



Inclusive Outreach and Community Engagement for the East Bay Regional Park District

*Perspectives from the 2021 Listening
Sessions and Community Survey*

July 2021



Introduction & Project Overview

The East Bay Regional Park District (EBRPD) is a system of parklands and trails in Alameda and Contra Costa counties to the east of San Francisco. The system comprises nearly 125,000 acres in 73 parks, including over 1,250 miles of trails. East Bay Parks acquire, manage, and preserve natural and cultural resources for all to enjoy now and into the future. EBRPD has a long history of surveying its public to best understand the current interests of East Bay residents. In 1976, General Manager Richard Trudeau commissioned the first EBRPD survey which identified a 94% user satisfaction rate from respondents. A great deal has changed since 1976, including the ways in which we communicate. Recognizing new, prominent communication methods—including social media and text—and a growing, diverse East Bay population, the EBRPD Government Affairs team initiated the Park and Public Interest Community Engagement Project to improve the agency's survey techniques and continue to collect relevant information on the public's interests.

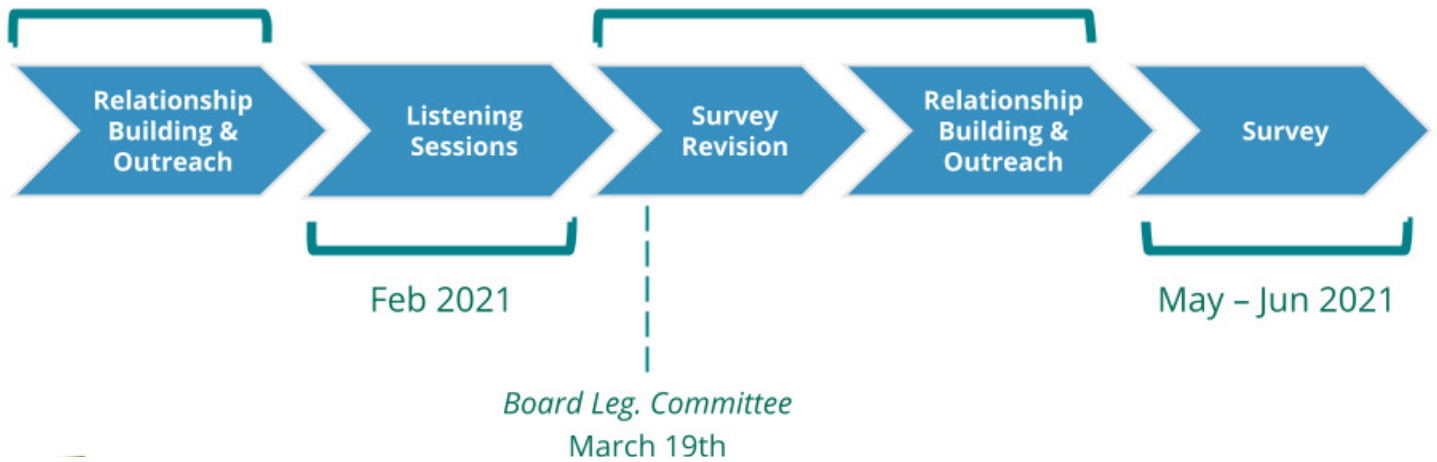
Following the unprecedented success of Measure FF in 2018, notably outperforming the voter survey conducted prior by landline, it became a core focus for the Government Affairs Team to guide all future surveying and advocacy engagement in a manner that better amplifies all voices of the East Bay's diverse voters and park supporters to ensure inclusive and equitable investments. In 2019, with active support from Public Affairs, Acquisition Stewardship and Development, Operations, other colleagues and community partners, EBRPD launched the Park and Public Interest Survey to assess survey methodologies, as well as learn more about public interests as they relate to access to parks and trails, projects, programs, and future investments. This survey received input from over 8,000 individuals across the East Bay. It highlighted the importance of text as a survey feedback option and the need for multiple languages to be available for survey response. In 2020, EBRPD utilized this learned information to conduct a scientific follow-up survey, conducted in English and Spanish and available via text. This follow-up survey was able to gather responses from community members reflecting the East Bay's demographics and was geographically distributed across the region. However, the District also recognized the need to acknowledge and address the 2019 survey's low geographic and demographic response areas. To do so, it partnered with the UC Davis Center for Regional Change (CRC) to host intentional community listening sessions and a third community survey.

