

Some Fresno schools will double as parks on weekends

By Tim Sheehan
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Fresno hopes to augment its documented shortage of open city park space by working with school districts to open their campuses for recreation use on weekends starting this summer.

The Fresno City Council approved an agreement Thursday with the [Central Unified School District](#) for weekend use of playground areas at Steinbeck and McKinley elementary schools in the western part of the city.

An agreement between the city and the [Fresno Unified School District](#) for the use of 14 elementary, middle and high school sites is expected to be approved in May.

All but three of the school sites are south of Ashlan Avenue, and in areas that have been identified as underserved by city parks.

Manuel Mollenedo, the city's director of parks, after-school, recreation and community services, told the council that the agreements will open up between 350 and 400 more acres of green space for residential recreation.

Mollenedo described the joint-use plan as "extremely exciting" and a "bold decision in trying to not only provide additional green space for the entire community of Fresno but also, in a very dramatic and cost-effective way, attempt to deal with the parkland shortage that this community faces."

Late last year, the City Council earmarked \$1.2 million to establish weekend recreation and fitness programs at the school sites. On Thursday, the council rejected both of the bids it received from outside organizations to run those programs, instead opting to have Mollenedo's parks/recreation department handle the chores.

Each of the 16 school sites will have two staff members assigned to those weekend programs to run organized fitness, recreation and nutrition activities.

But, Mollenedo added, the schools also will be open to families and the public for general recreation use like picnicking or random play.

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Fresno City Councilwoman Esmeralda Soria

Mollenedo said he hopes to recruit [Fresno State](#) and [Fresno City College](#) students to work in the program, including majors in recreation, sociology and other fields with an interest in working with children and families.

Mollenedo and City Manager Bruce Rudd said they hope to launch the programs in May and expand them through the summer. Each site will be open from 9 a.m. to 6 p.m. on Saturdays and Sundays.

While they voted for the program, Councilwoman Esmeralda Soria and Councilman Oliver Baines sounded two notes of caution.

The weekend use of the school sites will be reflected in the city's long-range parks master plan, "but remember it's only two days of the week," Soria said. "That's not a true reflection of the green space that's available to the community."

Baines urged Mollenedo to avoid a “cookie-cutter” approach to establishing the recreation programs for the individual school sites and to ensure that staffing reflects the character of each school’s neighborhood.

“We should be looking to hire people from these communities to work at these facilities,” Baines said. And that, he added, means “people who are familiar with the community” and not just ethnic diversity.

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