

October 26, 2020

To: Mayor Jenny Durkan
Council President González
Councilmember Lisa Herbold
Councilmember Debora Juarez
Councilmember Andrew Lewis
Councilmember Tammy Morales
Councilmember Teresa Mosqueda
Councilmember Alex Pedersen
Councilmember Kshama Sawant
Councilmember Dan Strauss

Cc: Seattle Parks & Recreation Superintendent Jesús Aguirre
Seattle Human Services Department Interim Director Jason Johnson
Seattle Police Department Interim Chief Adrian Diaz
Seattle Department of Transportation Director Sam Zimbabwe
Seattle Department of Planning and Community Development Director Sam Assefa
Seattle Public Utilities General Manager & CEO Mami Hara
Seattle Office of Economic Development Director Bobby Lee
Seattle Department of Neighborhoods Director Andrés Mantilla
Seattle City Attorney, Peter Holmes
Seattle Board of Park Commissioners
Seattle Park District Oversight Committee

Dear Mayor Durkan and Seattle City Councilmembers,

Our parks and public spaces are vital to the health and well-being of everyone in our city. Years of investment and planning have gone into making our urban outdoor spaces as safe and welcoming as possible for all. Unfortunately, the parks and public spaces in our city are experiencing a spiraling public health and public safety crisis that requires urgent action.

Now more than ever, safe, welcoming city parks and playgrounds are essential to the physical and mental health of Seattle residents — many of whom don't have outdoor space of their own or are now responsible for daytime activities with their children.

Because of COVID-19, regular maintenance, programming and events in these parks have been suspended, leaving them without critical management or the usual anchor of positive social activity. Consequently, our parks and public spaces have become dangerous and chaotic — exactly the opposite of what people need at this moment. And acres of park space have been closed to the public because they have been closed by the City, vandalized or are inaccessible for use to the residents of Seattle.

A quick survey of several parks and public spaces reveals a host of major problems:

Albert Davis Park

Less than $\frac{3}{4}$ of an acre, Albert Davis Park is nestled between the Public Library and the Lake City Community Center. It is one of the few parks in Lake City and has been

completely unusable over the last several months due to an extensive encampment of nearly 30 tents. Located in the civic core of the neighborhood and surrounded by single- and multi-family unit housing, this park has sadly been overtaken by pervasive drug dealing and usage, violence and people that are exploiting or unhoused neighbors. Human waste, used needles, trash, rodents, property damage and threatening behavior are all constant issues at the park. These conditions are unsafe and unhealthy, especially for our most vulnerable neighbors.

Ballard Commons Park

Located in the Ballard HUB Urban Village, this park is surrounded by dense multi-family residential and an adjacent neighborhood business district. This spring, Ballard Commons Park was overrun with illegal tent encampments and was the site of a Hepatitis-A outbreak. After months of work by the City's Navigation Team, and more than 25 separate visits from outreach workers, park residents were offered shelter and the encampment was dispersed with a promise from the City that the park would be "held," free of illegal tent encampments. The encampments have returned and grown to more than 40 tents/structures. The park and nearby public infrastructure is unusable, and the Ballard community feels abandoned by the City.

Bell Street Park

Once envisioned as the heart of public life in Belltown, this park continues to suffer from damaged infrastructure and chronic public safety issues. Plantings are neglected, and rodent infestation continues. Scarce parks resources are cited for lagging maintenance and response times. This park is meant to be a welcoming green reprieve in a dense urban neighborhood, but it has become a forbidding and unhealthy eyesore.

Cal Anderson Park

This seven-acre park is meant to serve the more than 11,000 people who live within a five-minute walk, but the park remains closed to the public, following a summer during which it was occupied as part of CHOP. Some groups of protesters have continued to live in and damage portions of the park, including the newly remodeled community shelterhouse. Other residents in the park exhibit serious behavioral health issues and present a danger to public health and safety. In September, a well-known prolific offender died tragically in the park after murdering his female companion. Unaddressed broken glass regularly harms the paws of neighborhood dogs. Major fires, incidents of violence and threatening behavior toward neighbors — including seniors and children — have continued unabated. Critical infrastructure, including lights and bathrooms, has been damaged and not repaired.

City Hall Park

This park, which was significantly upgraded with public dollars in 2019, has become a sprawling encampment. It now houses many of the 75 tents that are now dominating the streetscape of Pioneer Square. Neighborhood residents have reported major public health issues in addition to violent and threatening behavior in and around the park.

Denny Park

Numerous neighbors have reached out in frustration because this park, while technically open, is no longer usable or safe. Neighbors have been mugged. A police car was set on fire with the officer inside. The playground, planting beds and other park areas have been

overtaken by a growing tent encampment. The irrigation and watering equipment has been destroyed, and newly planted flowers and bushes have died. Police have discovered a stolen-goods network in the encampment. Local and national news coverage has captured these unflattering stories emanating from Seattle's oldest park.

Freeway Park

Freeway Park is experiencing a significant uptick in vandalism and trash which, coupled with a decrease in maintenance, threatens public safety as well as the health of the landscape. The historic concrete walls and fountains are covered in ever-increasing graffiti. Several of the wooden benches are in splinters — completely unusable. The Canyon and Cascade Fountains are filled with litter. Both the trees and the understory are suffering from lack of watering and/or broken irrigation and most beds are overrun with weeds. Despite work orders and regular maintenance reports to the City, these issues remain unresolved.

