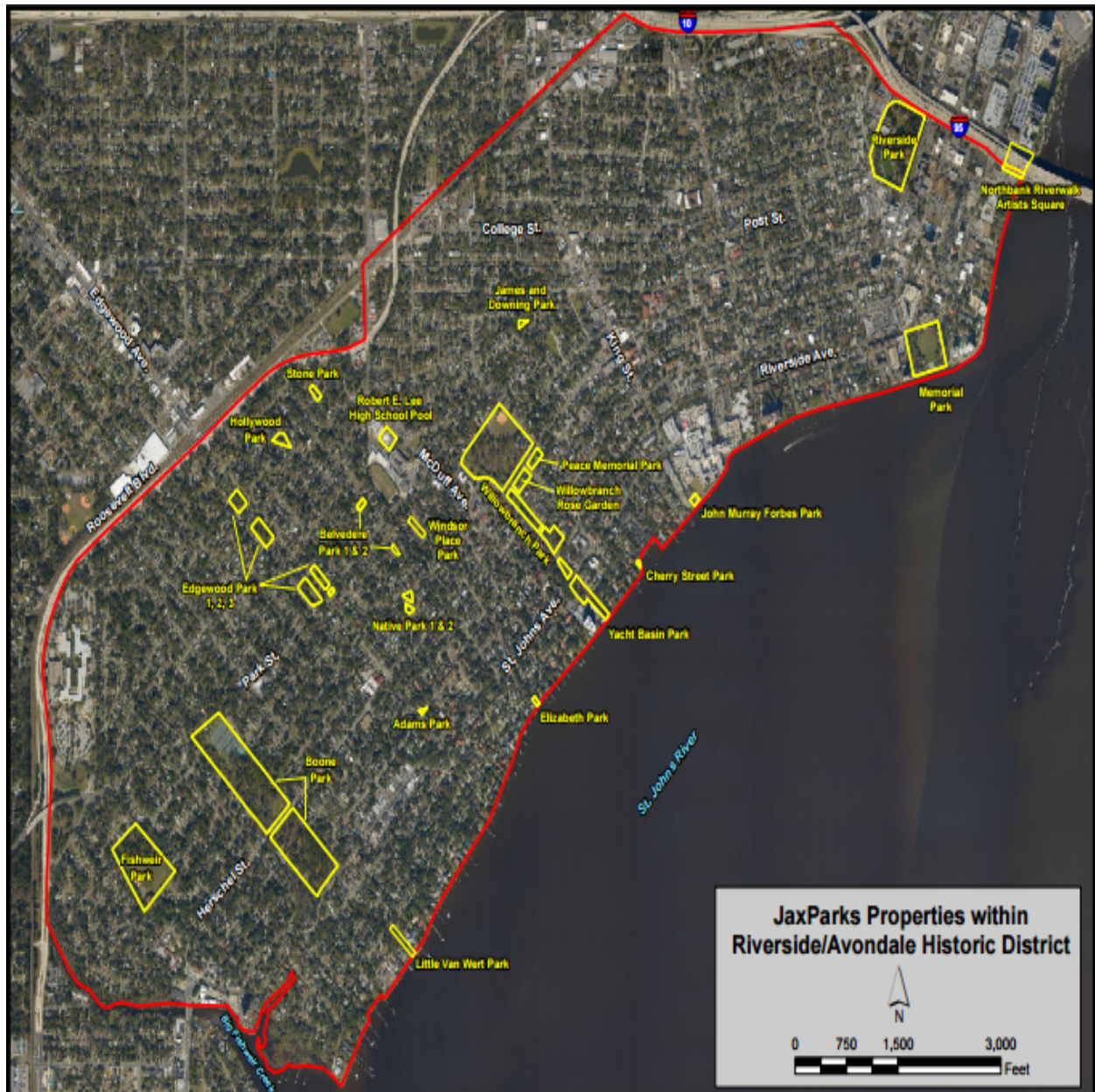
Site visits to most parks were conducted individually by task force members. An inventory form developed by the task force was completed that recorded observations of amenities, condition, issues, lighting, signage, and more for each park.

The task force spoke with Friends of Parks representatives about volunteering in the park, local residents about their experiences living near the parks, and Parks Dept. staff to understand their protocols and challenges maintaining the parks. Additionally, the task force sought input from Wayne Wood, Carmen Godwin, and others who have knowledge about parks, historic park files, and relevant local knowledge. Information from those discussions and lessons learned were included in this report as a starting point

for the future RAP Parks Committee. This task force did a cursory review of other cities' ideas for addressing the demands of maintaining city parks.

### STATE OF THE PARKS AND OPPORTUNITIES

To identify all the COJ city parks in Riverside Avondale, the task force obtained a map of the parks from the Parks Dept., used the Duval county property appraiser map on line, and referenced the Parks Dept. webpage that lists all Duval County parks. Unfortunately, these sources were neither complete nor consistent. The list of COJ city parks considered accurate and complete by this task force is listed below. The task force provided this list to the Parks Dept. to update their databases, website, and other COJ resources to make them consistent and complete. Follow up with the Parks Dept. is recommended.