The community engagement effort facilitated with the CRC was conducted from November 2020 through July 2021. The objectives of this partnership were to help EBRPD cultivate new relationships with community partners, inform long-term relationship building strategies, and understand with greater depth the needs and interests of key constituencies that have largely been underrepresented in previous survey efforts. It started with an initial round of outreach and relationship building in the winter, which culminated in three community listening sessions held in February. The listening sessions were followed by a second round of outreach and relationship building in the spring, with the community survey administered in May and June of 2021. The EBRPD Board of Directors also supported and informed this process through a preliminary presentation to the Legislative Committee in March following the listening sessions and a presentation to the full Board in July after the close of the community survey. The community engagement and data collection effort was designed to be an iterative process: the initial round of outreach informed the design and facilitation of the listening sessions, which, in turn, informed the second round of outreach and relationship building and the revision and distribution of the survey.

Timeline

Nov 2020 – Jan 2021

Mar – May 2021



Goals

- Explore and expand EBRPD relationships and network, with an emphasis on previously underrepresented geographic and demographic constituencies;
- Inform long-term District outreach and relationship building strategies; and
- Understand with greater depth the needs and interests of key constituencies that have largely been underrepresented in previous survey efforts.

Data Collection Process

Outreach and Relationship Building

Two successive rounds of outreach and engagement were utilized to tap into and expand upon the District's existing network of trusted relationships. These efforts supported snowball sampling for the listening sessions as well as the identification and involvement of trusted messengers and key community stakeholders for dissemination of the survey. Following previous survey efforts, EBRPD prioritized engagement with populations and groups representing the eastern regions of Alameda and Contra Costa counties. Demographically, partners and trusted messengers were sought for key populations and intersectional identities including seniors, youth, LGBTQ+, healthcare providers, members of the disability community, immigrant groups, and Black, Indigenous, and People of Color (BIPOC).

For the initial outreach effort ahead of the listening sessions, EBRPD staff started by reaching out to existing contacts within the District's network of key programmatic partners and community leaders along with members of the Park Advisory Committee, the Regional Parks Foundation, Interpretation and Recreation Services, and the Multicultural Advisory Committee.



District and CRC staff briefly contemplated conducting individual interviews at this project stage, but the overwhelming number of interested respondents made a focus group format the most viable option for community listening sessions in early 2021. This round of community engagement helped the project team identify gaps in order to prioritize further outreach and relationship building with underrepresented communities. Existing partners also provided recommendations for key stakeholders to invite into the process. Overall, this resulted in well-attended listening sessions that captured a diversity of perspectives and voices from across the East Bay.

The second round of outreach relied on the District’s existing network as well as listening session attendees and newly cultivated relationships. This effort helped the District identify and deepen its ties to key community stakeholders and organizations. The goal was to support distribution of and participation in the survey, particularly among key constituencies, with the aim of broadening and deepening EBRPD’s engagement base and establishing engagement strategies that could continue to be built upon in the future.

Community Listening Sessions

Three listening sessions were facilitated by CRC staff in February of 2021 with a total of forty-five participants. Attendees included long-standing EBRPD partners and park supporters as well as new stakeholders. The first session focused on capturing insights and snowball sampling from the District’s existing network—including members of the Park Advisory Committee, the Regional Parks Foundation, Interpretation and Recreation Services, and the Multicultural Advisory Committee—and the following two focused on engaging new stakeholders. The first session had thirteen participants, while the second and third had fourteen and eighteen participants respectively.

Current Stakeholders	New Stakeholders	
Regional Parks Foundation Board	Youth-serving organizations	
Park Advisory Committee	Public health entities	
Interpretation and Recreation Services	Outdoor recreation & environmental groups	
Multicultural Roundtable Committee	Advocacy groups	

Due to the ongoing COVID-19 pandemic and restrictions on in-person gatherings, the listening sessions were facilitated in an online format through the Zoom video conferencing platform. Each session lasted an hour and a half and had an identical format and questions. Facilitation of the listening sessions involved multiple modes of engagement to capture participant insights and allow for verbal and written responses, including online polling, chat, breakout rooms, and a collaborative online whiteboard. Questions and themes from the previous EBRPD community survey were shared ahead of time with participants and reviewed at the beginning of each session to provide context about the District’s ongoing community outreach efforts and establish a foundation for discussion. Poll questions were utilized to gauge participants’ level of involvement with the District and assess their network connections for further outreach support. Attendees then divided into small groups for facilitated discussions.

