

**The Bill Blackwood
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**A Need for Implementation of a Specialized Law Enforcement Park
Division in Montgomery County, Texas**

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ABSTRACT

In Montgomery County, Texas, there is a need for the implementation of a specialized law enforcement park division. Montgomery County has dedicated a large amount of property, money, and county resources toward parks, green spaces, and nature preserves. These parks can save money, have an economic value in the form of property value and tax revenue, and have physical and psychological benefit for users of the parks. Parks can additionally be utilized for attracting business, strengthening community relationships, making neighborhoods more attractive places to live and work, for exercise and sporting events, and in assisting in community development. Parks have additional benefits as they can help reduce air pollutants, reduce water pollution, reduce flooding, protect natural resources, wildlife, insects, and other species, save money, and increase the quality of life of the area around the park. There is a need to protect these county resources.

In conclusion, this white paper will make position points on the need for this specialized park division. The white paper will demonstrate how the specialized park division is necessary for the protection of county assets and how this division can assist the quality of life of the citizens and occupants of Montgomery County and surrounding counties. For this reason, Montgomery County, Texas should implement a dedicated law enforcement division for specialized park patrol, patrolling park projects, nature preserves, and to be utilized for special calls for service.

TABLE OF CONTENTS

	Page
Abstract	
Introduction	1
Position	4
Counter Position	8
Conclusion.	10
References	12

INTRODUCTION

Montgomery County and other entities in Montgomery County have dedicated a large amount of property, money, and county resources toward the dedication of parks, green space, and nature preserves. The reasoning for parks in any kind of rural and urban settings is multiple. Studies have shown that safe parks can save money. A study conducted in Boston, Massachusetts determined that by offering free or inexpensive recreation, the economic value of direct park use was 354 million dollars (Schwartz, 2009). Water resulting from storms and precipitation can be absorbed by trees and other types of vegetation. This process naturally saves money in treating this storm water. Due to this, communities can save money on storm water waste management costs. An example of this is in Philadelphia, Pennsylvania. A study showed that Philadelphia city parks saved an estimated 5.9 million dollars, in one year, in storm water waste management cost (Schwartz, 2009).

There is also a health benefit of exercise in parks. According to Schwartz, (2009), a study in Sacramento, California “calculated 19.9 million dollars in medical cost savings by residents, because of active recreation in parks” (para.14). In addition, trees remove pollutants from the air. Schwartz (2009) stated that a study in Washington, D.C. demonstrated that “4,839 acres of tree cover in 7,999 acres of Washington, D.C. parkland produced savings of 1.13 million dollars in air pollutant removal” (para. 16).

Parks can also add to a government entities tax base, as property near parks achieves greater market value. In a study in Boulder, Colorado, it demonstrated that properties along the curtilage of a new greenbelt increased in value by 32% over properties that were located 3,200 feet away (Sherer, 2006). This same study showed

that this same greenbelt was paid off in three years' time. This was as a result of a 150,000 dollar annual increase in proximate property taxes that was due to the creation of the green belt itself (Sherer, 2006). Another example is San Francisco, California's Golden Gate Park. Revenue from property owners who live close to California's Golden Gate Park altogether pay five to ten million in property taxes each year (Benotto, 2002). According to the Benefits of Parks, According to the Neighborhood Parks Council (2010), "cities with safe and plentiful parks have a reportedly easier time attracting businesses to relocate there, because many companies want to be able to offer their employees a better quality of life" (para. 6). In a study about the benefits of parks, reportedly large high tech companies seek out establishing offices in locations that have an abundance in natural resources within a city or surrounding it (Sherer, 2006). In the same study, the large high tech companies reported that desirable employees, who the company wished to recruit, cared as much about their quality of life as the salary they made at their job (Sherer, 2006).

