

**CITY OF PHOENIX
PARKS AND RECREATION BOARD
SUMMARY MINUTES
January 23, 2025**

Virtual meeting hosted on Webex.

<u>Board Members Present</u>	<u>Staff Present</u>	<u>Community Members</u>
Kelly Dalton, Chair Emma Viera Aubrey Barnwell Ed Zuercher Sarah Porter (virtual) Dorina Bustamante Tony Moya	John Chan Luke Christian Cynthia Aguilar Brandie Bartlett Martin Whitfield Jarod Rogers Tim Kreis Tim Jones Tannia Ruiz Jana Benson Laura Borson	Tom Frieders John Bawden Jes Dobbs Timothy Sierakowski Christopher Bagby Daniel Archer Tim Bagby Robert Villasenor Randy Ziegler Mitzi Haughn Michael Hopkins Meeka Vigue Mike Duffy Timothy Gammage II Kathy Reichert Deirdre Pfeiffer Daniel Luedders Jerry Van Gasse Ed Nusbaum Geoff Mathieux Jay Jurgemeyer Julia Taggart Danielle Bryant Josh Fowler Chian Ma Lisa Pozzoni Marcel van der Stroom Marion Cholieu Martin Kane Michael Norton James Seeley

1. CALL TO ORDER

Chairperson Dalton called the meeting to order at 5:02 p.m. with Board Members Barnwell, Moya, Zuercher, Viera, and Bustamante in attendance.

1. CONSENT ITEMS

No formal presentation on these items. Consent and request for approval only.

2a. Corrected Parks and Recreation Board Summary Minutes – October 24, 2024

Jes Dobbs questioned the legitimacy of the decision to change trail closure times and locations made at the October 2024 Parks Board meeting. She stated the change in the minutes demonstrated that the public was never informed to attend the meeting where action could be taken.

Chairperson Dalton inquired how the agenda item was listed when shared publicly online.

Director Cynthia Aguilar confirmed that the item was posted on the agenda for discussion and possible action and a recommendation was presented in the report.

2b. Parks and Recreation Board Summary Minutes – November 21, 2024

Board member Zuercher made the motion to approve consent items 2a and 2b. Board member Moya seconded the motion, and the motion passed unanimously, 6-0.

2. WORK STUDY: Phoenix Trails and Heat Safety

Deputy Director Jarod Rogers and Fire Department Executive Assistant Chief Tim Kreis provided a joint update on the Phoenix Trails and Heat Safety Program, outlining its implementation from 2021 through 2024 as a collaborative effort between the Parks and Recreation Department and the Phoenix Fire Department. Originally launched as a pilot in 2021 to address concerns over heat-related illnesses and mountain rescues, the program was later formalized with Board approval, implementing trail closures at Camelback Mountain (Echo Canyon and Cholla) and Piestewa Peak on Excessive Heat Warning days from 11 a.m. to 5 p.m. Over the years, the Board has reviewed rescue data leading to program modifications. In 2023, closure times were expanded to 9 a.m. to 5 p.m., and in October 2024, the Board approved the addition of South Mountain Park/Preserve to the program and expanded closure times to 8 a.m. to 5 p.m.

Board Member Porter joined the meeting at 5:15 pm.

The presentation highlighted information about the trails rating guide, information on trails not affected by restrictions and public safety outreach efforts, including the “Take a Hike. Do It Right.” campaign, improved onsite signage, and outreach through local resorts. It also emphasized the role of Park Rangers and volunteers in educating hikers.

Fire Department staff also presented information on the impact of the Trails and Heat Safety Program noting from 2021 to 2024, there was a significant reduction in mountain rescues at closed locations—37 percent fewer at Camelback Mountain and 43 percent fewer at Piestewa Peak—while rescues at other mountains remained stable or slightly increased. Additionally, rescue calls shifted earlier in the day, peaking between 6 a.m. and 11 a.m., likely due to hikers attempting to avoid peak heat.

Director Cynthia Aguilar concluded the presentation, reaffirming the Parks and Recreation Department's commitment to ongoing discussions on trails and heat safety. She also stated the intent to return in February with any additional information requested by the Board.

Chairperson Dalton thanked the presenters and opened the floor for public comment.

