

EB Parks revs up spending as others cut

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It's a dose of riches in the rags of the recession.

The East Bay Regional Park District is preparing to mete out \$28 million to renovate city parks in two counties and spend \$4.4 million on its own parks at a time when many public agencies consider cutting service, laying off workers and closing parks and other facilities.

Oakland will get \$6 million to build an East Oakland sports center, plus another \$1.7 million to renovate the city's historic Morcom Rose Garden, a popular wedding site.

Concord will get a \$945,000 grant to replace the aging Meadow Homes public swimming pool with a water spray park.

Pittsburg and Dublin each will get about \$1 million to build synthetic turf soccer fields. Newark will get \$1.5 million to replace Lakeshore Park's deteriorating sea wall.

The flow of money seems out of whack with the current hard times for governments, especially as the state has threatened to close more than 200 state parks to cope with declining revenues.

Regional park officials said they're making no apologies. Their ramped up spending is to carry out a mandate from East Bay voters who last November approved the \$500 million Measure WW property tax extension to buy and improve parks and open space.

"We are doing what the public told us: expand and improve parks," said Dave Collins, an assistant general manager for finance for the park system in Contra Costa and Alameda counties.

"We're feeling the recession.

It's reducing our operating funds," he said. "But the Measure WW money is about providing the recreational infrastructure for future generations to enjoy. This is not about money to pay utility bills and clean the restrooms."

For its part, the regional park district tried to fund projects with little or no increase in operating costs, he said

Of the \$500 million from Measure WW, \$125 million is earmarked for grants to cities and local park districts on a per-capita basis. The other \$375 million goes toward expanding and improving regional parks.

With a new budget year starting July 1, regional park officials are gearing up to sell the first bonds and spending the first Measure WW money.

Oakland and Concord were among the early birds submitting applications for \$28 million in grant money that the regional park board approved May 19 — contingent on projects passing a more detailed review for grant rule compliance.

"This is welcome help. It's a very challenging time," said Diane Carrico, Concord's director of community and recreation services. "We usually look to developer fees for improving our recreational infrastructure, but those revenues aren't coming in these days."

Concord will get about \$1.8 million in first-year funding. In its biggest grant, Concord will get \$945,000 to demolish the 40-year-old Meadow Homes public swimming pool and replace it with a series of water outlets to spray and shower water on youngsters.

The spray park will be much cheaper to operate than the old pool, she said. Yet without the regional park grant, the city couldn't have afforded the project and would have lost a \$468,000 state grant for the spray park, Carrico said.

Concord also will get another \$865,000 to resurface aging tennis courts, and replace aging playground equipment at several parks and deteriorating wooden bleachers at the prime softball field at Willow Pass Park.

Oakland was allocated about \$11.3 million in first-year funding. The city plans to use much of it to fix up playgrounds, ball fields and courts.

The biggest share — \$6 million — will be used to construct a 22,500-square-foot sports center building in East Oakland, with an indoor swimming pool, aerobics studio and multipurpose room.

Oakland also will use \$500,000 to renovate long-dormant horse stables and a barn in the Oakland hills in hopes of reopening the facility, said Lily Soo Hoo, a city spokeswoman.

The regional park district also plans to spend \$4.4 million in bond money on 13 regional parks. The biggest grant is \$2.4 million to build a 5,000-square-foot visitor center and exhibit building for the Delta Science Center at the Big Break Regional Shoreline in Oakley.

All the park construction projects will help the local economy, Collins said. "We have our local economic stimulus package."

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