The reason a park is opened is rarely economic though. Parks can improve an individual's physical and psychological strength; they can strengthen community relationships, be a place for education, and make neighborhoods more attractive places to live and work. Trees and plants take away air pollutions, help reduce water pollution, and absorb carbon dioxide, which reduces global warming. Parks can assist in social and community development. Parks can be used as places for exercise and sporting events. Parks, and especially preserves, can have other purposes. Examples of these purposes are preserving forests and bottomland, providing home to wildlife, insects, and other species, reducing flooding, and protecting natural resources like water.

The need for parks and open spaces as demonstrated from the above information is substantial. With Montgomery County contributing property, money, and county resources toward these parks, green spaces, nature preserves, and park projects in Montgomery County, there is a need for a dedicated law enforcement division to patrol these areas, enforcing state laws, park rules, county ordinances, and to protect the welfare and security of the occupants of these parks. Additionally, with the continued number of parks, green spaces, nature, and park projects in Montgomery County increasing, there will be even a greater need for this dedicated law enforcement division. Montgomery County additionally needs this dedicated law enforcement division for specialized patrol to assist other agencies such as search and rescue, fire services, asset protection, and other services.

Parks can be defined as a, “safe park” or a “risky park” (Hilborn, 2009, para. 14). Hilborn (2009) defined a “safe” urban park as “a dynamic place where the design, maintenance, and policing of the park work together so that the general public perceives the park as a safe place, want to go to the park regularly, and spends their optional time in the park engaged in valued activities” (para. 14). In safe parks, unreported and reported crime is limited. Different groups utilize the park for multiple uses. The majority of activities inside the park are for lawful means. The community and individuals who use the park take ownership in it. The community and individuals will ensure that the park is utilized as intended and will take action and contact park management and/or law enforcement personal if necessary. Hilborn (2009) defined a “risky” urban park as “a place where crime and disorder has become the norm to the degree that local users consider the park unsafe, try to avoid being in the park, and limit their time in the park to

necessary activities” (para. 15). A risky park is additionally viewed as a location where criminal activity and disorderly conduct occurs, such as criminal mischief, vandalism, littering, animal defecation, the use of alcohol and drugs, and acts or displays of sexual acts have become dominant activities for the park. It is extremely important to the community, the county, and the individuals who lawfully use the parks, green spaces, and nature preserves that they can be referred to as a “safe” park as defined above. Ultimately, Montgomery County, Texas should implement a dedicated law enforcement division for specialized park patrol, patrolling park projects and nature preserves, and to be utilized for specialized calls for service.

POSITION

Montgomery County should implement this specialized park division for several reasons. One of these reasons is to enforce state laws, county ordinances, and park rules. Currently county parks, green spaces, and nature preserves are patrolled by the Montgomery County Sheriff’s Office and Constable’s Offices. The Woodlands Township does provide a “Park Ranger” division, which patrols and works in parks in the area known as the Woodlands Township. These Woodlands Township Park Rangers assist in security services for the Parks and Recreation Department. The Parks and Recreation Department operates and maintains nearly 210 miles of hike and bike paths, 135 parks, 14 swimming pools and more than 1,800 acres of open space” (The Woodlands Township, n.d., para. 1). This non-law enforcement security entity patrols and acts as supplemental security to the parks inside of the Woodlands Township only. Calls for service in the parks are dispatched to the Sheriff’s Office unless inside of a contact for service by the Constable’s Office.

Although the parks are patrolled occasionally, due to calls for service and the need for police services in other parts of the county, chances are that parks will only see regular patrol in the parks that have notable incidents. If there are notable incidents in a certain park, or these problems in a park have become so bad that the public demands a visible police reaction, chances are there will be an increase in visible and covert police presence. With a dedicated park division, the main duty of this division will be the patrolling and welfare of these parks. The visibility factor of this patrolling division alone will deter criminal activity and anti-social and unacceptable activity. Law enforcement deter crime by increasing the perception that criminals will be caught and punished for violations ("Five things," 2016, para 6). With the dedicated park division, enforcement of laws, county ordinances, and park rules will promote and increase legal and acceptable activities. Dedicated park law enforcement can become familiarized with the areas inside of these parks, green spaces, and nature preserves.