John Bawden, a South Mountain Park trail runner, requested a reversal of the trail closure policy, arguing that it shifts rather than prevents heat-related rescues. He urged the Board to explore alternative solutions instead of closures.

Jes Dobbs expressed her belief that the heat closure policy lacks legitimacy, is outside the authority of the Parks and Recreation Board and belongs to the City Council. She advocated for a comprehensive conversation between the stakeholders and elected officials on City Council to find an alternative solution to trail closures.

Timothy Sierakowski, a 40-year hiker, urged for more hiker education and additional park rangers to promote safe hiking practices. He called for a balanced solution and highlighted differences in heat safety approaches between Scottsdale and Phoenix.

Christopher Bagby opposed trail closures, disputing the data interpretation used in the decision. He suggested deploying heat ambassadors at trailheads as an alternative solution.

Daniel Archer, a mountain biker, emphasized the mental health benefits of exercise and opposed trail closures. He suggested trailhead signage showing the average cost of a mountain rescue.

Tim Bagby, a resident and trail user, highlighted the health benefits of mountain trails and questioned how fewer rescues justify closures. He thanked Phoenix Fire Department but noted rescues are part of their job responsibilities.

Robert Villasenor requested data on who is being rescued and suggested targeted safety messaging. He urged the Board to reconsider the October 2024 decision and keep trails open. He also recommended better cooling gear and safety measures for Fire Department crews.

Randy Ziegler, 24-year Phoenix Firefighter and Captain, shared a story of a large-scale mountain rescue he worked in 2020. He ended up in the hospital for heat related kidney issues, missed over five months of work, and incurred over \$10,000 for medical care. He requested the Board to consider the welfare of the Phoenix Firefighters.

Mitzi Haughn, a trail runner, urged keeping South Mountain Park trails open in summer, citing their heavy use, mental health benefits, and economic impact from visitors.

Michael Hopkins, a hiking guide, commented that new rules aren't needed if existing ones aren't enforced and questioned the effectiveness of trailhead signage and safety education.

Meeka Vigue, a regular Camelback Mountain and South Mountain hiker, discussed the impact of closures on hikers and hikers not being prepared. She suggested having more park rangers at the trailheads to educate hikers about safe hiking practices, rather than place further restrictions on hiking hours.

Mike Duffy, a local Fire Department Chief who works with the tactical helicopter rescue unit, stated that rescues in the summer are not injury related, but more so heat-related issues. He added that the rescue helicopter cannot fly at 116 degrees, which places more firefighters on foot on the mountain. He suggested extending the closures until other alternatives can be put in place..

Timothy Gammage II, Director of Operations for the Phoenix Firefighter chapter, encouraged extending the closure times to save lives. He acknowledged there may be other long-term solutions but hiking restrictions is something that is needed now.

Kathy Reichert, noted that no other Arizona cities or the Grand Canyon close trails and urged Phoenix to adopt volunteer led safe hiking programs used elsewhere. She also suggested the Fire Department avoid unsafe trail rescues.

Deirdre Pfeiffer, advocated for education over closures, citing research linking Phoenix residents' well-being to green space access. She urged the Parks Department to utilize volunteers and park rangers for hiker education.

Daniel Luedders emphasized the importance of water and noted that non-locals may underestimate hydration needs. He advocated for year-round trailhead education and volunteer programs.

Jerry Van Gasse read a recently filed public records request for documents about the proposed closures at South Mountain Park and stated there was not proper public notification for October's Parks and Recreation Board meeting.

Ed Nusbaum noted that National Parks use preventative search and rescue instead of closures and suggested Phoenix follow Grand Canyon National Park's approach.

Geoff Mathieux, a Piestewa Peak hiker, emphasized hiking's health benefits and called heat exposure self-regulating. He suggested signage stating the Fire Department won't perform rescues above a certain temperature.

Jay Jurgemeyer, a longtime Piestewa Peak hiker, thanked the Phoenix Fire Department and volunteered to help find alternatives to trail closures.

Julia Taggart requested heat safety and skin cancer safety training and new signage at

trailheads to educate the public. She encouraged planning ahead given the upcoming budget cuts.

Danielle Bryant, a Piestewa Peak hiker, credited hiking with saving her life and argued that closures create harmful social trails. She advocated for more park rangers and higher wages.

