

# ***THE PARK RESCUE PROJECT***



## ***RETURNING APPLETON'S PARKS TO THE PEOPLE***

As long as most residents could remember, Appleton's parks had been beautiful, safe places for young and old to enjoy recreation and the natural world. However, in recent years, criminal/nuisance activity had turned some parks into unsafe and uncomfortable spaces. Fortunately, these parks were rescued through police and public cooperation, returning the parks to their intended users. *Appleton's Parks are again safe places to be proud of!*



### **City of Appleton Police Department**

Community Liaison Officers:

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## POLICE DEPARTMENT

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April 30, 2001

To Whom It May Concern:

This letter is to confirm my support for the nomination of the Appleton Police Department's Safe Parks Project for this year's Herman Goldstein Award.

This project, as detailed in the nomination, embodied cooperation of many entities within the community, including the local residents, elected officials, officers and users of the park system. After receiving several citizen complaints regarding alcohol-related calls in our parks, the officers developed an innovative Safe Parks Project, tailored to meet the community's specific needs, which has proven to be a great success based on the reduction of alcohol-related calls in the parks city-wide.

The City of Appleton's recreation areas are safer because of this project. Having a safe place to play has gone a long way in preventing crime in our community and promoting healthy behaviors among our youth.

Thank you for your consideration of this nomination.

Sincerely,

A handwritten signature in black ink, appearing to read "Richard W. Myers". The signature is fluid and cursive, written over the typed name and title.

Richard W. Myers  
Chief of Police

***THE PARK RLSCUE PROJECT***  
***HEMMING APPLETON PARKS 1() This PEOPLE***

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# *The Park Rescue Project*

## Returning Appleton's Parks to the People

The City of Appleton has always had a reputation for having beautiful and safe parks. However, over the past few years, an increase in park use by transient alcoholics, had significantly degraded the community's enjoyment of this valuable resource. The community's sense of "ownership" toward the parks was slipping away.

Several problems within the parks became evident as community members and city employees reported troubling events to the police department regarding intoxicated individuals.

- A core group of transient alcoholics became responsible for the majority of criminal and nuisance activity.

- Both citizens and city employees frequently complained of being harassed and disturbed by the intoxicated subjects' behaviors.

- Public use of the parks decreased due to a perception of the parks being unsafe.

- Officers spent a disproportionate amount of time handling disturbance calls in the affected parks as compared to parks in other areas of the city.

In response to these problems, the Appleton Police Department enlisted the help of concerned citizens. This cooperative relationship facilitated a change in city ordinance restricting the use of alcohol within the parks. The Police Dep.' Linent also worked with the City Parks Depai Linent to establish a procedure wherein persons involved in criminal activity within the parks were evicted. In addition, CPTED (Crime Prevention Through Environmental Design) principles were implemented resulting in improved safety of the park environments.

Safer parks resulted from the partnerships that were established:

- 89% reduction** in alcohol related disturbances in the affected parks.

- 38% reduction** in general police calls for service in affected parks.

Most importantly, the community as a whole now perceives the parks as safe places to visit and enjoy. Furthermore, the community has reestablished their sense of ownership of the parks.

## *Scanning*

Appleton's parks have historically been beautiful places where the community can recreate and enjoy the outdoors. Recently however, intended users have "steered clear" of the parks due to an influx in the number of transient alcoholics that have chosen the parks as their gathering places.

A small group of transient alcoholics caused the majority of problems at parks located near the downtown area. These parks included Alicia, Arbutus, City, Jones, Lutz and Pierce Parks. Most of these problems were related to alcohol abuse.