Crime prevention through environmental design (CEPTED) is extremely difficult to sell to parks, green spaces, and especially nature preserve designers and managers because of the desire to keep several of these locations as close as possible to how they can be found in a natural setting. Due to a parks boundary lines being undefined and complicated, policing parks can be challenging, in contrast to buildings and streets (Hilborn, 2009). A division that patrols these locations regularly can become familiar with these unusual settings. With visible patrol and enforcement in these parks, it allows potential offenders to realize that law enforcement will not ignore or tolerate certain behaviors. With this visible patrol and enforcement, it lets potential offenders also know that there is a risk of being detected, and unless they wish to face

consequences, these risks need to be avoided. These units can be used for specialized patrol for laws that are difficult to enforce with regular patrol units.

An example of this is illegal use of all terrain vehicles in these parks, greenways, along and in waterways, and in nature preserves. These vehicles can cause large monetary losses, can interfere with the natural progression of nature, and can hinder other occupants of the parks from enjoying themselves in these locations. With a greater chance of law enforcement detecting these violations, and taking proper action against the violators of this behavior, there is a greater deterrent for this behavior.

Another example is poachers and illegal hunters in these parks, greenbelts, and nature preserves. When regular patrol is given this type of call or information, they are limited by equipment, knowledge of terrain, and accessibility to the areas in question. A trained and specially equipped division would be able to address this problem with greater ease, take appropriate actions, and have a better outcome. These appropriate actions could deter future violations and act as a deterrent. While the above examples are a need for this specialized division, it demonstrates the need for this this type of division for the enforcement of state laws, county ordinances, and park rules. This will serve as a deterrent of these violations and further act as a deterrent of future violators.

Another reason why Montgomery County should implement a specialized park division is that the unit can perform specialized tasks with other agencies. The unit would need to be trained in the use of specialized equipment. This includes but is not limited to all terrain vehicles, water rescue equipment, and night imaging equipment. The specialized units training, knowledge of parks and different terrains, and unique equipment make them a perfect match to assist other agencies. An example of this

would be in search and rescue operations. The park unit's specialized equipment and training is an asset in such an endeavor. The park unit's all-terrain vehicles can be utilized to get to other locations that other vehicles cannot. The Montgomery County Sheriff's Office has already used these all-terrain vehicles in assisting the fire department in transporting firefighters and equipment to fire locations in parks and wooded areas and was even used in assisting emergency medical technicians in transporting a back boarded patient from a plane crash location. These all-terrain vehicles have also been used to locate people needing assistance in parks and locating and transporting injured individuals. They can additionally be utilized to catch and prevent illegal use of all-terrain vehicles near Texas riverbeds and surrounding areas. All-terrain vehicle in Texas riverbeds has grown in popularity in recent years (Sweeney, 2005), which has caused the State of Texas to act and pass Senate Bill 155 to protect Texas riverbeds and surrounding areas from damage from vehicles.

These specialized units can be utilized in working along with recreational agencies involved in the parks and nature preserves and can be utilized in public relations and education events. This relationship between these divisions opens up communication between the two. Due to this relationship, the recreational agency will feel more comfortable calling law enforcement. Knowing what to do and who to talk to makes it much easier to solve problems (Kiestler, Roscop, & Carlson, 2000). While working with the public and recreational agencies, law enforcement benefits from a "captive audience" and are able to share the message with the community they serve. These specialized units can be used during special events in the parks as both a visual presence and public relation tool. These park units can assist other county, city, and

state, and federal agencies in numerous roles. Additionally, with the public trusting the safety and security of these locations, more people may use these facilities for their intended needs. These individuals will take ownership of these parks, and they become natural guardians in these parks. This, in itself, can make these parks safer places (Hilborn, 2009).

COUNTER POSITION

A counter position that could be presented in reference to the implementation of specialized law enforcement park division in Montgomery County would be the need to dedicate money and resources for these positions and equipment. The foreseeable argument would be that the money requested for these positions and equipment would be better dedicated to general patrol positions inside of the county.