	<b>Park Name</b>	<b>Size (from COJ Parks webpage)</b>	<b>Location</b>
1	Adams Park	0.08 acres	3419 Riverside Ave
2	Belvedere Park #1	0.14 acres	1400 block of Belvedere
3	Belvedere Park #2	0.18 acres	1300 block of Belvedere
4	Boone Park (North portion between Park St and Herschel St, South portion between Herschel St and St Johns Ave)	26.31 acres	3700 Park St
5	Cherry Street Park	acreage unknown	1865 Cherry St
6	Edgewood Park #1 (two portions split by Edgewood Ave)	1.87 acres	On Edgewood Ave, northwest of Edgewood Ave and Park St
7	Edgewood Park #2	1.18 acres	On Edgewood Ave at intersection with Remington Ave
8	Edgewood Park #3	0.82 acres	On Edgewood Ave at intersection with Avondale Ave
9	Elizabeth Park	acreage unknown	1886 Elizabeth Place
10	Fishweir Park	10.09 acres	3925 Valencia Road
11	Hollywood Park	0.22 acres	1200 block of Hollywood Ave
12	James and Downing Park	0.14 acres	1061 James Street
13	John Murray Forbes Park	0.18 acres	2700 St Johns Ave
14	Little Van Wert Park	acreage unknown	Little Van Wert St at St Johns River
15	Memorial Park	5.85 acres	1620 Riverside Ave
16	Native Park #1	0.22 acres	Park St at Avondale Ave
17	Native Park #2	0.14 acres	Park St at Avondale Ave
18	Northbank Riverwalk Artist Square	acreage unknown	729 Riverside Ave
19	Peace Memorial Park	0.64 acres	1515 Mallory St
20	Riverside Park	11.66 acres	753 Park St
21	Robert E Lee High School Pool	acreage unknown	1200 South McDuff Ave
22	Stone Park	0.26 acres	1200 block of Lechlade St
23	Willowbranch Park	15.61 acres	2870 Sydney St
24	Willowbranch Rose Garden Park	0.7 acres	2840 Park St
25	Windsor Place	0.23 acres	Cul-de-sac on Windsor Place
26	Yacht Basin Park	0.65 acres	2941 St Johns Ave

Various aspects of parks were considered, discussed, and researched while opportunities for improvement were developed. The membership of this task force has significant experience in supporting local parks and addressing the many issues, concerns, and realities related to parks. All have



worked with or for the Parks Dept. and understand the complexities of dealing with a large governmental agency with extensive citywide responsibility and limited budget. The discussion of the topics below are based on the experience of the task force, research gained through discussion with those involved with parks, and opinions and suggestions for improving and enhancing parks in Riverside Avondale.

### **Site Visits**

Members of the task force visited 23 of the 26 parks and completed an assessment form which recorded their observations and opinions. The assessment form is focused on the state of each park, maintenance, safety, lighting, amenities, and ideas for activating the park, if appropriate. In some cases, local residents were interviewed and their comments have been included on the assessment form. The completed assessments for 23 parks are a good snapshot in time of the condition of the parks and could be a starting point for logging change over time.

Three parks were not assessed for this report, John Murray Forbes Park, Northbank Riverwalk Artist Square, and Robert E. Lee High School Public Pool. The John Murray Forbes Park is currently inaccessible as part of the adjacent St. Vincent's hospital addition construction. Northbank Riverwalk Artist Square is the parking lot space under the Fuller Warren Bridge and the location of the Riverside Arts Market (RAM). RAP is the sponsor of RAM and has a long-term written agreement with COJ and Florida Department of Transportation for the use of the space. The Robert E. Lee High School Public Pool is maintained by the Parks Dept. and open year-round (daily during the summer and weekends only during the school year) with programs such as swimming lessons. The program director reports that it is an underutilized asset in our community that should be better advertised to local residents.

### **Signage and Rules**

An assortment of signs is posted in our parks and includes the following:

- Name of park
- Park hours of operation
- Park rules
- Leash rules
- No parking
- Leash law enforced
- No smoking
- Do not litter
- Do not block entrance

Most parks have a park name sign. Two parks have no park name sign, Native Park #2 and Little Van Wert Park. Two parks have a park name sign that is inaccurate or inconsistent with the COJ website. The sign for Native Park #1 reads 'Native Park' and the sign for Windsor Park reads "Windsor Place."

Many of the signs in the parks are in poor condition and difficult to read. There is a general lack of way-finding in the parks and nothing that serves to 'connect' the parks of our neighborhood. In some cases,

there is no physical address that can be used to navigate to a park. Additionally, the design of signage does not represent the historic nature of the Riverside Avondale neighborhood.

Native Park #1 was adopted by the Florida Native Plant Society (FNPS) in about 2005. An active group of volunteers cleaned out the park and planted native plants in extensive mulched beds. In 2018, this group installed a message board kiosk to provide visitors with information about the FNPS and use of native plants. A volunteer reported that the kiosk provided by the Parks Dept. was unsightly and leaked therefore they raised funds for a custom-built wooden kiosk. In addition, the city has added a sign under the park name sign that indicates that this park has been 'adopted and maintained' by the Florida Native Plant Society. Signs like these at all parks with active support groups would recognize the efforts of volunteers in our community. Native Park #2 has not been activated but there is some interest in doing so similar to Native Park #1.

A reality is that the COJ and the Parks Dept. do not have the resources to enforce park rules and some residents and visitors do not abide by them. Generally, there are no significant issues that result from this lack of enforcement. Increasingly, more residents use the parks to run their dogs unleashed and except for a few acrimonious dog interactions and dog waste not picked up by owners, there are few problems. Basically, park users and neighbors seem to tolerate these infractions of the rules.

Because most Riverside Avondale parks are integrated into residential areas, park hours and appropriate lighting should be compatible with local residents. Some parks have no posted hours and although the time of use of the parks is difficult to enforce, it may be useful for extreme violations to consider this type of signage, especially for heavily-used parks and parks that may become frequented by late-night visitors and vagrants.

This task force cautions that the proliferation of signage may create visual pollution in our parks when their effectiveness is limited. Research on what other cities have done to limit the impact of excessive signage and still provide sufficient information for visitors is recommended.

### **Maintenance and Trash**

The park site assessments and knowledge gained from local residents and volunteers highlighted park maintenance and trash pickup as the top issues for our parks. Unfortunately, COJ Parks staff rarely picks up trash on the ground at parks or in parking areas. Garbage pickup is limited mostly to removal of garbage in trash receptacles. As noted in the task force assessments, city staff leave 55-gallon plastic barrels with the tops open to supplement existing trash cans. These barrels are bright blue, black, or painted assorted colors and are not appropriate in our historic parks. The committee recommends that they be removed from all parks and, if additional cans are needed, they should be installed.

