



## COUNTY OF SONOMA

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

### SUMMARY REPORT

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**Agenda Date:** 5/21/2024

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**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:**

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

**Recommended Action:**

Adopt a Resolution Introducing, Reading the Title of and Waiving Further Reading of a 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 and direct staff to schedule the proposed ordinance for consideration of adoption on June 4, 2024.

**Executive Summary:**

Staff recommends that the Board adopt a Resolution introducing, reading the title, and waiving further reading of a 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 owned or managed regional park and within the Public Officers presence, but with the current intent that Department policy will limit the arrest powers. After introduction, the proposed ordinance would be scheduled for consideration of adoption on June 4, 2024, with an effective date of 30 days from the date of adoption.

**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 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 and 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 law enforcement and maintaining public safety, whereas a Public Officers primary duty and focus is not law enforcement but encompasses a broader spectrum of roles and duties. 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 customized 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 regulation 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

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that benefit the public and the Park Ranger workforce.

The County is engaging in the necessary meetings and negotiations with the affected bargaining unit representatives in accordance with State law.

**Strategic Plan:**

N/A

**Racial Equity:**

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

No

**Prior Board Actions:**

None

**FISCAL SUMMARY**

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

**Narrative Explanation of Fiscal Impacts:**

None

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

**Narrative Explanation of Staffing Impacts (If Required):**

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None

**Attachments:**

Resolution

Ordinance

**Related Items “On File” with the Clerk of the Board:**

None