While there is no doubt that there is a need for additional patrol positions in the county, for several reasons as listed above, the need for a specialized park division needs to be secured. The need for the park division should be looked at as an addition to the needs of the park. The money secured for this division should be looked at as an expenditure of the parks and not necessarily the law enforcement entity. Although the park division officers would be peace officers, they should be recognized as a direct expense to the park. These officers would be used to protect these valuable assets. While the large majority of the parks, green belts, and nature preserves in Montgomery County are recognized as extremely safe and secure, without regular patrol, there is a danger that these parks can get a reputation as “risky parks.” Once a park gets a reputation of being a “risky park,” the park becomes a place or risk to be avoided. The positive reasons for parks can become negative ones. It is essential to keep these

parks safe, productive, and a safe place for individuals to congregate. Without these specialized park patrols, property taxes around current parks could drop and parks, green spaces, and nature preserves could be damaged due to criminal acts. The parks intended and legal means could be replaced by the anti-social, criminal, and inappropriate means. The need for this specialized division should be looked upon as an investment in the parks and not a hindrance to patrol acquisitions.

Another counter position that could be presented against the implementation of specialized law enforcement park division in Montgomery County could be the view of creating a cheaper non-law enforcement division in the parks. While creating and hiring a division of non-law enforcement personnel would possibly be cheaper, these non-law enforcement individuals' abilities to take action in criminal episodes would be limited. There are certain patrol aspects that these non-law enforcement personnel could not perform. An example of this could be from the mentioned above all-terrain vehicle patrol. Non-law enforcement personnel could not stop or detain all-terrain vehicle operators. Non-law enforcement personnel could not take appropriate action for law violators, as they do not have the authority to enforce this action, and, therefore, they cannot be a deterrent for future violations.

Another example from above would be illegal hunting. Not only would this non-law enforcement entity not be able to take action, other than summoning law enforcement, it would be downright dangerous for these non-law enforcement personnel to engage these violators. There is a belief that soft enforcement in parks (uniformed non-armed) is preferable to hard enforcement (uniformed armed). Even in a study suggesting the use of soft enforcement, it is referenced that there is additionally a need

for hard enforcement in the parks due to park goers' beliefs that soft enforcement representatives have "no real authority" or inactions or idle threats by soft enforcement officials can lead to worse complicity (Pendleton, 1998). There could also be liability issues with a non-law-enforcement entity either taking action against violators or even not taking action. A non-law enforcement entity could supplement a law enforcement park division, but in no way does it take away the need for a law enforcement division.

RECOMMENDATION

Due to the above listed and other factors, Montgomery County, Texas should implement a dedicated law enforcement division for specialized park patrol, patrolling park projects, nature preserves, and to be utilized for specialized calls for service. This plan should be implemented, assets secured for the positions, and specialized equipment and planning for the starting of this specialized division started. Policy and procedure will have to be addressed by the law enforcement entity acquiring this division. This law enforcement division in the parks, green space, and nature preserves will enforce state laws, county ordinances, and park rules with specialized equipment and training. The division will be utilized to assist with search and rescue, fire department calls, and medical assistance calls. The division can protect these great assets, the ecosystem, and the property and wildlife in these parks and preserves. The division will provide a deterrent to crime and keep county parks, green spaces, and nature preserves safe and secure.

This paper demonstrated that the dedicated money and resources for this park division should be looked at as park expenditure and not in any way be observed as a hindrance to the number of positions in the patrol division. Additionally, the dedicated

money and resources for this park division can be offset by the money that these parks bring in by position points stated above. The paper also demonstrated that a non-law enforcement entity to patrol the parks could not replace a dedicated law enforcement division. Not only would this law enforcement division greatly benefit Montgomery County, but it will be a demonstration to the law enforcement community as to the benefits this dedicated division can serve to medium to large law enforcement agencies with similar need as Montgomery County.

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