In many parks, especially those with established Friends groups, volunteers pick up trash and downed limbs from the ground regularly (weekly or monthly). Other groups have park cleanup days several times per year. The Men's Garden Club and Duval Extension Service Tree Stewards have regular clean up and tree trimming events in Riverside Park. The Dog Park has a monthly cleanup day. In Boone Park South, for example, a few dedicated volunteers pick up downed limbs and pile them along the street right-of-way for pickup by the City. This group informs the City when large limbs or trees have fallen in the park and will require maintenance crews to assist. Unfortunately, in parks where local residents or Friends groups are not active, this work is delayed sometimes for an extended period until Parks staff are assigned to the park.

Playgrounds in our parks require regular maintenance such as repairing broken equipment, replacing mulch around playground equipment, and fixing other hazardous conditions. Often, this maintenance work only occurs after a phone call is made by a volunteer group or local residents.

### **Tree Canopy and Wildlife Support**

The tree canopy is a significant aspect of the historic district neighborhoods and its parks. Maintaining the tree canopy in parks requires regular assessment of the current trees and the removal and/or replacement of old, dying, and fallen trees. Maintenance of the trees by the Parks Dept. is generally limited to cutting low limbs that overhang walkways, cutting out broken limbs, and removing hazardous trees (often old or damaged). When trees fall down in the parks, they are removed by COJ staff or contractors. Parks Dept. staff candidly admits that their staff is not tree arborists and that, for professional tree trimming, local tree companies who specialize in large shade and historic trees, such as live oaks, should be used for tree maintenance in our parks. In fact, Memorial Park Association pays for a professional tree company to proactively trim trees, lift the canopy to create space and light for users, and address damage and disease issues.

In the past 20-30 years, some trees have been planted in our parks. Unfortunately, the number of trees planted does not equal the number of trees lost. Trees planted in parks have been planted by several different efforts. In some parks, local residents have planted trees, bushes, ground covers, and flowers in their neighborhood park with or without permission of the Parks Dept. Friends of the Park organizations have planted trees with permission from the Parks Dept. Trees have also been planted by the City through the recent Tree Mitigation funded effort or other City funded efforts. Greenscape, a local nonprofit dedicated to planting and promoting trees, reported that they occasionally get grants that require trees to be planted on park lands. Usually their efforts are for large parks outside Riverside Avondale.

During an April 2018 meeting with Daryl Joseph, Director of the Parks Dept., he reported that a tree loss inventory for Jacksonville Parks was conducted to include trees lost during Hurricane Irma (September 2017) and Hurricane Matthew (October 2016). The RAP ReLeaf Committee and Parks Task Force has requested this list for parks in Riverside Avondale. The task force recommends that this list, when received could be used to guide future tree planting in our local parks. At this time, it is unclear if that list can be used to obtain FEMA funds for tree planting or to gain approval for tree planting using the Tree Mitigation funds.

The City Forester Richard Leon and his staff manage city-wide tree planting using the tree mitigation fund. The rules for use of the fund are currently being developed and should be considered for tree planting in local parks. During a meeting with Daryl Joseph and his staff at RAP in spring 2019, he reported that the Parks Dept. had not yet used the tree mitigation funds for planting trees in parks. The few trees recently planted in local parks have been by the City Forester through the ReLeaf effort when he had 'extra' trees for planting.

Starting in 2015, the Friends of Boone Park South (FBPS) has coordinated with Greenscape for planting trees. FBPS plants about 20 trees every February. Greenscape works with JEA to provide the trees, have them delivered to the park, and assist with planting them. Volunteers (often families) adopt a tree, help plant it, and agree to water their tree according to a prescribed watering protocol for the first year. This has been very successful and planting day has become a fun family event. The Resident newspaper often takes photos and writes an article about the event.

Maintaining the tree canopy requires a long-term vision and commitment. This task force recommends that the RAP Parks Committee set recommendations for use of native trees and other plant material in local parks and that the historic character of the parks be considered when developing landscape plans. Perhaps a review team consisting of landscapers, foresters, arborists, and master gardeners can serve to guide Friends of parks in developing these plans.

Local parks also are important places in neighborhoods as habitat for birds and other wildlife. Tree-lined streets provide connectivity between parks and other green spaces. The large acreage of parks and extensive tree canopy in Riverside Avondale provides an excellent opportunity to protect and enhance local wildlife in our neighborhood.

A 2019 article in the Journal of Urban Ecology (<https://academic.oup.com/jue/article/5/1/juy030/5298915>) discusses the value of tree snags (standing dead and dying trees) in urban parks and other green spaces. Some dead and damaged trees should remain in parks in Riverside Avondale where they do not pose a hazard to active areas or near walkways and parking. Wildlife snags are commonly trimmed of all limbs and cut to specified height (based on local bird activity). The Friends of Boone Park South has initiated discussion with Duval Audubon to provide signs for these 'habitat trees' as part of their commitment to support and enhance bird populations.

Other considerations to support birds and other wildlife in our local parks include:

1. Gaining advice on locations for bird houses, bat houses, and other wildlife nesting opportunities.
2. Learning how bright lights in and near parks impact birds, such as night feeding owls, and how to mitigate these impacts.
3. Heightening awareness of our urban wildlife through educational signage.

### **Landscaping and Irrigation**

Many of the parks once had landscaping at entrances or along walkways which, in many cases, had irrigation systems. Over the years, these irrigation systems have been damaged or do not meet current permitting requirements (i.e. backflow valves) therefore no longer are used. A few exceptions include Memorial Park where the park association installed and maintains the irrigation system, and Riverside Park where the Men's Garden Club, who developed the camellia garden, had an active irrigation system installed and maintained by the Parks Dept. Several other parks, such as Native Park #1, Stone Park, and Yacht Basin Park, use park hose bibs to irrigate landscaped beds with temporary irrigations systems purchased by local residents.

Without irrigation systems, landscaped beds of flowers and bushes are vulnerable to the hot spells and drought periods common in Jacksonville. Unfortunately, the Parks Dept. is limited in its ability to add and maintain irrigation systems to every park. This is an opportunity for local residents and businesses to seek other options for funding these systems that can make a significant difference in the look and appeal of our parks.

### **Security**

Parks that are free of crime and provide security for visitors is an important precursor of activating and enhancing local parks. Other than a review of the night lighting (noted on the park assessment forms), this task force did not investigate security issues nor document police records for this report. However,

given the content of some of the park litter, it is apparent that some undesirable behavior does take place in our parks. These issues are recommended for further data collection as part of a plan to improve parks.