Josh Fowler, a South Mountain hiker noted that regular hikers assist park rangers and called trail closures too restrictive. He urged others to contact City Council for representation that aligns with their values.

Chian Ma, an avid hiker and volunteer urged education on safe hiking and questioned the effectiveness of the "Take a Hike, Do it Right" campaign. He called for park rangers on trails and resort outreach to educate guests.

Lisa Pozzoni, an avid runner emphasized the health benefits of trails and argued that heat safety is an education issue, not one requiring closures, citing the low number of rescues.

Marcel van der Stroom argued that the issue is about capacity, not safety, and urged the Board to align decisions with the Parks and Recreation Department's mission by keeping trails open.

Marion Cholieu highlighted the community's strong use of trails year-round, stating that rescues are rare but necessary and that firefighters should be acclimated to the heat. She believes hiker safety can be managed without closures.

Martin Kane described the issue as multi-faceted, involving education and health conditions. He questioned the lack of water fountains at Camelback Mountain and Piestewa Peak and noted that eliminating rescues would require closing all mountains.

Michael Norton argued that funding is the key issue, claiming Phoenix's parks and preserves are underfunded. He suggested a small tax to address concerns without closing trails.

James Seeley, a regular Camelback Mountain hiker, stated that volunteers in Scottsdale are always present at the trailheads and questioned why that cannot be done in Phoenix.

Board Chair Dalton thanked the public speakers and opened the floor to the board members.

Board Member Viera inquired if there has been an evaluation of the effectiveness of the trailhead safety signs installed in 2015.

Director Aguilar responded there is no specific data to measure changes before and after the signs were installed.

Board Member Viera noted that 70 percent of mountain rescues involve Arizonans and requested more details on the specific issues they encounter on trails.

Board Member Viera referenced the concierge education program and inquired about the criteria for selecting trail closures.

Deputy Director Rogers explained that the trails selected for the pilot program were chosen based on their popularity frequency of rescues and difficult technical rescues.

Chief Kreis confirmed the importance of the technical difficulty of rescues because the ability to use helicopters and other rescue gear is limited on these trails.

Board Member Viera cautioned about relying on volunteer service for these complex and difficult trails systems.

Board Member Viera asked about the closure threshold and whether any modeling has been conducted to assess the impact of extending trailhead hours earlier or later in the day.

Director Aguilar responded by stating expansion of trailhead hours is something members of the public have requested and that is something the department can look into further.

Board Member Viera suggested that the Department collect information on this possibility.

Board Member Viera requested a medical professional to speak about the relationship between extreme heat and hiker health and safety.

Director Aguilar answered that a medical professional would speak at the February work group.

Board Member Porter thanked the public for their comments and presentations. She inquired about funding sources and a trail and heat safety volunteer coordinator for the Parks Department.

Director Aguilar explained that while a volunteer park steward program exists, it is administered by park rangers. Additional funding would be required to hire a volunteer coordinator dedicated to mountain preserves. She noted that City of Phoenix community budget hearings in April offer an opportunity for the public to share their requests for funding priorities. However, she cautioned that upcoming budget restrictions may make securing funding difficult over the next few years.

Board Member Porter asked for a breakdown of the mountain rescue statistics provided by Chief Kreis by time of year.

Chief Kreis confirmed he would be able to provide that information at the next work study meeting.

Board Member Zuercher thanked attendees for their input and requested data on the number of trails and access points at South Mountain Park, particularly in comparison to

Camelback Mountain and Piestewa Peak. He also asked for a breakdown of trail ratings at South Mountain Park. Additionally, he inquired whether there are any circumstances in which the Fire Department would not respond to a 911 call for service and directed this question to Chief Kreis.

Chief Kreis stated that the Phoenix Fire Department always responds to 911 calls for service, emphasizing that their policy is to risk their lives to save savable lives.

Board Member Zuercher inquired if drones are used by the Fire Department for rescues, especially during high temperature days.

Fire Department Special Operations Chief Jones responded that while drones are effective, the most effective tool for rescues is the rescue helicopter. The Fire Department uses drones on a very limited basis.

Board Member Moya questioned Chief Kreis about the typical injury type for mountain rescues.