- The Appleton Police Department began to identify an increase in calls for service to these parks.
- Reports of individuals "passed out" in the parks were frequent
- Public urination/defecation were becoming commonplace
- Officers began to note more violations for littering and other nuisance behaviors within the parks
- Both citizens and Park Department employees reported being verbally and physically harassed by intoxicated individuals
- Schools, business people, daycare providers, adults and children, chose to stop using the parks due to their fear of being victimized
- Lack of police intervention had decreased the likelihood that the alcoholics would seek treatment for their disease

## *A n a l y s i s*

The City of Appleton has long recognized the importance of parks to the community. The city's growth and quality of life are directly related to the quality of its parks. The citizens of the City of Appleton expect that their parks should provide the following benefits:

### **Social Benefits**

- Leisure opportunities, facilities and the quality of the local environment are the foundations of community pride.
- Recreating together builds strong families, the foundation for a stronger society.
- Leisure provides opportunities of community involvement, shared management and ownership of resources.
- Recreation promotes ethnic and cultural harmony.
- Community recreation reduces alienation, loneliness, and anti-social behaviors.
- Leisure provides leadership opportunities that build strong communities.

### **Personal Benefits**

- Leisure opportunities for youth provide positive lifestyle choices and alternatives to self-destructive behavior.
- « Relaxation, rest, and revitalization through the opportunity of leisure are essential to stress management in today's busy and demanding world.
- Parks and open spaces bring beauty to an area while giving people satisfaction and improving their quality of life.
- Meaningful leisure activity is an essential source of self-esteem and positive self-image.

### **Economic Benefits**

- Parks and recreation services motivate business relocation and expansion in the community.
- Recreation and park services are often the catalyst for tourism, a growing sector of our economy.
- Meaningful leisure services reduce the high cost of vandalism and criminal activity.

## **Environmental Benefits**

- Through the provision of parks, open spaces and protected natural environment recreation can contribute to the environmental health of our communities.
- Investing in the environment through parks and the provision of open space in residential area leads to an increase in neighborhood property values through accessibility to environmentally friendly green spaces and associated recreation opportunities.
- The trend toward natural environment based leisure activities is insurance for a new and improved environmental future.

However, in 1998, the citizens' perceptions of the parks were far from their expectations.

-Schools, daycare facilities, park employees and residents living adjacent to the parks, frequently called the Police Department to express concerns or file complaints about the inappropriate behavior of intoxicated persons.

-St. Joseph Middle School refused to allow students to have recess in Jones Park after school administrators deemed the park unsafe.

-The Downtown YMCA Daycare stopped using Jones Park as a play area because of the inappropriate behavior of intoxicated people in the park.

-Park maintenance staff reported ongoing verbal harassment and threats hindering their efforts to maintain the parks.

-Residents surrounding the parks felt that the safety of their neighborhoods was deteriorating due to problems within the parks.

Police response to problems within the parks lacked coordination within the department and with other agencies. Officers *did* not consistently enforce the violations that were occurring in the parks. There was no process in place to target problem offenders and permanently remove them from the parks.

When officers did intervene, a number of actions were potentially taken. These included:

- Verbal Warnings; offenders were told to stop the violation or to "move on"
- Written Warnings; offender notified in writing that future violations would result in arrest or fine
- City Summons/Citation; Fines issued for violations of city ordinances
- State Charges; Referral to District Attorney's office or confinement for the offense

During this analysis phase, it became clear that enforcement action varied widely. An example of this, would be an officer arresting an offender on one occasion, while another officer gave the same offender a warning for the same type of offense soon after.

This "reactive" response was not providing a "proactive" solution to the problem. Violators quickly learned the system and took advantage of its shortcomings. These violators learned that individual officers enforced similar violations differently. Additionally, many would be issued city summonses in the summer and intentionally not pay the fine, knowing that when the summons went to warrant status in the winter, they would have a warm bed in jail.

Close analysis of these issues revealed the following core problems:

- 1) An increased number of transient alcoholics using the city parks.

*Numerous, recently constructed homeless shelters within the city and a wealth of free services, created an influx of transient subjects into the community.*

- 2) The majority of alcohol related complaints came out of parks that were nearest the downtown area.

*Most shelters, food pantries and drop in centers were positioned near downtown, creating an environment that was convenient for the homeless.*



3) Park rules and city ordinances did little to inhibit alcohol related problems within the parks.

*Consumption of alcohol within city parks was not regulated. Drinking was allowed, morning, noon and night. Violations of park rules provided no consequences for the offender.*

4) A small minority of homeless shelter users were found to be the source of most of the problems within the parks.