Gateway Park North, Georgetown

As Georgetown's only access to the Duwamish River, Gateway Park North is one of only a few open spaces for residents in what is largely an industrial neighborhood. Over the past two years, tent encampments, drug use, poor park maintenance, trash, vandalism and threatening behavior have all contributed to make this park dangerous and unusable by the community that spent so much time and energy in recent years working to improve it.

Hing Hay Park, Donnie Chin International Children's Park, Kobe Terrace

Parks in the Chinatown-International District are a refuge for seniors, families with children, and others in low-income housing. None are being maintained. Regular trash clearing has stopped, as has pressure-washing, maintenance of play structures and exercise equipment, and removal of graffiti, human waste and used needles. Residents, customers of neighborhood businesses and visitors have been harassed and assaulted by people experiencing mental illness. The City has not responded to repeated requests to maintain outdoor seating and resume concierge service in Hing Hay Park.

Junction Plaza Park

Junction Plaza Park is the only green space in the West Seattle Junction. Encampments, people experiencing behavioral health issues, a marked increase in open drug dealing and use, and threatening behavior to community members have all rendered the park inhospitable to the neighborhood. Businesses already grappling with a loss of income due to COVID and the West Seattle Bridge closure are now faced with increased theft and concerned customers who are unwilling to enter the business district. Debris, beer and liquor bottles, human waste and needles litter the landscaping. The park has been completely abandoned by the City.

Occidental Square Park

Park Ambassadors working in Occidental Square report that this space has become a dangerous place. The new children's play area was recently set on fire and permanently damaged. The City is looking to modify the design of the park's new pavilion by eliminating a planned overhead canopy, to reduce the risk of encampments. Without the canopy, the socially distanced activities planned for this fall and winter will not be possible. The success of the public-private partnership that revitalized this park over the past several years has been almost completely undone.

Westlake Park

Westlake Park is seeing increasing violence toward Park Ambassadors, who arrive most days to find new graffiti, cut or broken locks and cables, litter, biohazard material, and damage to or theft of park amenities, which includes the informational booth, tables, chairs, flowers as well as the play space. Reporting of these issues to City staff results in little or no action. Public safety is an issue even during the day, when park staff now feel vulnerable.

Williams Park

Even in such a small space, there are major ongoing issues with human waste, garbage and needles, along the sidewalks at the park and in the park itself. People are walking around in the nude, urinating, defecating and openly shooting up with injectable drugs throughout the day, with high levels of impact on the surrounding community. There is a noticeable increase in rats in the park and surrounding areas due to the excessive trash and human waste. The community is deeply concerned about the health ramifications resulting from this for everyone involved.

As a result of these disturbing developments, residents in many of Seattle's densest neighborhoods (which also happen to have the highest concentration of low-income families and seniors) stay away from our City parks. They are fearful for their health and safety. They are frustrated that the City doesn't properly maintain its critical public infrastructure. They are also frustrated that the City is failing to adequately serve or address the hundreds of unhoused individuals who congregate in these spaces. This situation is untenable.

We strongly believe that near-term action, aligned with the latest pandemic-related guidance from our public health officials, can be taken to allow all people to safely use outdoor spaces in Seattle. We call on the City to create an interim interagency team to develop and execute an immediate action plan to address the following issues in our central urban parks:

- Major public health and safety concerns
- Damaged and nonfunctioning park and community infrastructure
- Lack of basic upkeep and growing maintenance backlogs
- Ongoing, unregulated occupation of park areas and infrastructure
- Poor communication with and lack of accountability to neighborhood and community organizations
- Lack of guidelines for safe activation activities in phases 2 and 3 of reopening

These issues are complex, but that does not absolve the City of responsibility to address them. Together, we can find constructive solutions. As Mayor, City Councilmembers, City department heads and members of citizen oversight boards, you must hold our parks to a higher standard — especially during COVID.

On behalf of all Seattle residents, we urge you to address these issues immediately. In pushing for action, we stand ready to work with you and others to ensure our public spaces are safe and welcoming to everyone and will make ourselves available to discuss thoughtful solutions that go beyond the placeholder measures enacted in the early weeks of the coronavirus response.

Thank you in advance for your response and partnership as we work to urgently address this crisis. We need your leadership to ensure that we have vibrant parks that are welcoming and safe at a time when Seattleites need our shared outdoor spaces more than ever.

Sincerely,

Lisa Howard, *Executive Director*
Alliance for Pioneer Square

Mike Stewart, *Executive Director*
Ballard Alliance

Chris Levenson, *Project Manager*
Build Lake City Together

Jill Cronauer, *Board Member, Chief Operating Officer*
Cal Anderson Park Alliance / Hunters Capital

Monisha Singh, *Executive Director*
Chinatown-International District Business Improvement Area

Howard Anderson, *Board Chair*
Denny Triangle Neighborhood Association

Jon Scholes, *President & CEO*
Downtown Seattle Association

Riisa Conklin, *Executive Director*
Freeway Park Association

Tim Gaydos, *Board Chair*
Friends of Denny Park

Greg Ramirez, *Board Chair*
Georgetown Community Council

Tija Petrovich, *President*
Pioneer Square Residents Council

Dr. Sheila Edwards-Lange, *President*
Seattle Central College

Thatcher Bailey, *President & CEO*
Seattle Parks Foundation

Tom Norwalk, *President & CEO*
Visit Seattle

Lora Radford, *Executive Director*
West Seattle Junction Association

Heather Leaman, *Board President / Owner*
West Seattle Junction Association / Bakery Nouveau

Ross Kling, *Chair*
15th Ave. E. Merchants Association