



COUNTY OF SONOMA

575 ADMINISTRATION
DRIVE, ROOM 102A
SANTA ROSA, CA 95403

SUMMARY REPORT

Agenda Date: 7/16/2024

To: Sonoma County Board of Supervisors
Department or Agency Name(s): Regional Parks
Staff Name and Phone Number: Bert Whitaker, 707-565-2041
Vote Requirement: Majority
Supervisory District(s): Countywide

Title:

Adopt an Ordinance changing the designation of Park Rangers from Peace Officers to Public Officers

Recommended Action:

Adopt the proposed ordinance changing the designation of Park Rangers from Peace Officers to Public Officers under Penal Code 836.5 with Powers of Arrest and Citation as Implemented in Department Policies and Procedures (introduced on May 21, 2024).

Executive Summary:

Staff recommends that your Board adopt the proposed ordinance changing the designation of Park Rangers from Peace Officers to Public Officers. Currently, Park Rangers are designated as Peace Officers pursuant to California Penal Code sections 830 and 830.31. To align with Regional Parks vision and under the authority of California Penal Code Section 836.5, the Director of Regional Parks seeks to change the Park Ranger designation from Peace Officer to Public Officer with the continued authority to arrest and issue citations for misdemeanors committed within a County of Sonoma regional park and within the Public Officers presence, but with the current intent that Department policy will limit arrest powers. The proposed ordinance would be effective 30 days from the date of adoption.

The introduction and first reading of this ordinance occurred on May 21, 2024.

Discussion:

On January 27, 1975 the Board of Supervisors adopted Resolution No. 47787 authorizing the Director of Regional Parks and Park Rangers to arrest and issue citations. On July 8, 1983 Regional Parks issues a policy stating that Park Rangers shall be considered Peace Officers pursuant to California Penal Code sections 830 and 830.31.

Regional Parks is proposing to update its Park Ranger job series to a Public Officer model for existing and future employees whereby increasing recruitment potential by eliminating peace officer training requirements, status, and law enforcement duties while preserving statutory immunity and maintaining employee safety.

The Regional Park's vision of the Park Ranger is one of community engagement, visibility, outreach and a welcoming presence within the parks, trails, campgrounds, and other facilities operated by Sonoma County Regional Parks (Department) the department. The Park Ranger should be a steward of the environment and

an expert on the geography and recreational opportunities within the Regional Parks. They should provide a welcoming environment that provides safety through presence and the ability to respond to medical emergencies. Park Rangers should have the ability to enforce rules and regulations, write administrative/parking citations and utilize local law enforcement for enforcement actions against illegal activities in the park system.

The key distinction between a Peace Officer and Public Officer lies in the employees' primary functions. Peace Officers primary focus and duty is on law enforcement and maintaining public safety, whereas Public Officers encompass a broader spectrum of roles, including but not limited to law enforcement as applicable through ordinance and policy and procedure. Regional Parks philosophy, mission and the daily services provided by Park Rangers can better be defined and articulated to the public through a specific county-level ordinance and policy as a Public Officer where the primary duty is not law enforcement.

Transitioning to the Public Officer designation rather than Peace Officer is desirable at this time for the following reasons:

1. Public Officer status removes barriers to hiring which promotes equity and diversity. A major barrier to hiring otherwise qualified candidates is the rigor and length of the Peace Officer background investigation.
2. An additional barrier to hire will be removed by replacing the current requirement for a Park Ranger focused National Park Service law enforcement training academy, which is no longer available locally, with a custom training program for Park Rangers. This also provides the department the opportunity to align the training with the updated status and policies of park rangers designated as Public Officers.
3. Public officer status provides clarity on Park Rangers scope of work and legal protections when working within the scope of the Park Ranger authority. Since law enforcement is not the primary duty of a Public Officer, through ordinance and policies and procedures, Regional Parks can clearly articulate what level of rule and law enforcement is applicable while still providing civil protections against the possibility of a perceived detention during the issuance of a citation.
4. The Public Officer status clarifies that Park Rangers are not park police, do not have the ability to arrest or transport, and that law enforcement is not the primary duty. Additionally, Department policies will clarify specific roles when a public officer may use certain powers afforded them in California Penal Code 836.5. Regional Parks has always articulated a low level of law enforcement philosophy, however, there is confusion from the public, staff and other law enforcement agencies about which tools, activities and equipment Park Rangers have with their current peace officer status.
5. Public officer retains the public safety role and identity for Park Rangers. Public officers may still be called upon to help with evacuations, use of hi/lo sirens and move behind boundaries during emergencies to access parks as necessary and as directed.
6. The public officer model increases opportunities for staff mobility within the Department. Reducing the barriers of the law enforcement academy and Peace Officer background will facilitate more opportunities for movement between divisions within Regional Parks, creating an increase in transferable knowledge and skills that benefit the public and the Park Ranger workforce.

Strategic Plan:

N/A

Racial Equity:

Was this item identified as an opportunity to apply the Racial Equity Toolkit?

No

Prior Board Actions:

May 21, 2024: Introduced, read title, and waived further reading of a proposed ordinance changing the designation of Park Rangers from Peace Officers to Public Officers.

FISCAL SUMMARY

Expenditures	FY23-24 Adopted	FY24-25 Projected	FY25-26 Projected
Budgeted Expenses			
Additional Appropriation Requested			
Total Expenditures			
Funding Sources			
General Fund/WA GF			
State/Federal			
Fees/Other			
Use of Fund Balance			
General Fund Contingencies			
Total Sources			

Narrative Explanation of Fiscal Impacts:

None

Staffing Impacts:			
Position Title (Payroll Classification)	Monthly Salary Range (A-I Step)	Additions (Number)	Deletions (Number)

Narrative Explanation of Staffing Impacts (If Required):

None

Attachments:

Ordinance

Agenda Date: 7/16/2024

Related Items "On File" with the Clerk of the Board:

None