### **Park Events**

Our local parks are used for many types of events. Large events, like festivals, require a permit from the Parks Dept., however some events, like birthday parties, are often not permitted. Most residents don't know if and when a permit is required. A RAP webpage about parks might include the link to COJ for permit information for residents.

The main concerns regarding events at parks are trash management and parking. The Friends of Boone Park South (FBPS) has worked closely with the permit staff at the Parks Dept. and they often call them to confirm there is no conflict with FBPS activities. One of the requirements under the permit for Boone Park South always includes trash removal by the permitted group or city trash pickup scheduled following the event. Parking for large events can be an annoyance for local residents. Generally, these events are infrequent but will likely be more problematic as the parks become revitalized and activated.

All events should be compatible with our historic parks. Several recent examples may not be appropriate for Riverside Avondale parks such as a cyclocross-like event through Boone Park (including some of the wetland areas near the creek) and Willowbranch Park where trails damaged passive portions of the park. A recent 'find the hidden money' event brought hundreds of people to Willowbranch Park with digging tools to "find" hidden cash. None of these events brought any benefit to the parks, such as a local cleanup day or donations for a park need. The task force recommends that RAP work with the Parks Dept. to approve park uses that do not damage our parks and are consistent with the park's purpose and history. For example, Memorial Park Association has been thoughtful and, at times, restrictive about events there because it is a park established to honor veterans who lost their lives in World War I.

### **Historic Aspect**

The task force discussed how parks created 100+ years ago are serving residents today and how these parks need to evolve over time to meet the demands of future generations. Our parks are historic, therefore changes to these parks should be carefully considered and, where possible, respect the history and original purpose. For example, Memorial Park was created to honor Floridians who died during World War I. The Memorial Park Association, the park's volunteer support organization, has made a commitment to maintain this park for its original purpose and all future changes must be compatible. However, changes to some historic parks should, where possible and appropriate, create new natural spaces and recreational opportunities. An example is the Community Garden located in a portion of the original Willowbranch Rose Garden where the rose gardens have not been tended by local residents in many decades. RAP saw the opportunity to use the space to continue resident involvement by developing gardens for growing fruits, vegetables, and herbs. Both examples are intentional development of a park to either enhance the original intent, as in the case for Memorial Park, or repurpose and activate a space that had not been maintained for its original purpose, as in the case of the Willowbranch Rose Garden.

Any and all changes to parks should be done with local residents' agreement and involvement. An 'improvement' in one park may not be appropriate in a nearby park. The 'personality' of our parks enhances the diversity of Riverside Avondale and should be considered carefully as our parks evolve. Engaging neighbors of the parks is key to creating a supportive relationship and compatible change.

## **Park Donation Program**

A new COJ Ordinance creates a trust fund for COJ parks which allows donations, fees, and contributions to be reserved for park improvements and overseen by the Parks Dept. Further, this ordinance establishes the Parks Partnership Program to promote private support of city parks. This support can include donations or funding for a single bench, grill, or bike rack, however it also includes large donations to include a tennis complex or community center. Opportunities under this new ordinance should be considered for parks in Riverside Avondale. The new COJ Jax Parks Amenities Catalog describes this program.

## **SUPPORT FOR PARKS**

While COJ is well intentioned, staffing and budget limitations of the Parks Dept. and Public Works require community participation for parks that are active, well maintained, attractive, and meet the demands of local residents. Many of our local parks have volunteers that enhance the parks, ranging from a single resident who regularly mows a small pocket park to Memorial Park Association with many donors and paid staff who preserve the park's history, and fund maintenance and landscaping of the park.

This task force proposes more collaboration and coordination among the many park volunteers and COJ entities in Riverside Avondale. Bringing together many different groups with the common goal of creating exemplary parks could provide the impetus for changing and improving the way Riverside Avondale addresses the needs and demand of our local parks.

## **Volunteers**

Several types of volunteer groups and non-profit organizations currently support our parks in Riverside Avondale including:

- Non-profit organizations with memorandums of understanding or other agreements with COJ
- Friends of Parks (formal and informal)
- Neighborhood Watch groups and local residents
- Organizations and businesses

The objective of these support groups may include:

- Bring awareness to the park, its amenities, and activities
- Augment COJ Public Works and Parks Dept. maintenance, trash clean-ups, watering newly planted trees, storm debris removal
- Notify COJ regarding park issues such as safety issues, damage, trees down, inappropriate uses
- Identify needs of the park to further activate to serve local residents
- Fundraising for significant capital projects
- Solicit support from interested parties, neighbors, merchants, business entities, and grants
- Coordinate park activities and support with COJ, local merchants, and other interested groups for long-term projects

- Manage communications and social media, as appropriate

#### Memorandums of Understanding or Other Agreements with City of Jacksonville

Many organizations have a memorandum of understanding (MOU) or other agreement with the COJ outlining how the organization can use the park, which may include maintenance of the park, often outlining the roles and responsibilities of both the Parks Dept. and the non-profit organization.

For instance:

1. Northbank Riverwalk Artist Square– RAP uses of the park for the Riverside Arts Market on Saturdays and other days for special events.
2. Willowbranch Rose Garden Park – RAP uses the park for operating the Community Garden.
3. Memorial Park – Memorial Park Association provides oversight for the park’s operation, maintenance, historic preservation, events, and fundraising in the park.
4. Riverside Park – RAP uses a portion of the park for the John Gorrie Dog Park.

#### Friends of Parks

In 2004, City code, Ordinance 2004-1211-E amended previous code (Adopt-A-Park Program) to establish the Friends-of-the-Park Program (FOTP). The code describes details of this program such that “The City and the Friends-of-the-Park organization shall jointly contribute to the maintenance and care of the park.” Further, “The Division Chief shall be responsible for coordinating the work of the Friends-of-the-Park organization with work to be done by the City on the park, and for coordinating the work of the various Friends-of-the-Park organizations. Each Friends-of-the-Park organization shall be responsible for fulfilling its obligations under the maintenance and care agreement and for coordinating the work done on its behalf on or about the park.”