Chief Kreis answered that approximately 75% of rescues are related to medical conditions and the rest result from traumatic injury, but he would have to bring the specific statistics back to the February Board meeting.

Board Member Moya asked about the current situation with urban and mountain preserve park rangers.

Director Aguilar explained that currently, there are just over 100 park rangers, with approximately 60 percent assigned to mountain preserves.

Board Member Moya recommended that during periods of high heat, urban park rangers be reassigned to mountain preserves to assist with heat education. He also acknowledged that this shift may present challenges related to job classification.

Board Member Moya noted that trailhead safety signage has become less effective over time and recommended updating the messaging to better reach the target audience, while also suggesting expanded partnerships with hotel associations to enhance hiker education.

Director Aguilar confirmed they can investigate what resources are available to address educational marketing and campaign efforts.

Board Member Bustamante thanked attendees and supported a volunteer coordinator, expanded concierge program, hydration stations, and trailhead volunteers. She suggested regular hikers help sustain these efforts. She also inquired about the difficulty level of the South Mountain Park trails being closed.

Director Aguilar stated that since 2021, trails at Piestewa Peak and Camelback Mountain have been included in heat-related closures, with South Mountain Park added in October 2024. These trails close from 8 a.m. to 5 p.m. when the National Weather Service (NWS) issues a heat warning. She noted that staff will provide more details as it relates to the

difficulty levels of trails in South Mountain Park in February.

Board Member Barnwell inquired if it is possible to close specific trails at South Mountain Park versus all trails.

Director Aguilar stated that while this could be reevaluated in future meetings at the Board's direction, she noted the logistical challenges of a partial closure at South Mountain Park due to its size and interconnected trail system, which differs significantly from Piastewa Peak and Camelback Mountain.

Board member Barnwell asked if it is correct that 60 percent of the trails will be closed.

Director Aguilar replied she can look into this, but did not believe this statistic is correct.

Board Member Zuercher requested more information at the February work study regarding revamping the safe hiking signage at the trail heads, noting the effectiveness of signs at the Grand Canyon National Park.

Chairperson Dalton requested clarification on the National Weather Service (NWS) threshold for issuing an Excessive Heat Warning.

NWS Meteorologist Tom Frieders explained that the heat risk value considers time of year and duration of heat, causing the threshold to vary throughout the year. This data is collaborated with the CDC to minimize heat-related fatalities. He also discussed the body's acclimatization to heat.

Chairperson Dalton inquired about training for the tactical mountain rescue team.

Chief Jones responded that it includes 200 hours of tactical rescue training, including mountain rescues, rope system, and low and steep angle operations which are then followed up with weekly ongoing trainings.

Chairperson Dalton asked if the tactical rescue team is responsible for regular calls for service in addition to mountain rescues and if there could be a situation where they are involved in a mountain rescue immediately after fighting a fire.

Chief Kreis responded that it is absolutely a possibility.

Board member Porter left the voting body at 7:15 p.m.

Chairperson Dalton asked if the Fire Department can pinpoint where the calls at South Mountain Park are located based on GPS locations.

Chief Kreis confirmed and stated he will provide that information at the February Board meeting.

Chairperson Dalton inquired if the breakdown of 75 percent of rescues related to health conditions includes heat related issues.

Chief Kreis confirmed that is correct.

Chairperson Dalton acknowledged the City of Phoenix's funding cuts and expressed support for updating trailhead signage to be more impactful. She requested a cost estimate for a large-scale signage replacement and an assessment of its feasibility in the near future.

Chairperson Dalton asked about helicopter rescues on excessive heat days and the backup plan when the helicopter assistance is not possible.

Chief Jones explained that while non-hoist helicopters can be used, South Mountain Park lacks designated landing zones. In such cases, rescue crews must hike in and locate individuals using their cell phone GPS data.

Chairperson Dalton inquired what factors necessitate the need for a helicopter.

Chief Jones replied that the severity of the patient's condition, distance into the preserve, and the terrain getting into and out of the mountain are factors that necessitate a need for a helicopter.

Chairperson Dalton thanked everyone for their time and presentations on this important topic.

3. ADJOURNMENT:

Chairperson Dalton adjourned the meeting at 7:24 p.m.