*Shelters had lenient policies regarding the housing of intoxicated individuals.*

Because of their convenience, parks near the downtown had become a frequent gathering place for transient alcoholics. Their drinking would begin early in the morning, and by noon, they would usually be heavily intoxicated. Both their presence and intoxicated condition gave them an unwarranted sense of ownership and often exclusive use of the parks.

Interviews with residents living adjacent to the parks, school faculty, students, daycare providers, park employees, patrol officers and citizen users revealed numerous examples of harassment and criminal behavior within the parks. Only some of which were actually reported to the police department. These same groups expressed an increased sense that the park environment was unsafe. Many chose to no longer visit the parks at all.

Local press agencies were contacted to help the police department communicate the problems that were occurring in the parks. These agencies interviewed citizens, police and the transient alcoholics themselves. The result was a factual representation of the problem that was broadcast and shared with the entire Fox Valley Community.

## ***Response***

### **Goals:**

- Eliminate criminal activity from the parks
- Restore a sense of safety for those who legally use city parks
- Reduce calls for police service to the parks
- Facilitate intervention for transient alcoholics to seek treatment

### **Step One:**

The first reaction to these problems was to prohibit any alcohol from being consumed in city parks whatsoever. Albeit this had significant police support, many within the community and a number of city alderpersons vigorously opposed this idea.

Realizing that the consumption of alcohol within the parks before noon was the precipitating factor creating the problem, a compromise was struck. The city council enacted city ordinance #13-74, prohibiting consumption of alcohol in any city park prior to noon. The language of this ordinance had previously been created through a cooperative effort between the police department and the city attorney's office.

Councils deliberation reference this issue included the testimony of many concerned citizens and police officers. These arguments, in support of the ordinance, were compelling.

## Step Two:

The citizens had clearly and wholeheartedly expressed their desire to be able to use their parks and feel safe while doing so. The sense of ownership of the parks needed to be removed from criminal users and restored to law abiding citizens. However, solely arresting and fining violators within the parks would not eradicate the problem.

Accordingly, a collaborative effort between the police, parks and city attorney's departments was established. This partnership led to the creation of the **Park Eviction Program**, wherein offenders could be evicted from the city parks. Initial concerns were raised regarding the legality of evicting subjects from public spaces. Research conducted by the city attorney's office showed that criminal behavior was indeed grounds for eviction from these spaces. These agencies believed that the eviction notice would be an effective means to eliminate disruptive and illegal behavior from the parks.

The eviction process is simple. The names of serious/habitual offenders are forwarded to the parks department from the police department. Violators of any law, ordinance or park rule are given written notice of eviction by the City Parks Director. The offenders are evicted not only from the park where the violation occurred, but from all city parks for a period of one year. Should the offender visit any park during the eviction period, they would be arrested for trespassing.

Once the eviction notice is issued, it is served by police officers patrolling the parks. At the time of service, officers explain the consequences of further visits to any parks to the offender.

Park evictees' photos and personal information are displayed and frequently updated in the roll call area of the police department. As a result, patrol officers are familiarized with the evictees' names and faces.

### **Step three:**

Our goal was definitely not to push the homeless or alcoholics onto the street. A permanent solution had to involve intervention for the subjects' substance abuse.

Potential partners, that could assist the police department and the alcoholics, were identified and contacted. They included area hospitals, county social service agencies, halfway houses, various shelters, and local substance abuse centers.

The hospitals, which had denied treatment to the most chronic alcoholics because of the frequency of their visits, were encouraged again treat them. This 'front end' intervention, set the stage for the alcoholics' introduction into the treatment process.

County social service agencies were "brought into the loop". Caseworkers assigned to most of the chronic alcoholics were regularly contacted regarding their client's condition or behavior. The police department encouraged the caseworkers to provide the maximum intervention possible.

Meetings with area homeless shelters were conducted. Shelter staff were informed regarding the problem in the parks and were given updates regarding their clients criminal behaviors.

To facilitate the exchange of information between the shelters and the police department, a liaison program was established. This program brought the police department into partnership with the shelters. The assigned liaison officer frequently met with shelter staff, sharing pertinent information and providing training for them.