The Parks Dept. has informed this task force that there are no currently approved FOTP agreements in any parks in Riverside Avondale. Where there were agreements, they have now expired. For reasons that are unclear, the Parks Dept. has not used the ordinance as intended. In the past, volunteers were told that liability concerns were limiting use of the FOTP ordinance, however a recent email from the Parks Director stated that the requirement for liability insurance should not be an impediment for park volunteers. This task force recommends that the RAP Parks Committee work with the District City Council person to rewrite or modify the FOTP Program code to better support volunteerism in our city parks, not just Riverside Avondale.

This task force encourages all Park Friends groups to submit their application to the Parks Dept. ‘for the record’. The Parks Dept. needs to know that volunteers are making a difference in local parks and may be encouraged to reactivate the FOTP program.

#### Neighborhood Watch Groups and Local Residents

Fishweir Neighborhood Watch Group has for many years informally cared for the Fishweir Park. Other small lot-size parks, often called pocket parks, have been mowed, landscaped, or tended by local residents.

### Organizations and Businesses

In the past, garden clubs have cared for local parks. For example, a plaque in Native Park #1 dedicated in 1932 commemorates the efforts of the Avondale Garden Club who developed the park “for the study of Florida plant life”. As described above, the Florida Native Plant Society (the local Ixia Chapter) has recently reestablished native plants in the Native Park #1 after many years of neglect.

The Friends of Jax Playgrounds is a nonprofit organization lead by Kim Clontz, a resident of Avondale. The primary focus is to coordinate neighborhoods, donors, and agencies to renovate active playgrounds in Jacksonville. In 2016, this Friends groups sponsored the new playground in Boone Park South. Kim’s current focus is for neighborhoods in need; however, she offers support to playgrounds citywide and is a great resource for Riverside Avondale parks.

Over the years, local businesses, such as local realty companies, and volunteer groups, such as Boy Scouts and church groups; have conducted occasional local park cleanups. BSA Eagle Scout candidates have contributed by conducting their Eagle Scout project in support of a given park, such as the new picnic tables in the Community Garden. These efforts have been locally sponsored and often coordinated without the knowledge of the Parks Dept. Establishing relationships with these businesses and organizations would benefit local parks. Additionally, publicly acknowledging the contributions of these local businesses and organizations on the RAP website is important to show appreciation and encourage continued support.

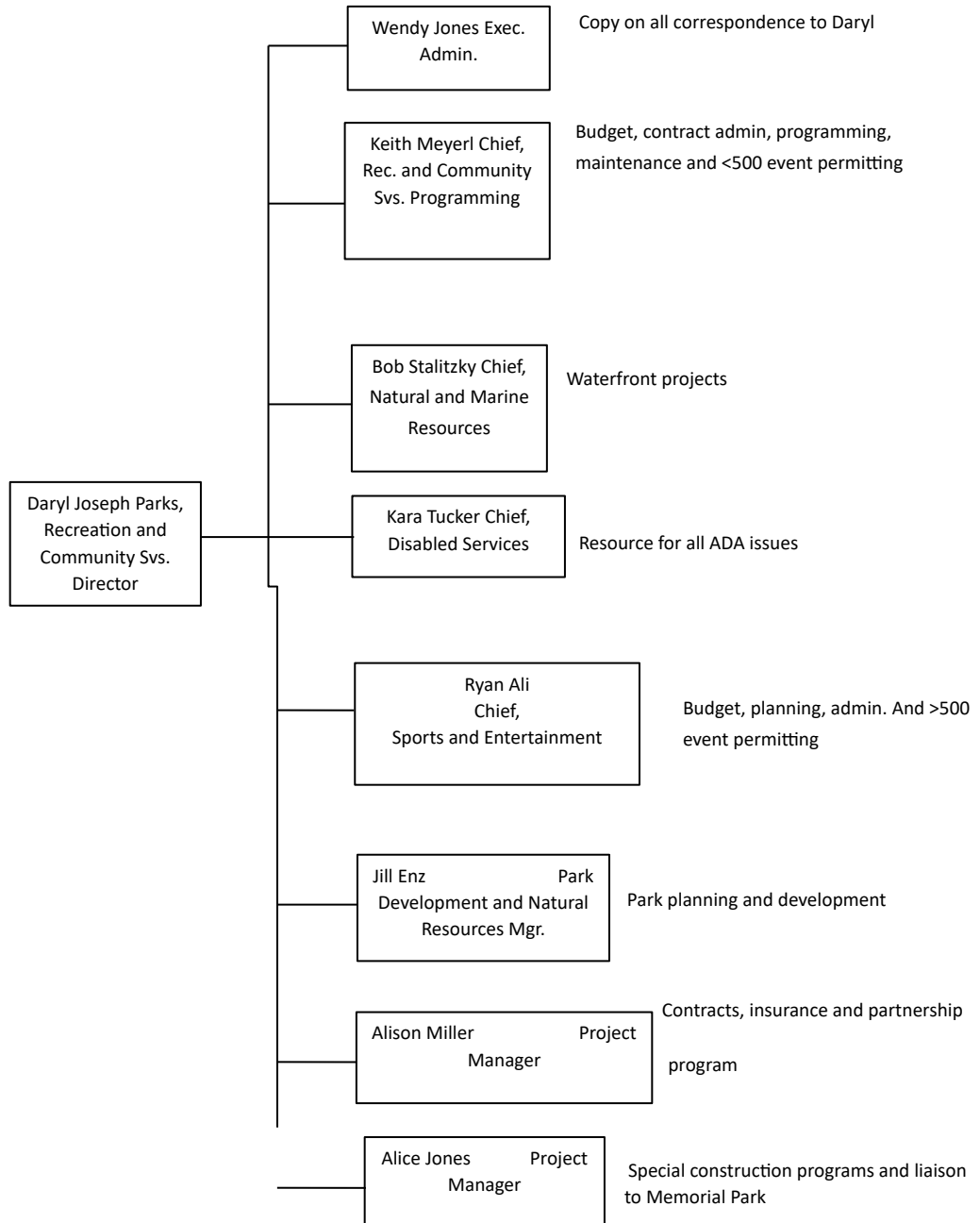
### **City of Jacksonville Department of Parks, Recreation, and Community Services**

The Parks Dept. is responsible for over 400 parks throughout the county. With limited resources and staff, maintenance needs go unmet, programs are limited, innovative ideas are pushed aside, and trash management is often not adequate. This statement is not intended to place blame on the Parks Dept, but rather to state that the root cause is a city with many competing budget demands and a tax base that does not match the need. The Parks Dept. has met with RAP and others involved with local parks-related projects and is always eager to help where possible. However, the realities of their limitations must be factored into a proactive plan by RAP. Indeed, this task force was initiated to fill in the gap between what the Parks Dept. can realistically provide and what this community demands, and hopefully, will support.