The listening sessions covered the following key topics:

- Assessing partnerships and reasons for engagement with EBRPD;
- Exploring access to EBRPD resources and amenities; and
- Strategizing effective outreach and engagement with East Bay communities for this and future efforts.



Community Survey

The CRC developed the 2021 community survey after the completion of the listening sessions with input from community stakeholders and in collaboration with EBRPD staff. This survey built upon the questions and framework from the 2019 and 2020 surveys, maintaining as much continuity as possible in order to provide opportunities for longitudinal analysis of key indicators. However, this survey also featured a number of revisions based on significant themes that emerged in the listening sessions. After analyzing the data from the community engagement efforts, the CRC, in consultation with District staff, added questions to the survey exploring the following topics:

- Feeling welcome/unwelcome at parks or trails;
- Factors contributing to one's sense of safety at parks or trails;
- Desired features/activities for parks or trails and key barriers to access; and
- Identification of additional engagement, partnership, and outreach opportunities.

Once drafted, the survey underwent a series of checks to assess and enhance its level of accessibility. Community partners supported a review of Qualtrics—the online platform used by the CRC to host and administer the survey—including a thorough assessment of screen reader accessibility on multiple devices. This approach was part of the project's holistic community engagement process and represented an important opportunity to strengthen community relationships and generate critical stakeholder buy-in. In addition to these accessibility reviews, the finalized survey was also translated into Traditional Chinese, Korean and Spanish.

The 2021 community survey was distributed by EBRPD through various channels. Online dissemination occurred through the District's website and social media accounts on Twitter and Facebook. Physical flyers with the QR code and link to the survey were posted in all four languages at parks throughout the District. Print and online media was utilized as well, including an advertisement in the San Francisco Chronicle.

East Bay
Regional Park District
Healthy Parks Healthy People

TELL US ABOUT YOUR EXPERIENCE
OF THE REGIONAL PARKS AND TRAILS,
PROGRAMS, AND VISITOR CENTERS!

2021 Community Survey
ENDS FRIDAY, JUNE 11, 2021

We'd love to hear from you!
Your responses and insights will help guide our:

- Future Decisions
- Community Programs
- and Investments

Visit: ebparks.org/2021CommunitySurvey

Guided by the UC Davis Center for Regional Change, the 2021 Community Survey includes questions about **feeling welcome** at Regional Parks and Trails, **barriers to visiting**, and **new programs and events** that you would like to see.

The survey takes about 8 – 10 minutes to complete. All survey responses are anonymous. All ages welcomed.

Vision Hispana Newspaper
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El Distrito de Parques Regionales quiere saber tu opinión acerca de tu experiencia en los parques y senderos del Distrito. Contesta la Encuesta Comunitaria, tus respuestas se utilizarán para orientar las decisiones futuras, los programas comunitarios y las inversiones del Distrito de Parques. La encuesta tomará aproximadamente de 8 a 10 minutos en completarse. Todas las respuestas de la encuesta serán anónimas. Español: https://ucdavis.co1.qualtrics.com/jfe/form/SV_7adXjme3wU... See More

Encuesta comunitaria del East Bay Regional Park District

Al Distrito de Parques Regionales del Este de la Bahía (Distrito de parques) le gustaría conocer su experiencia con nuestros parques y senderos. Con la orientación del Centro para el Cambio Regional de la Universidad de California en Davis (UC Davis Center for Regional Change) la Encuesta Comunitaria 2021 incluye preguntas sobre qué sugerencias se sienten quienes visitan los parques y senderos, los servicios que se encuentran dentro de los parques y los nuevos programas y eventos que gustaría ver en los senderos de nuestros comunitarios. Responder a la encuesta tomará aproximadamente de 8 a 10 minutos en completarse. Todas las respuestas de la encuesta serán anónimas. Español: https://ucdavis.co1.qualtrics.com/jfe/form/SV_7adXjme3wU...

Additionally, the District took advantage of its extensive network of partners and park supporters, with particular emphasis placed on newly engaged stakeholders and listening session participants garnered through this community engagement effort. Outreach was conducted to key community organizations and stakeholders—such as Citizens for Historical Equity and the Mental Health Association for Chinese Communities—who were asked to share the survey with their networks and encourage others to participate.

Limitations of the Data

It's important to acknowledge the potential limitations of the community outreach and data collection.

