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## Spending on city parks is a needed investment

**Leaders from Friends of Dallas Parks** say voters support dedicating 28 percent of the 2017 bond program to building and maintaining parks

Thanks to our booming economy, Dallas is on the cusp of its next great era. This economic growth will bring new residents to the region who have the choice of living in Dallas — or somewhere else.

Dallas' park system is critical to creating the high quality of life that attracts families. Unfortunately, with over \$2 billion in capital needs, Dallas' parks are falling behind. That's why we're advocating that 28 percent of the city's next bond program be dedicated to investments in our city's park system.

The inventory of park needs is daunting: new roofs for recreation centers, replacing equipment at children's playgrounds, repairing our aging pools and aquatic centers, just to name a few.

Furthermore, the city's population growth has outpaced acquisition of land for new parks, and today only 58 percent of Dallas residents have a park within walking distance of their home. As each year passes, our park system falls further into disrepair, while the need for more neighborhood parks only grows.

The situation is dire, but it did not materialize overnight; rather, it is the outcome of chronic underinvestment in parks over many years.

While other cities regularly spend over \$200 per resident annually on parks, Dallas allots a paltry \$76 — less than Seattle (\$281), Minneapolis (\$222), Chicago (\$173), Plano (\$157) and Atlanta (\$147). It should be no surprise that the Trust for Public Land's annual ParkScore report ranks Dallas 54th out of the country's 100 largest cities.

Historically, Dallas has used capital bond programs to help overcome these deficiencies in



2015 File Photo

**The inventory** of park needs in Dallas is daunting, say Delia Jasso, CW Whitaker and Jim Graham.

annual spending. In the four bond programs from 1995 through 2006, Dallas invested over \$550 million in the park system, averaging 21.5 percent of each bond program. The 2012 bond program did not include a parks and recreation component at all, and now there is talk that the next bond will be devoted entirely to streets.

It has been a decade since Dallas made a major capital commitment for our park system, and these critical investments cannot wait any longer. And with development accelerating across the city, we are quickly running out of opportunities to acquire land for the neighborhood parks we so desperately need. If we do not act now, we will be unable to meet the park needs of future residents.

Dallas voters agree that parks must be a priority in the 2017 bond program. During recent town hall meetings, residents ranked parks as their No. 2 priority. A September poll conducted by the Trust for Public Land found that two-thirds would vote "yes" on a \$275 million parks-related

bond proposition. Furthermore, a substantial majority said that at least 28 percent of the bond program should be devoted to parks.

Underinvesting in parks in the 2017 bond program would not only be selling our future short, but would go against what Dallas voters are demanding.

Generous donors have stepped up to the plate, pledging \$217 million in private money to match any public bond funding. No other bond priority can boast this level of philanthropic support. To leave parks out of the bond would mean leaving hundreds of millions of dollars on the table.

The good news is this: Spending on Dallas parks is a great investment. Not only do parks improve public health, connect communities and protect the environment, but they also spur the economy.

According to a 2015 study by HR&A Advisors, Dallas' park system generates an annual \$678 million in economic activity. For every \$1 the city spends on parks, \$7 is returned to the local economy. Trails are an even better investment, with a 50-to-1 return. In fact, Dallas' parks are such a good investment that an increase in spending of only \$1 per resident would generate \$8.9 million in economic impact for the entire city.

In order to build a city ready for the economic opportunities of tomorrow, we must invest in our parks today. The 2017 bond program is our chance to ensure Dallas has the great park system it deserves. Don't sell it short.



Delia Jasso is former vice president of the Dallas Park and Recreation Board. CW Whitaker and Jim



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