FOCUS ON
Our Parks Maintenance Team: Keeping parks clean and safe for everyone to enjoy

– July 3, 2014

Ask a homeowner why it’s important to keep the grass cut, and he’ll concede that it’s not just about looking tidy. Humans of all sizes know it’s tough to snag a fly ball when the grass is knee-deep. And every dog knows you can’t do a decent backflip to catch a Frisbee in mud. There are practical reasons besides the aesthetic and safety issues.

When your yard covers 10,000 acres, this is a much bigger deal. That’s what our Parks and Recreation maintenance unit faces every day. Grounds Maintenance Manager Eric Horne makes sure 175 sports fields in 46 Gwinnett County parks are mowed, watered, aerated, fertilized, and weeded. His staff performs major turf renovations on about 40 fields a year due to heavy use. You’re starting to see more artificial turf fields in our parks to help reduce those annual maintenance costs.

“Our park staff has always strived for excellence,” Horne said. “They do the basics correctly and build on that core. In the words of Colin Powell, ‘If you are going to achieve excellence in big things, you develop the habit in little matters. Excellence is not an exception, it is a prevailing attitude.’ This attitude of excellence is empirically evident as you travel through our parks.”

Turf care is just a small part of the equation. Horne’s staff also maintains 27 miles of fences and spends 30,000 hours a year picking up litter. Last year, they recycled 200 cubic yards of plastic bottles and other recyclable litter.

Every morning at every park, the first order of business is cleaning the restrooms and picking up trash from 64 pavilions, 38 concessions buildings, seven skate parks, seven dog parks, activity buildings, and community recreation and senior centers. Not to mention cleaning up 112 courts for tennis, basketball, and sand volleyball.

There are 94 full-time and 11 part-time employees who also check 69 playground units and 130 miles of trails for safety issues every day. Safety is always the primary focus, with more formal inspections done weekly and monthly to prevent injuries in Gwinnett parks.

In winter, training classes sharpen employees’ skills at everything from CPR/first aid and chain saw safety to playground inspection procedures and pesticide application safety.

The maintenance staff is organized into two groups: grounds maintenance and skilled trades. Led by Support Services Manager David McGaughey, the skilled trades group includes certified and licensed plumbers and electricians who maintain the buildings, interior, exterior, and sports lighting, 17 pools at nine aquatic centers, and irrigation equipment.
The annual budget for all this is $9.2 million, which comes from a separate recreation fund in the County budget. Volunteers, especially in the youth athletic associations, provide countless hours of help. Support also comes from local companies, churches, and the volunteer-led Gwinnett Parks Foundation that organizes fundraising programs and events throughout the county.

“Gwinnett residents love their parks,” Parks and Recreation Operations Division Director Tina Fleming said. “And they are able to enjoy them every day because our dedicated parks maintenance staff and wonderful volunteers make sure our parks are well-kept and safe.”

Gwinnett County can boast that 6 percent of the 437 square miles of land in the county is protected from development in the form of greenspace, park lands, forests, lakes, ponds, streams, wetlands, and meadows. That’s about 20 acres for every current resident.

Parks staff members work to maintain a healthy balance between human and environmental needs, providing sustainable habitats for a variety of plants, birds, and animals. This leads to cleaner parks, increased biodiversity, and better water quality. Dr. Mark Patterson, conservation district coordinator, developed an award-winning waterfowl management plan that encourages the public not to feed wildlife in the parks, which in turn helps the maintenance team keep the parks cleaner.

In addition to the amazing job the maintenance team does on their own, they are a part of the larger Gwinnett County Parks and Recreation division, which won the coveted Gold Medal Award in 2008 from the National Recreation and Park Association, making the County’s park system officially best-in-class in America. This year, we’ve been named a finalist again, so everyone is working extra hard to earn a repeat of that honor. Be sure to help us celebrate this achievement during National Parks and Recreation Month this July! It’s a great time to get out in the real world and commune with nature in our well-maintained, award-winning county parks!

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