1. The pandemic and shelter-in-place restrictions limited the ability to conduct in-person outreach and engagement. This may have affected who learned about and participated in the listening sessions and community survey, therefore affecting whose perspectives are represented.
2. Qualitative data collection (e.g., listening sessions) typically yields fewer responses than quantitative data collection (e.g., surveys). Given the nature of these data collection methods, it's unrealistic to expect the listening sessions to provide the same volume of responses as captured through the survey. However, qualitative data provides greater depth of information and should not necessarily be quantified. If a key theme was identified by the listening session participants but not the survey respondents, this does not necessarily mean that it's a less popular opinion or unimportant to note. Furthermore, the listening session participants largely served in leadership roles within community organizations and represented key constituents that EBRPD set out to engage. As such, these individuals offered great insight about the communities they serve.
3. Many survey respondents reported frequent use of the parks and trails. Although this implies that survey data reflect the experiences of park users, it also indicates that the survey is not capturing feedback from people who do not use these amenities. Therefore, it remains difficult to fully understand why people choose not to use the parks and trails, or if they are prevented from doing so.
4. The survey did not ask people to indicate how close they live to EBRPD parks and trails (e.g., within .25 mile) or whether they own a car. This limits the understanding of how people access the parks and whether the challenges identified by survey respondents fully reflect the needs of East Bay residents. For example, people who are within walking or biking distance may not face the same transportation barriers as those who live further away and require a car or public transit to reach their destination.
5. Underrepresentation of specific groups is still apparent in the survey data. Therefore, the findings cannot be generalized to the entire community. Although the responses do not entirely reflect the demographics of the East Bay, the data show positive trends from previous years.
6. Survey data collection is inherently limited and biased in the responses it captures. Participants self-select to respond to the survey and the data reflect the personal perceptions of these individuals. It's also important to consider that people who have completed EBRPD surveys in the past may be more inclined to participate again, therefore limiting the new perspectives gathered through this process.

7. The survey was conducted in four languages, which leaves room for error in the translation process. Although the surveys were completed by a translation service and reviewed by community partners prior to public distribution, the survey responses were translated using Google translate, which may have resulted in minor misinterpretations of the open-ended responses.

Listening Session Findings

Assessing Partnerships and Reasons for Engagement with EBRPD

Questions in this section explored what is drawing people to EBRPD as park users and/or partners and the ways in which this has been (or could be) a valuable resource and relationship for East Bay organizations and community members. Key themes shared by participants included:

- Personal connection and sense of belonging to the parks;
- Programmatic partnerships that support access for constituent groups and communities;
- Recreational opportunities and educational resources; and
- Physical health and social-emotional wellbeing.

Many people who were heavily involved with EBRPD expressed a strong sense of belonging, personal connection, and ownership of the parks. For a number of participants, this connection was developed through their own personal use of the parks, often beginning at an early age and with exposure to their local park. Others got connected to the District through specific programmatic partnerships that supported park access and engagement for their communities (e.g., youth programming, programming for specific BIPOC communities, and online programming during the pandemic). It was also noted as beneficial to have local role models in park-related sports and from specific racial and ethnic groups who used and were connected to the parks to highlight broader representation and promote and normalize usage.

How engaged with EBRPD are you currently?

Not at all: 0
Slightly: 9
Moderately: 14
Very: 18

Do you have connections with East Bay communities or groups that are not well represented or currently engaged with EBRPD?

No: 4
Unsure: 15
Yes: 25

How engaged is EBRPD with your community?

Not at all: 3
Slightly: 14
Moderately: 13
Very: 12

Combined results from listening session polls.

“People engage with the parks through the programs provided by the parks.”

- Listening Session Participant



In recognizing the current and potential value of the District, participants expressed an overall sense that parks are clean and well maintained and provide positive opportunities for recreation, education, and social interaction. Utilizing the parks and their natural beauty was identified as an important form of personal self-care to support individuals' physical health and social-emotional wellbeing, particularly during the COVID-19 pandemic and stay-at-home orders. Participants also appreciated opportunities to engage with the park system in collective outings and activities as a means to connect with others in their community.

Programmatic partnerships were identified as an important avenue to cultivate further community relationships and expose additional communities and groups to EBRPD. Participants expressed a desire for expanded in-person and virtual programming and partnership opportunities, including collaboration with groups that offer organized events, programs, and park visits (e.g., school field trips, walking/hiking groups, youth-serving organizations, etc.). There was also strong interest expressed in participating in reciprocity projects in collaboration with the District, such as land tending and restoration.

