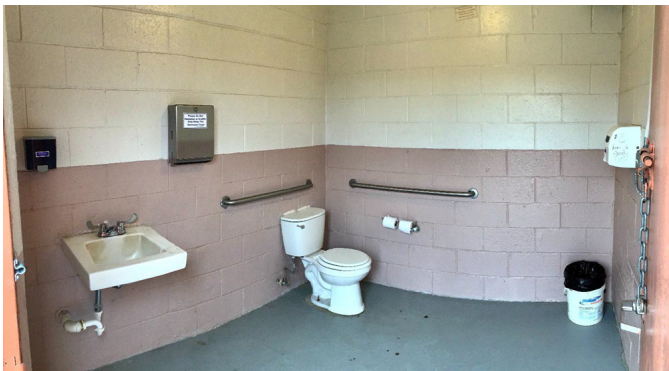


## A plea for parks: Can cannabis taxes rescue them?

Written by By Holly J. Wagner Sun Correspondent  
Friday, 03 March 2023 04:01

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Parks and Recreation Director Vince Alonzo wants to put the recreation in “recreational marijuana.” Or more accurately, he wants the Gallup’s cannabis tax proceeds to help fund much-needed park maintenance and improvements.

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“We’re calling it recreational marijuana. What about earmarking the excise money for parks and recreation?” He proposed to the city council in a presentation Feb. 14.

Alonzo admits that for personal reasons he was against legalizing marijuana, but acknowledged that cannabis is the state’s top growth industry, no pun intended.

The city’s share of cannabis taxes collected between last April and November was \$85,000, Alonzo said, and some projections indicate sales will grow by 273% over the next year. Alonzo thinks the proceeds could grow enough for the city to do a \$20 million parks bond and pay it back with marijuana money.

That could help the city keep up with demand from not only residents, but the visitors that swell the town’s population on weekends. The city has park sharing agreements with schools and the county as well.

Gallup’s problem is that city parks are too popular, especially with the explosion of league sports over the last two decades. Many of the parks are old, with facilities that are falling into disrepair faster than the parks department can patch them back together.

Nobody has seen this firsthand like Alonzo. He joined the parks department when he was 17, in 1981. He retired in 2007, but when the city called, he went back in 2010 and has been leading the department ever since.

He said it breaks his heart to see the parks he’s tended for 40 years deteriorating before his eyes. He thinks about his legacy, and hopes to get the city’s parks on a better path before he retires for good.

“I don’t blame anybody. This is the result of years and years of getting by on what you have. It’s caught up to us,” he said.

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Alonzo estimates that getting all of the city's parks into tip-top shape would cost \$43 million, far more than the city can afford, over 10 years – and he has a separate \$13 million list of “nice to haves.” For just this year he'd love to have \$5.3 million, but said the department will operate on about \$2.5 million.

“We are getting very close to making hard decisions and limiting groups who access the parks. We are not able to meet and accommodate demands,” Alonzo told the council. “All of our programs used to run two or two and a half months. Now they are so big, and it's every day.”

The park needs are many and varied. Several parks have no paved parking, or what they do have has deteriorated into asphalt jigsaw puzzles. Some sports fields are riven with prairie dog holes.

“We have a problem in many areas of Gallup where the prairie dogs are a real nuisance. The grass is food for them. They have everything, they have water because we irrigate,” Alonzo said. “We had a huge problem at the old Gallup soccer complex, which we no longer use, and at the T-Ball field.”

Restrooms often have just one or two sinks and toilets or urinals, which may or may not comply with current Americans with Disabilities Act standards. Some have no hot water.

The Larry Brian Mitchell Recreation Center is a good example. The building was built in 1940 and has had several upgrades over 83 years.

“I don't think this building will ever fall down, but it doesn't meet our needs,” Alonzo said, noting that a craft fair in the first week of December drew 2,000 people. “It has one urinal in the men's and two toilets in the ladies' room. That's just not enough.”

The big push for this year will be turf. At least one field at Indian Hills Park will be closed for the season to let new grass take hold, while others will get new artificial turf. The life expectancy for

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artificial turf is about eight years; some of what's in the Joe Vargas Veterans Memorial Complex has been in place since 2004 and is the turf equivalent of threadbare.

"I've been told by several turf vendors that they can't believe there's anything left out there," Alonzo said. "I credit my staff for making them last as long as they have."

His goal for next year is to refurbish the city's 10 playgrounds, a project he estimates will cost \$1.8 million.

With few options for bringing in money, the city may need to revisit some of its sharing agreements, consider starting an adopt-a-park program and/or start charging user fees for more facilities.

"I'm not crazy about the idea of charging our users. I'm not crazy about charging our county users more than city residents," Alonzo said.

Councilors listened sympathetically and agreed that using cannabis funds is an option.

"This gives us a different picture. It gives us a picture that we are in dire need," Councilor Linda Garcia, Dist. 1, said.

Councilor Michael Schaaf, Dist. 2, congratulated Alonzo and his staff "for doing such a fantastic job with what little you have."

Alonzo said he doesn't plan on giving up on making the parks as pretty as possible.

"My time is getting shorter and shorter, and I owe the community a huge debt," he said. "They have been good to me. I don't want to walk away and [have my successor say], 'What did that

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