The Parks Dept. has encouraged RAP to promote more active Friends of the Parks volunteers. COJ uses Memorial Park as the model for park volunteer support. Care must be taken to hold COJ accountable for what the community and tax payers should expect while augmenting the support for the parks through community involvement and support. RAP can play an important role in elevating expectations of COJ while providing support and collaboration through volunteer advocacy and benefactor support.

A portion of the organizational chart for the Parks Dept. below names those individuals who have a role in our local parks (provided by Alison Miller, October 2019).





## City of Jacksonville City Council

City Council representatives have in the past provided funding for park related projects. For example, Jim Love contributed District 14 discretionary funds for the new playground at Boone Park South and the John Gorrie Dog Park at Riverside Park. There are likely other examples of City Council support for park improvements.

An important and urgent need for COJ City Council support is for revision and use of the COJ Ordinance for the Friends-of-the-Park program. The support provided by the Friends groups can supplement the work by Parks Dept. staff. The synergy of local participation is necessary to improve and enhance our local parks.

## CONCLUSIONS

The Riverside Avondale neighborhoods are fortunate to have numerous park spaces within walking or biking distance of nearly every resident. The assessments highlight both the parks that are successfully serving the community as well as the parks that need more attention, better maintenance, and updated amenities. Information gained by these assessments can be used for decision making for the future of the parks, specifically how parks can and should evolve over time, how maintenance is conducted, and where amenities can be discontinued or expanded based on demand.

Six examples of parks that are successfully serving the residents or where volunteers have made a difference include:

### 1. Native Park #1

Volunteers from the Florida Native Plant Society (FNPS) have transformed this park into a beautiful display of labeled native plants and trees which is naturally maintained and mulched. A dead snag in the middle of the park is providing a home for birds and insects. A newly constructed information kiosk installed by FNPS includes information about plants and their monthly meetings. This park is an example of how local residents can make a park space great!

### 2. Boone Park South

The Friends of Boone Park South have committed to restoring and maintaining the tree canopy in this beautiful wooded park. Collaboration with Greenscape and JEA has provided over 60 free trees and logistical support with annual tree plantings. Engagement of local residents to plant and water trees creates a sense of ownership and support for a local park.

A new playground was installed in 2015 that is a very successful example of public-private partnership collaboration. Kim Clontz of Friends of Jax Playgrounds raised \$75,000 locally and worked with the Parks Dept. to install a first-class playground, unlike any playground in the city. Local residents and those from outside the neighborhood enjoy this playground, now a model for other neighborhoods.

### 3. Boone Park North

The City maintains and staffs the active and popular tennis center located at this park. With competitive prices, the center offers lessons and court time for local residents and is a wonderful asset in our neighborhood. Additionally, a small building with a kitchen and bath can be rented for parties and events at fairly reasonable prices. It is not often used because many residents may not know about it.

#### 4. Community Garden at Willowbranch Rose Garden

Conversion of the now-inactive rose garden to a community garden is a successful example of conversion of park space to meet changing demands and needs of local residents. The Parks Dept. and RAP collaborated to make this space another asset in the neighborhood.

#### 5. Dog Park at Riverside Park

The John Gorrie Dog Park was opened in 2017. This park is an excellent example of a public-private partnership. This park on the back side of Riverside Park, has become very popular. Because of its popularity and success, the park does require a significant amount of maintenance which is augmented by a group from this dedicated dog community. Memorial Park

#### 6. Memorial Park

Memorial Park, supported by a very active Association of volunteers, has been a long-time model of local residents working with the City to maintain an historic park. They continue to set the standard for maintenance, historic preservation, event planning, and fundraising.

Several new and exciting efforts for parks in Riverside Avondale include:

1. Planting of Love Grove in Willowbranch Park in honor of local residents who died from AIDS.
2. Development of park space under the Fuller Warren Bridge by the City, west of the RAM space.
3. Formation of Friends of Riverside Park to restore and reactivate this historic park.
4. Revitalization of Fishweir Park amenities by local residents and formation of a Friends group.
5. Reestablishing John Murray Forbes Park with historic elements following the nearby hospital construction.

Opportunities for improvement in local parks include:

1. In general, the standards for maintenance in Riverside Avondale parks need to be raised. There are pockets of success where community involvement and strong influence with the Parks Dept. has brought maintenance up to an acceptable level.
2. The tree canopy is aging and trees lost through age or storms have not been adequately replaced.
3. Signage is marginal, and sometimes incorrect or just inadequate. Little of the signage is consistent with a historic neighborhood or park system.
4. The small riverfront parks do not effectively take advantage of the waterfront (Elizabeth Park, Cherry St. Park, Little Van Wert Park).
5. Trash pickup is inconsistent and the use of 55-gal plastic barrels is incompatible with a historic neighborhood.

6. There are some safety issues such as the broken playground equipment in Fishweir Park, the failing block storage building in Fishweir Park, the content of litter (syringes) and some of the vagrant activity.
7. The parks have generally not had upgrades to the amenities for many years with some exceptions (ex. playground at Boone Park South, John Gorrie Dog Park at Riverside Park, Memorial Park landscaping).
8. The passive pocket parks or neighborhood parks have generally not been activated with some exceptions including Stone Park garden plots and Belvedere #2 playground.
9. Parks Dept. use of outside maintenance contractors are generally unreliable and often damage trees and other foliage.
10. Riverside Park, one key cornerstone park for our neighborhood, is in need of major restoration (broken sidewalks, messy duck pond, lifting tree canopy, better design for events, improved way-finding).