Exploring Access to EBRPD Resources and Amenities

Questions in this section sought to identify barriers impacting accessibility and capture opportunities and strategies that could potentially increase accessibility, particularly for prioritized community constituencies. Response themes for barriers and opportunities were categorized as either physical or social.



Concerning physical barriers, transportation to the parks was identified by many participants as an ongoing challenge, especially for those who do not live close to a park and are reliant on public transit. Park facility accessibility was noted as a particular concern for seniors, people with mobility concerns, and people with disabilities. Safety was also a theme that emerged throughout the listening sessions, although the perceptions and realities of safety in the parks can look very different for different park user demographics. While concerns over safety in the parks may be limiting usage from some groups, it is important to identify what is meant by safety, whose safety needs to be ensured, and the best ways to accomplish this. Increased safety is often associated with an increased presence of law enforcement officers and activities, but this can be detrimental to park usage for some communities, particularly current and potential BIPOC park users. And while some people may feel safer using parks when other park users are present, others may get the feeling that they do not belong in the parks if park usage by their community is generally not recognized or normalized and their use of spaces is scrutinized and policed by other park users. Although the strong sense of ownership that some local residents have over the parks can be very beneficial, this can also pose a problem when people use this connection to determine who else can use a space and who else feels comfortable there.

Regarding social barriers, lack of awareness of and familiarity with EBRPD and what it has to offer continues to be a significant concern (even for community members who may live close to a park).

“As a tribe, we would like to be able to be as involved as we [used to] with the Ohlone Internship program where they had native members learn from one another and share their knowledge with East Bay Regional Park District and generalized public.”

- Listening Session Participant



Another critical issue discussed throughout the listening sessions was the importance for all community members to feel welcome in the parks and represented within EBRPD. While connected to perceptions of safety discussed above, feeling welcome was also tied to additional concerns, including limited language accessibility, lack of diverse cultural representation, and erasure of Indigenous cultures.

Participants identified a number of opportunities and strategies that could potentially increase accessibility and address these barriers. These included providing more diverse interpretive/educational elements and activities in multiple languages and braille, reducing/removing permitting requirements and fees, and reducing cost-prohibitive parking fees for larger vehicles. Organized groups and programmatic partnerships were seen as an effective way to promote access to the parks, introduce new park users to the system, and reduce social barriers. Programs that included transportation could also help alleviate physical barriers to accessibility. Online programming was noted as a strategy that could be expanded even when there are no longer in-person restrictions due to the pandemic. This was seen as a valuable opportunity to familiarize both youth and adults with EBRPD in a virtual setting and increase the likelihood of in-person usage while overcoming physical barriers (although keeping in mind the potential added barrier of internet/technology access for under-resourced communities).

To ensure all community members feel welcome at EBRPD parks and trails, participants recommended increasing representation of diverse East Bay communities throughout the District (e.g., park staff, affiliated bodies, and park users), as well as normalizing exposure to and usage of the parks. Multiple participants also identified the need to uplift local Indigenous communities, practices and traditions, including supporting, promoting and incorporating Traditional Ecological Knowledge (TEK) within park planning, programming, and educational/interpretive elements.

Strategizing Effective Outreach and Engagement with East Bay Communities

Questions in this section sought to identify priorities for EBRPD outreach and engagement for this and future efforts, as well as effective strategies to employ. Overall, listening session participants identified groups for priority outreach and engagement that align with the park district's priorities. This included seniors, youth, people with disabilities, immigrant groups, and Black, Indigenous, and People of Color (BIPOC). In particular, many participants wanted to see youth intentionally included in these conversations and processes moving forward.

Participants identified a number of potential strategies to support increased outreach and engagement. One key theme that emerged across the sessions was the importance of emphasizing inclusivity and communicating with and through trusted community partners, organizations and messengers. Such a strategy could be supported by the development of a shared partner list to allow park supporters to identify and reach out to communities within their own networks who are missing from EBRPD's network. Participants also recommended leveraging peer outreach and direct, word-of-mouth connections through friends and family. While online communication channels and social media were recognized as important and effective, participants also noted the challenges of pursuing an "online-only" approach to outreach. Some communities lack the access and capabilities to engage via online platforms, and it is important to be aware of age-specific and community-specific communication methods and outlets, too. Print media, newsletters and text notifications were still seen as valuable outreach tools. It should be noted that participants across the three listening sessions expressed high praise for EBRPD Community Relations Manager Mona Koh and her outreach and engagement efforts.