Our department's ongoing positive working relationship with a local treatment program/halfway house (The Mooring House) continued throughout the Park Rescue Project. The police department and The Mooring House worked together to prepare for an anticipated increase in admissions to their facility, and for the use of their services. Mooring House caseworkers assisted officers in placing

incapacitated subjects on 72 hour alcohol holds at local hospitals. The Mooring House also provided temporary housing and counseling services for clients who were in the process of "sobering up".

## *Assessment*

In the summer of 1998, the Park Rescue Project was established. Ongoing crime data analysis and feedback from park users and Park Department staff are used to measure the program's success. The project is continually re-assessed with its original goals in mind.

### **-Reduce calls for police service to the parks and Eliminate criminal activity from the parks**

While it is impossible to completely eliminate all criminal activity, our analysis over the past three years shows a significant reduction in alcohol related crimes and calls for service. In the six targeted parks, an 89% decrease in alcohol related incidents was noted over a three year period. Additionally, police calls for service to these parks decreased 38% overall.

### **-Restore a sense of safety for those who legally use city parks**

The police department recognizes that not only is a numeric reduction in crime critical, but the perception of the citizen's using the parks is important as well. Interviews with various stakeholders showed them to be overwhelmingly pleased with the project. The stakeholders reported a restored sense of security within the parks and indicated increased use of the parks as well.

### **-Facilitate intervention for transient alcoholics to seek treatment**

Of the sixteen subjects evicted from parks since 1998, thirteen were alcoholics. Of these thirteen, one has returned to sobriety, one died of complications associated with alcoholism, five have had no further negative police contacts, one is currently incarcerated, and the remaining five continue to exhibit criminal and alcoholic behavior, but have steered clear of city parks. This lack of increased sobriety among the evictees has been discouraging. Our aim was never to displace this population, but to facilitate positive lifestyle changes. Sadly, compelling

these chronic alcoholics to seek treatment has proved very difficult. Furthermore, area homeless shelters continue to have problems managing this population. Unfortunately, only one of the three shelters in the city has adopted an "alcohol free" policy.

### **-Unanticipated outcomes**

As the Park rescue program progressed some additional benefits were realized.

At the request of both the police and parks departments, The City Park Rules, which as written had no consequences attached, were adopted by city ordinance. This allowed officers to cite and fine subjects who violated any park rules whatsoever.

The police department began to actively participate as CPTED (Crime Prevention Through Environmental Design) consultant on a variety of park projects. This included the design and placement of pavilions and other structures within the parks as well as landscaping. This provided for increased access by intended users and discouraged illegal activity within the parks.

The Park Rescue Project, has expanded to include the deterrence of other crimes within the parks as well. Individuals involved in weapons offenses, sex crimes and assaults (not alcohol related) have also been evicted from the parks.

## *Agency Information*

The Appleton Police Department has long been recognized as a progressive, proactive police agency. The utilization of Problem Orientated Policing techniques is not new to this department, and is engrained into the department's organizational philosophy. All officers are well trained in this regard and are given great latitude in utilizing these problem solving techniques.

The Park Rescue Project was embraced at every level of police department. Administrators and supervisors diligently monitored the activities of police officers who focused their patrols on the parks. Community Liaison Officers kept lines of communication open between patrol, administration, City Departments and the community, keeping all apprised of progress and concerns.

A park evictee notification bulletin board was displayed in the operations area of the police department. This board contained photos and general information on current park evictees, keeping officers apprised of who had been evicted and for how long.

This project was incorporated into the officers' daily duties, and assignments were routinely made directing officers to patrol the parks utilizing a zero tolerance approach.

Officers received training regarding newly established ordinances and park rules and regulations that pertained to the project.

## *Synopsis*

The Park Rescue Project has achieved its original goal of returning the parks to their intended users. The Appleton Police Department has learned that only through cooperative efforts with other City Departments, City Government and the community, can the parks remain safe and enjoyable places to visit. Ultimately the community's perception of the park environments has improved exponentially. The significant decrease in crime and nuisances within the parks, since the program's onset, shows that this perception is indeed a reality.

