**2023 Operating Budget: Finance Committee Amendment**

**Amendment Title:** Create Parks Volunteer Coordinator (1.0FTE)

**Agency:** Parks

**Sponsor(s):** Alder Figueroa Cole

**Amendment Narrative**

The proposed amendment would create 1.0 additional Parks FTE

**Amendment Analysis**

As well documented through the work of various institutions and organizations, including The United Nations, Independent Sector and National Recreation & Parks Association (NRPA), among countless others, volunteers are critical to the social, physical, emotional, environmental and economic well-being of their communities, as are parks. The United Nations [State of World’s Volunteerism Report](http://unv-swvr2018.org/), estimates that each year the work of “1 billion volunteers around the world are equal to that of [109 million full-time workers](http://unv-swvr2018.org/#scale-scope).” Volunteering provides opportunities for connection with community and natural environment, while strengthening overall sense of ownership and belonging within the spaces and community. The City of Madison Parks system was built on the foundation of volunteerism and philanthropy dating back to the start of the Park & Pleasure Drive Association. Parks founders and following generations recognized that connection with the natural environment is essential to growing future stewards of the land that would work to protect, preserve and grow the park and open spaces that the community deeply values. Yet, with over 275 parks and 5600 acres of parkland, Madison Parks does not have a dedicated Volunteer Coordinator to support these efforts.

A Successful Volunteer Program:

As defined by the Cooperation and Coordination Agreement between Olbrich Botanical Society, Inc. and The City of Madison (Leg File 44551, Res-16-00783), The City of Madison funds a Volunteer Coordinator that supports all programmatic needs at Olbrich Botanical Gardens. The volunteer program at Olbrich Botanical Gardens has demonstrated its value for over a decade. Through the volunteer program, with a dedicated staff person to lead and coordinate the program, an average of 575 individuals per year have provided an average of 26,026 hours of volunteer time annually (data from 2009 – 2021, excluding 2020). Volunteers assist in a wide variety of capacities, from greeters and gift shop workers, to gardeners and class facilitators, all to make the visitor experience at Olbrich Botanical Gardens world-class. The number of hours provided by these volunteers is equivalent to 12 full time staff, every year. If these volunteers were paid at [Independent Sector’s](https://independentsector.org/resource/value-of-volunteer-time/) Wisconsin 2021 value of volunteer hours of $27.87, they would have contributed over $725,000 in staff time on an annual basis.  Measured from 2009 to 2021, over $9 million in volunteer hours have offset costs at Olbrich Botanical Gardens.

In order to have such a high number of volunteers, and a retention rate that has remained above 84% for the last five years, the volunteer experience must be positive and rewarding for the volunteer. This is demonstrated through the fact that from 2009 to 2019, the number of volunteer hours grew by 8%, and while there was a significant dip during 2020. As restrictions due to COVID have eased, volunteers have been returning to Olbrich to serve.

The Olbrich volunteer program has been an integral piece of the Gardens’ success. The role of volunteers and the significant labor hours contributed towards the Integrated Pest Management Program have allowed the Gardens to utilize a variety of alternative land management strategies with meaningful results towards sustainability and resiliency measures, significantly reducing pesticide usage over the last decade within the Gardens. Garden scouts, an excellent example of Community Science, have been integrated into the gardens to monitor for pests, but also capture data on species of concern, such as the Zebra Swallowtail, which was spotted in the gardens in 2022. Olbrich has also successfully demonstrated how relationships with local businesses can cultivate mutually beneficial partnerships, as employees of these companies are paid to volunteer at the Gardens, which according to  [NRPA](https://www.nrpa.org/our-work/partnerships/initiatives/heart-your-park/), boosts employee morale and engagement.

Current Capacity within Parks System:

In Madison Parks today, volunteer coordination is less than 10% of the Recreation Services Coordinator’s job. It does not receive the coordinator’s full attention, and more recently has that person’s attention has been pulled to higher needs of community programming within the parks. In 2019, approximately 1,609 volunteers provided 4,732 hours of volunteer work in Madison Parks. Regular volunteer opportunities include Earth Day Challenge, flower garden volunteers, Adopt Ice Rink program, various Friends groups, dog park cleanup, Ride the Drive, Volunteer-led nature walks and disc golf volunteer days. Madison Parks receives requests from groups, individuals, businesses, and organizations seeking volunteer opportunities in parks, but the groups vary in size, ages, background and in which park they would like to volunteer. Projects often include important work such as invasive removals, trash pickup, spreading mulch, beach cleanup, weeding, and shoreline cleanup. Often staff are not aware of volunteer work happening in parks due to the size of the system, resulting in work not completed to established standards, with proper permissions or accounting of hours worked. There have been limited opportunities for engagement around Community Science despite the fact that there are many initiatives that Parks and the City are pursuing that are ripe with opportunity. Without having staff dedicated to overseeing volunteer efforts, coordination of projects can be delayed, difficult and less rewarding for volunteers than is optimal.

Intentional Approach to Volunteer Coordination:

A dedicated Volunteer Coordinator within the Parks System would be responsible for overseeing all aspects of the Parks Volunteer Program. This individual would respond to requests, recruit new volunteers, and strengthen relationships with Friends of groups. This individual would also collaborate with staff and stakeholders to develop an annual volunteer project plan that will include opportunities for land management, programming support of parks activities and educational events along with identifying projects that help to further a variety of initiatives (ie. Mayor’s Monarch Pledge, Bird City and Bee City USA) and community science. This position would coordinate project-specific needs in conjunction with other Parks staff. In addition, they would implement policies and procedures, obtain documentation, conduct initial and annual background checks and organize data of the volunteer work completed as required by [APM 2-54](https://www.cityofmadison.com/mayor/apm/2-54.pdf).

The Parks system continues to grow, as does the need to address social disparities and climate change. Parks plays an integral role in working towards solutions on both fronts. As budgetary resources face more constraints, the need to leverage the power of people within the community to be proud, responsible stewards of the land and support culturally relevant programming within parks will be critical in advancing the goals of the City and Parks Division. Following a model similar to the successful Olbrich Volunteer Program, the Parks Volunteer Coordinator will enhance the overall volunteer experience, and actively seek to connect more people to nature, community and the spaces around them. Under this individual’s intentional coordination, the Parks Division will seek to increase volunteer hours in parks to 15,000 hours per year by 2025 (an estimated annual value of $418,000) and increase volunteerism by 4,000 hours annually in subsequent years.

[State of World’s Volunteerism Report](http://unv-swvr2018.org/): <http://unv-swvr2018.org/>

<https://independentsector.org/resource/value-of-volunteer-time/>

<https://www.nrpa.org/parks-recreation-magazine/2019/may/citizen-science-volunteers-vital-to-parks/>

<https://www.nrpa.org/blog/building-resilient-communities-through-volunteerism/>

<https://www.nrpa.org/our-work/partnerships/initiatives/heart-your-park/>

<https://www.nwf.org/-/media/Documents/PDFs/Mayors-Monarch-Pledge/Mayors-Monarch-Pledge-Action-Item>