"A youth council in EBRPD would be amazing."

- Listening Session Participant



Multiple participants recommended expanding EBRPD's presence in East Bay urban centers to provide additional opportunities for connecting with residents and raising awareness about the park system. Potential strategies could include mobile outreach/educational units and increasing EBRPD's direct presence and participation in communities (e.g., within community centers, libraries, churches, schools, organizations, events/activities, etc.). City parks were also noted as fertile ground for increased outreach and engagement, particularly due to the fact that community members sometimes struggle to tell the difference between city parks and regional parks. Such a strategy could leverage existing relationships that people have built with local community parks to enhance their familiarity and connection with EBRPD.

Participants proposed innovative strategies to support outreach and increase engagement and accessibility. This included the creation of a Park Ambassador Program with training and incentives that could support outreach, awareness building and park usage within key geographic and demographic communities. There were also suggestions to use technology to engage different communities. One recommendation involved the use of augmented/virtual reality (both visual and audio) to increase language accessibility and enhance educational and interpretive elements at parks. Another recommendation involved the creation of a virtual EBRPD passport app with stamps/badges so park users could track how many miles they trek and/or how many parks they visit (e.g., via check-in or QR code) and promote it to their networks through social media. An approach like this could lead to online marketing opportunities and could also incorporate competitions, challenges and incentives (e.g., incentives via social media or incentives focused on certain groups like youth).

Community Survey Findings

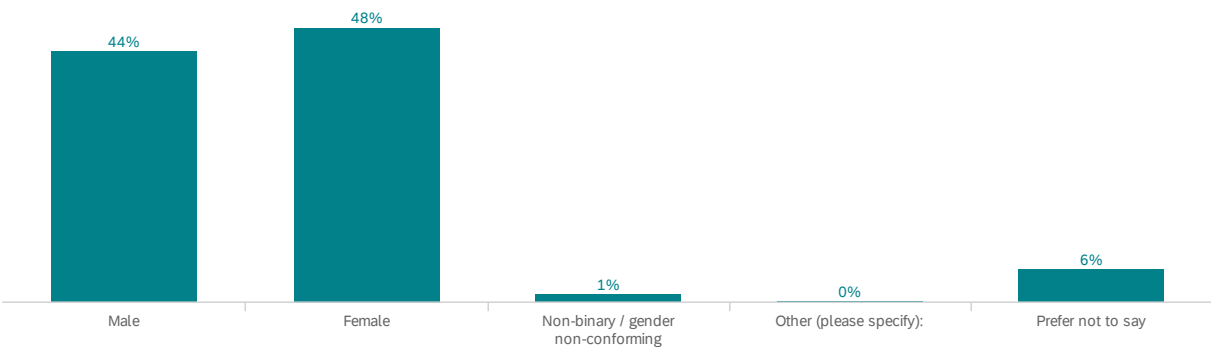
The 2021 Community Survey was designed to gather information regarding the experiences of people visiting EBRPD parks and trails. The survey included questions about feeling welcome, barriers to visiting, the quality and type of programs/activities, understanding what people would like to see more of, and determining the most effective ways to engage with the East Bay communities. The responses and insights from this survey are intended to guide future decisions and investments by the Park District.



Respondent Summary

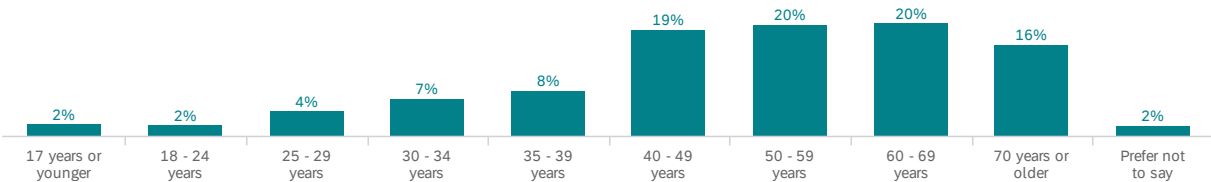
The 2021 community survey received a total of 3,323 responses. The majority of these respondents stated they are very familiar with EBRPD (79%) or somewhat familiar with EBRPD (20%). The breakdown between male and female respondents was fairly even (44% and 48% respectively), with a small percentage identifying as non-binary or gender nonconforming.