### **Accomplishments of this Task Force**

This task force initiated the following efforts:

1. Conducted site visits of all parks to inventory condition and status of 23 of 26 parks.
2. Confirmed and corrected addresses for all parks in Riverside Avondale, make consistent in all COJ databases and webpages (See Alison Miller for status of this effort).
3. Collected historic documents related to parks. The following locations where information was inventoried or gathered include the RAP storage at the Jacksonville Historical Society, the Florida Collection at the downtown library, and RAP electronic files.
4. Communicated with the Parks Dept. about existing support for parks, how it works, what is not working, new guidance for donations to parks, and opportunities to improve collaboration with RAP.
5. Communicated with all known support groups for Parks.
6. Developed list of topics for which Parks guidelines are needed for consistency and support to volunteer groups.
7. Developed recommendations for the formation and actions of a RAP Parks Committee.

### **RECOMMENDATIONS**

This set of recommendations is intended to serve as a guide for future work by RAP, COJ, and other interested parties. It cannot be stressed enough that our parks, while not up to our standard of beauty and functionality consistent with the expectations of our historic neighborhood, remain a critical element we can no longer ignore. Many of our parks are heavily used and would be used more if properly maintained, further activated, and promoted. The enormous demands on the Parks Dept. is a reality that requires new solutions for support and collaboration with the COJ. RAP has a wonderful opportunity to lead this effort.

## Proposed Role of RAP

Since its founding in 1974, RAP has been an advocate for preservation of the neighborhood's historic assets in Riverside Avondale. Our parks are an important asset of the neighborhood, its history, and, equally important, its future. Preservation of this asset will require active participation by RAP, the residents, the City, and local businesses and organizations.

This task force presents the following recommendations for the preservation and maintenance of our parks (five high priority recommendations are identified by this task force):

1. HIGH PRIORITY -- RAP to initiate a permanent Parks Committee (similar to other RAP committees for traffic and zoning). This initiative would be consistent with the RAP Board visioning process which includes efforts to 'connect and energize our park space.' The Parks Committee would actively address issues related to parks such as maintenance, coordination with the Parks Dept., enhancements, and many of the issues discussed in this report. A long-term plan for the parks of Riverside Avondale may be needed to guide future development that is consistent with the history of each park and relevant to the demands of future residents. A proposed annual 'state of the parks' report to the RAP Board and perhaps to the Parks Dept. would provide a year-by-year accountability to demonstrate progress.
2. HIGH PRIORITY – RAP (through the Parks Committee) to work with the Parks Dept. and the City Council representative to re-establish the FOTP ordinance by rewriting, editing, or otherwise making it effective for the City and residents already volunteering in parks.
3. HIGH PRIORITY – RAP (through the Parks Committee) to guide and give oversight to near-term and long-term projects with the Parks Dept. such as the reestablishment of the John Murray Forbes Park, the renovation of Riverside Park and its duck pond, and the new 'under the Fuller Warren bridge' park space from RAM to the Dog Park. Recently, this task force learned that the park under the Fuller Warren bridge has already been contracted for build-out. This is an important and urgent opportunity for RAP to become involved.
4. HIGH PRIORITY -- RAP (through the Parks Committee) to coordinate a 'consortium' of park's Friends groups and other supporting organizations. Instead of park volunteer groups working in isolation, RAP should encourage collaboration and sharing of resources (i.e. volunteers, signs, tools). Many issues and concerns are similar across the parks and working together to solve these problems is more efficient and effective. Together, Friends groups may have more of an impact working with the Parks Dept. Starting in 2019, Friends of Boone Park South will be sending an annual report with a list of accomplishments to the Parks Dept. This should help the Parks Dept. to further appreciate the value, commitment, and benefit of these volunteer groups.
5. HIGH PRIORITY -- RAP (through the Parks Committee) to develop and maintain a parks webpage (updated at least annually) that provides various information about parks – including a list of parks, locations, amenities, activities, and contact person. To generate interest, a map of the parks with a bike tour route might include a description of the history and important aspects of each park. Perhaps during the annual Home Tour, one or more

local parks could be highlighted as a stop for drinks, history talk of the park, and how to get involved in local parks.

Kim Clontz reported that the Parks Dept. does not have staff dedicated to public promotion of parks such as announcing new park equipment and park events, and actively recruiting volunteers in parks. The RAP parks webpage could provide this function in Riverside Avondale and perhaps serve as a model for other communities in Jacksonville.

6. RAP (through the Parks Committee) to create a file for each park in Riverside Avondale, similar to the RAP House files. Like the local houses in the neighborhood, the parks are historic resources to be preserved under the Department of Interior Historic Preservation designation. The park files should be maintained permanently at the RAP office and should document the history and 'story' of each park. These files would include:
  - a. Historic timeline of the park
  - b. Description of the park, when created, original purpose, history of its development, amenities
  - c. Letters, print material, and photos that document the park's story, including its history, original purpose, significant events
  - d. Information added for changes/additions to the park over time
  - e. Index of the files (updated with each change/addition to the file) for easy review of the file contents

A recent example when park files were not easily accessible and could have resulted in a major loss of a local park is related to John Murray Forbes Park. The park is on the St. Johns River at the end of Kings Street and adjacent to St Vincent's Hospital. During recent plans for construction of a new building, St Vincent's included the park space in the footprint of hospital without consultation with Parks Dept. or RAP. Their plans were inconsistent with the park's original purpose to honor Mr. Forbes, a local resident of renown, and to maintain it as a local historical park. RAP leaders had to scramble to find files that documented previous commitments with individuals no longer at St Vincent's. Even the Parks Dept. staff and their files did not document the commitment to maintain this space as a city park. All files and documents related to all parks should be created, indexed, and maintained by RAP. As the years go by, the stories of our parks (and the neighborhood) will be lost if not proactively documented and maintained.