## Project Contact Persons

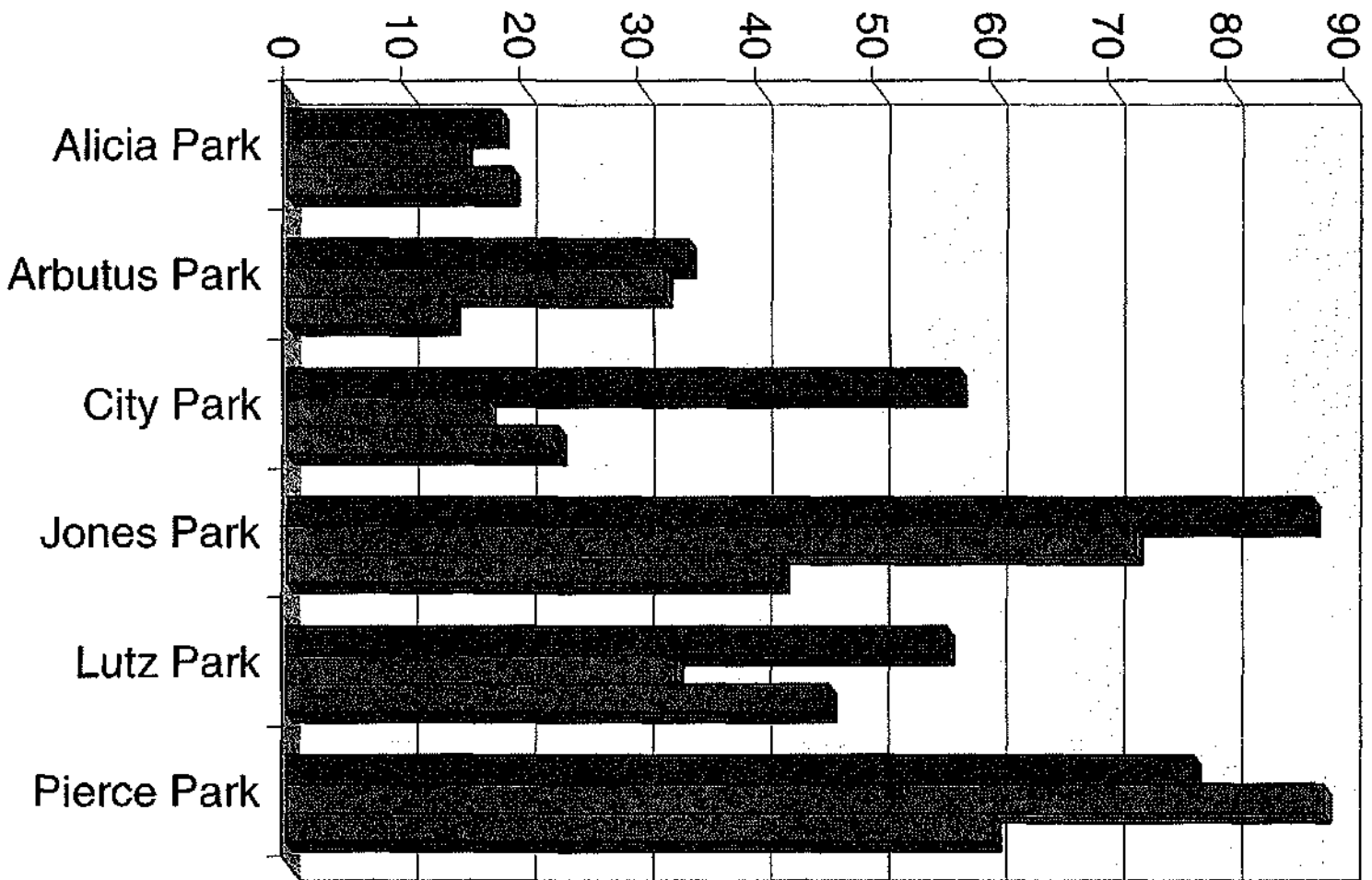
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# Annual Calls for Police Service (decreased 38%)



## Alcohol Related Calls for Service (decreased 89%)