What is your gender identity?

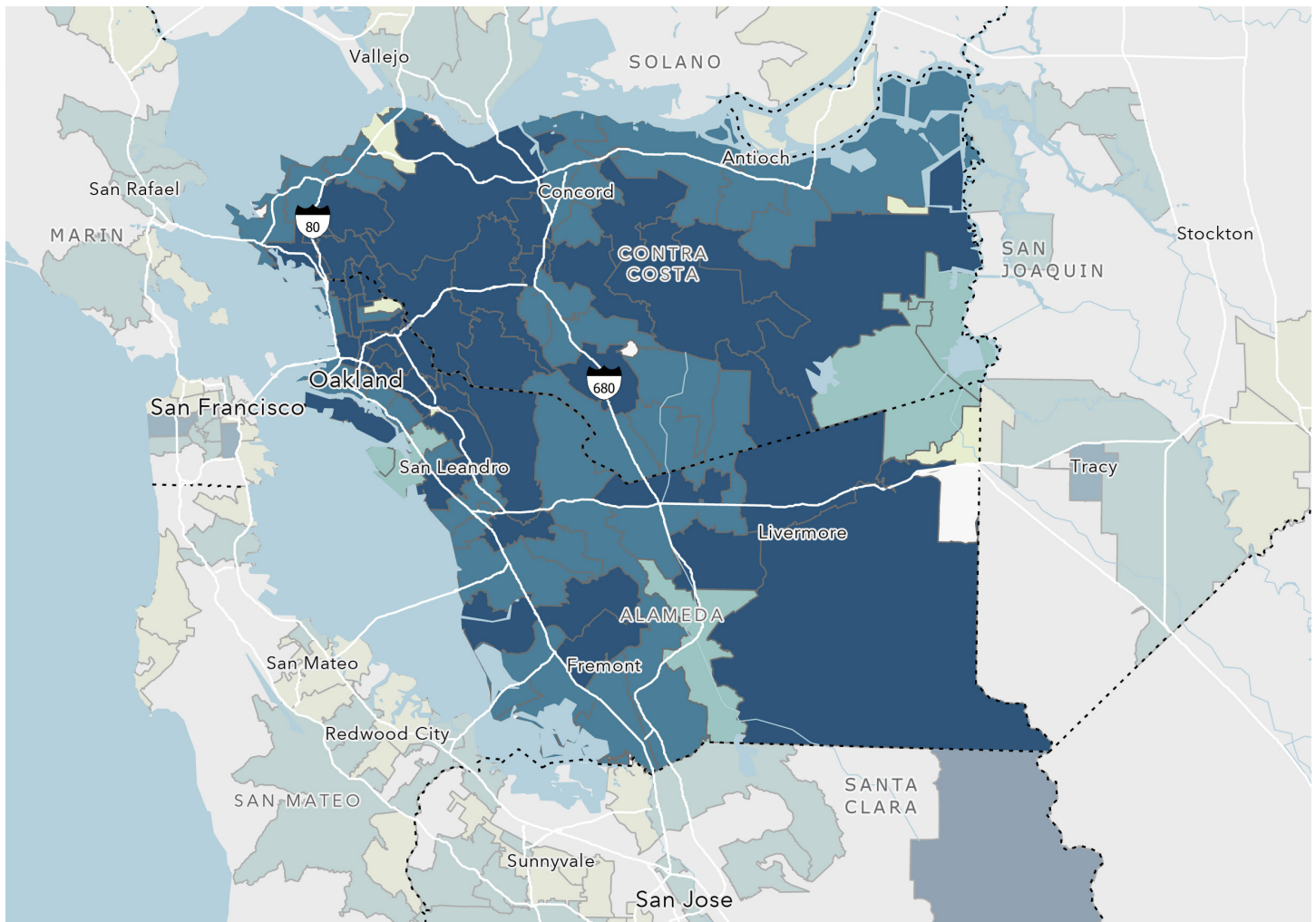
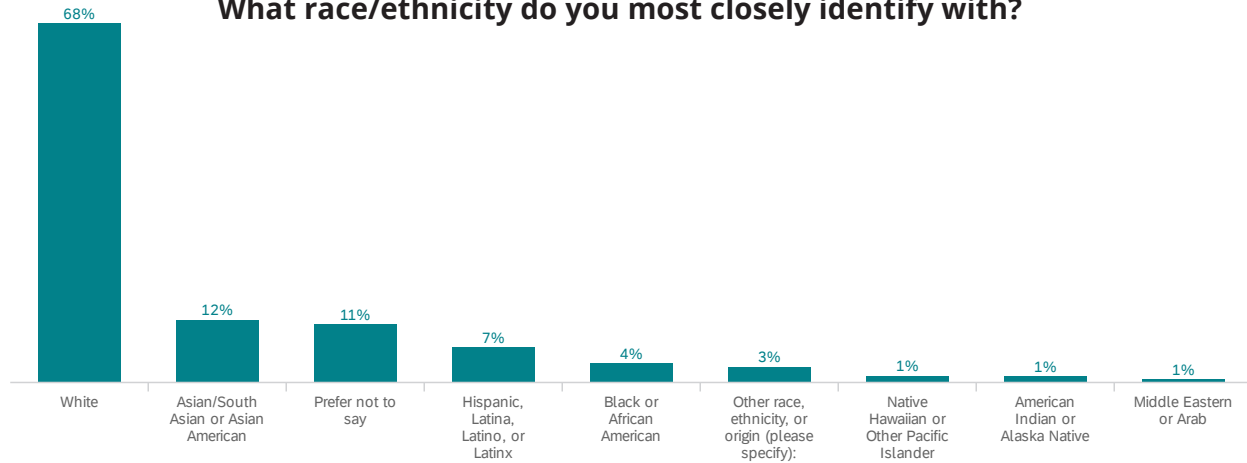