7. RAP (through the Parks Committee) to review and propose updates to the COJ webpage for parks in Jacksonville. Some parks are missing completely. Some information is not consistent, nor complete, and needs to be updated. The text should be reviewed and proposed by RAP. This would be an opportunity to make the RAP webpage and the COJ webpage consistent.
8. RAP (through the Parks Committee) to develop guidelines and standard operating procedures common activities in parks:

- a. Organizing a park support group
  - b. Requesting maintenance of parks
  - c. Tree planting in parks
  - d. Making improvements in parks
  - e. Activities and events in parks
  - f. Donating to parks
  - g. Communication related to parks
9. RAP (through the Parks Committee) to work with COJ to recognize and add Friends of Park names below the park name sign at parks. For example, at Native Park #1 a sign below the park name sign recognizes the Florida Native Plant Society for its maintenance and care of this park. All Friends groups should be recognized for their support of parks in the neighborhood. This gives groups ownership and pride in their volunteer participation. The RAP Parks Committee would ensure that these groups are active and contributing to the park's support.
10. RAP could serve as a 501c(3) nonprofit corporation for fundraising related to local parks. For example, if the Friends group for a park is not a 501c(3) corporation, donations to that group are not tax deductible. If a park initiates a large capital campaign for a specific improvement, RAP may act as the donation conduit and provide this benefit and oversight. Clearly, RAP does not want to become the 'treasurer' for every Friends group but this support may be useful when park groups need to raise funds for a specific purpose.
11. RAP (through the Parks Committee) to seek opportunities to engage other organizations and groups to support parks:
- a. Garden Clubs – Research shows that local garden clubs once adopted some parks, or perhaps all, of the Riverside Avondale parks. They were maintained by these clubs and beautified with plant material and trees. Is there an opportunity to collaborate with garden clubs now?
  - b. Master Gardener Program – Master gardeners are required to donate time to local gardening projects. Perhaps they can support local parks by:
    - i. annual pruning of azaleas and other bushes,
    - ii. developing landscape and irrigation plans for parks, or
    - iii. advising on park problems (i.e. pest control)
  - c. Local Businesses and organizations – Local businesses can support parks by providing financial support and by donating time for cleanups and park projects. Other groups such as local churches, youth groups, and Scouting organizations

should be contacted to consider service projects in our parks.

12. RAP (through the Parks Committee) conduct the following:

- a. Establish maintenance expectation with the Parks Dept. including the removal of unsightly plastic trash bins to be replaced with permanent trash containers.
- b. Include selected 'unnamed' green space in future assessments, maintenance discussions, and considerations that some spaces might become named parks.
- c. Refine and continue a regular park assessment process to judge progress, prioritize upgrades or additions to amenities, and review park safety.
- d. Initiate a study of 'best in class' municipal park systems for creative improvement and enhancement of park spaces.
- e. Review the park tree canopy study done by the Parks Dept. to encourage the replacement of trees lost from recent storms. Use the tree mitigation fund before it is used elsewhere.
- f. Share critical elements of this study with our City Council Representative, the Parks Dept, and Public Works, asking for their support for a manageable number of near-term initiatives.

#### **Additional Ideas Discussed**

This task force enthusiastically discussed ideas for making our parks exemplary, attractive, active, and meet the demands of our neighborhood. This includes ideas found by investigating other municipal park systems. Some of these ideas include:

- Link our parks through a way-finding tool like GPSmyCity.
- Develop a walking/cycling route map with distance between parks to monitor distances walked or pedaled.
- Encourage regular events, such as
  - Neighborhood-based park activities like 'pop-up' picnics especially during 2020 100/150 Riverside Avondale Anniversary year activities in parks
  - Movies in the parks
  - Kite days
  - Educations events by Master Gardeners/Naturalists – Tree/plant identification
  - Businesses or merchants to sponsor cleanup days with food trucks
  - 'Art in the Park' days
  - Bike Tour events from 'park to park' rides
  - Running clubs to sponsor 'park to park' runs



- Bird identification outings.
- Develop ideas for fundraising and opportunities to encourage local merchants and businesses to invest in their community; RAP could serve as the entity that promotes contributions that would eventually be a self-sustaining endowment.
- Investigate grants for special park initiatives and capital projects.
- Reach out to the local military, military support groups, Veterans Groups to reactivate Peace Memorial Park.
- Expand the Native Park to include both park spaces.
- Encourage neighborhood use of the Lee High School Pool.
- Consider large park activation project ideas –
  - Soccer field
  - Paved running/walking trails
  - Frisbee golf course
  - Elevated walkway through Fishweir Park wetlands – environmental education
  - Par Course Trail
  - New rose garden next to Community Garden.
- Establish a group of knowledgeable Master Gardeners, tree advocates, garden club representatives to provide more in-depth input to the assessment process.
- Explore the idea of a wildlife assessment to encourage urban wildlife in our city parks.
- Establish guidelines for historic signage for our parks that would be unique to Riverside Avondale.

## Summary

RAP was formed in 1974 to restrain the uncontrolled development of Riverside Avondale at the expense of architecturally valuable homes and buildings and to instill a sense of pride in community which would encourage restoration. Parks are not unlike the historic homes and buildings and are an original element of our neighborhood. All 26 of our parks deserve the similar standard of restoration, care and activation as has been demonstrated with Memorial Park. Our green space, medians, and tree canopy require attention to garner the consistent curb appeal that parts of our neighborhood already demonstrate. This initiative should respect the historical integrity of each park, while encouraging enhancements directed towards safe, active, and healthy living, by further connecting our neighborhood and serving to enhance the pride we have in our neighborhood. RAP is in a unique position to lead this effort intended to partner with the Parks Dept., our City Council representative, the merchants, the community and other interested benefactors.

This report is a consolidation of various files, conversations with residents and park advocates and eyes-on assessments directed to an initial set of conclusions and recommendations. The parks task force

would like to express its thanks and appreciation for the considerable number of individuals that provided valuable input for this report.

Our sincere hope is that we will look back on this effort in a few years and see that this was the turning point that made a real difference in the health and well-being of our Riverside Avondale Parks, not unlike the early days of the RAP organization.