

THE NEW KID ON THE COMMISSION

By Joel Heller

Actually I'm an old kid when it comes to recreation in Ashland but I'm newly elected to the Parks Commission. I thought I'd share about the learning curve; there's so much I didn't know. Are you aware that APRC is not under the City Council, but our own independent elected Commission, written into the City's charter by popular vote in 1908 with a permanent tax levy? This allows the Parks and Rec Commission to fund and care for Lithia Park, 48 miles of trails and funding for 17 additional parks, all providing a wide range of recreational opportunities.

I didn't know that I was walking into several issues about which people hold strong feelings. Being very interested in recreation, I noticed that the term "recreation" was rarely mentioned in my first several months on the commission... but I would soon learn about fee structures and seniority rights among the restaurants and artisans on Calle Guanajuato, considered an annex to Lithia Park and managed by the Recreation Division of APRC.

I was interested to hear the response from Jeff McFarland, Interim Parks Superintendent, when I asked about the biggest challenge in terms of maintaining Ashland's many parks. He responded that the transient population often sleep in restrooms or the Japanese Garden in Lithia Park and other parks, leaving behind soiled clothes and trash. This is an issue that requires a great deal of staff time and resources. I also wasn't aware that there is little that can be done by the police if the persons or items are discovered in the morning, when park land is considered public property.

There was so much I wasn't aware of. I had no idea that our park maintenance staff are committed to the Parks Commission's policy to eliminate herbicides and pesticides while avoiding neonicotinoids (products that are damaging to pollinators). I didn't know that the original Applegate Trail group camped at Ashland Creek in 1846 (no reports of trash left behind) and described it as their nicest camping spot along the route. I wasn't aware that the PERS underfunding issue would impact new programs and properties currently on the drawing board.

Somehow, in spite of a variety of challenges, a smooth running operation goes forward so that we can enjoy beautiful and well-maintained parks and trails. We can look forward to a new splash pad and volleyball courts opening on Memorial Day weekend at Garfield Park. I'm so appreciative that a smoothly running department and Commission hopes to be able provide a second dog park, an extended Bear Creek Greenway, an improved Daniel Meyer Pool and some dedicated pickleball courts for the fastest growing sport in the country.

Finally, I have learned how crucial volunteers are, for our Bee City USA-Ashland Subcommittee, for North Mountain Park and throughout our park and trails system. If you are looking for a way to be involved in keeping Ashland and Lithia Park the wonderland it is, consider contacting our Volunteer Coordinator. After all, that's what your Parks and Rec Commissioners are: citizen volunteers.