The survey received a substantial number of responses from people above the age of 40, with a fairly even distribution among these age categories as shown in the corresponding chart. For the remaining respondents, 4% were categorized as youth or young adults below the age of 25, and 19% were between the ages of 25 and 39. Among respondents, approximately one-third have school-aged children in their household and the remaining two-thirds do not. The racial and ethnic composition of survey respondents was predominantly white (comprising 63% of total respondents), followed most closely by Asian, South Asian and Asian American respondents (comprising 11% of respondents). Approximately 10% of survey respondents declined to state their race or ethnicity, and the remaining racial and ethnic categories were each composed of 6% or less of survey respondents.

What is your age?



What race/ethnicity do you most closely identify with?



Number of survey respondents per zip code



0 5 10 Miles

Geographic representation of survey respondents

Geographically, the survey received responses from both Alameda and Contra Costa Counties. The greatest representation came from Berkeley and Oakland (with 422 and 415 survey respondents respectively), followed by Richmond, Walnut Creek, Albany, El Cerrito, Concord, Fremont, and Lafayette (with more than 75 respondents from each of these cities).

"I cannot separate my physical and mental health."

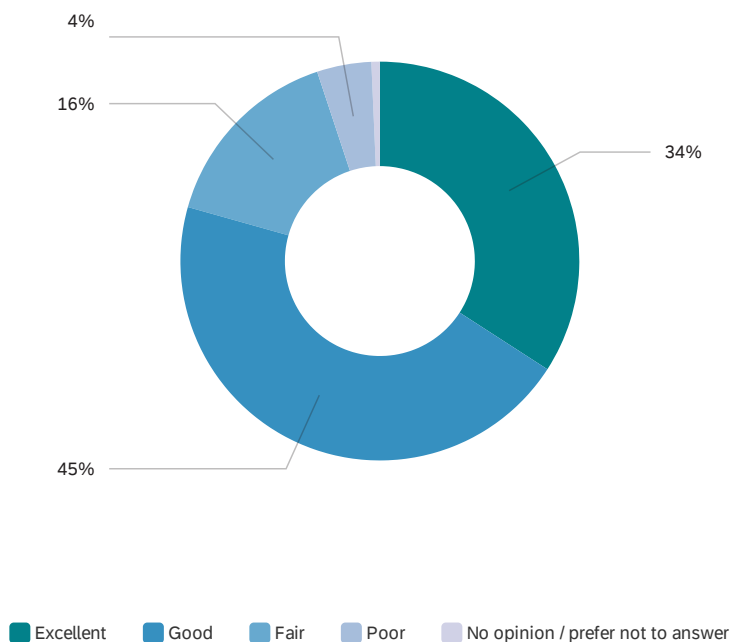
- Survey Respondent



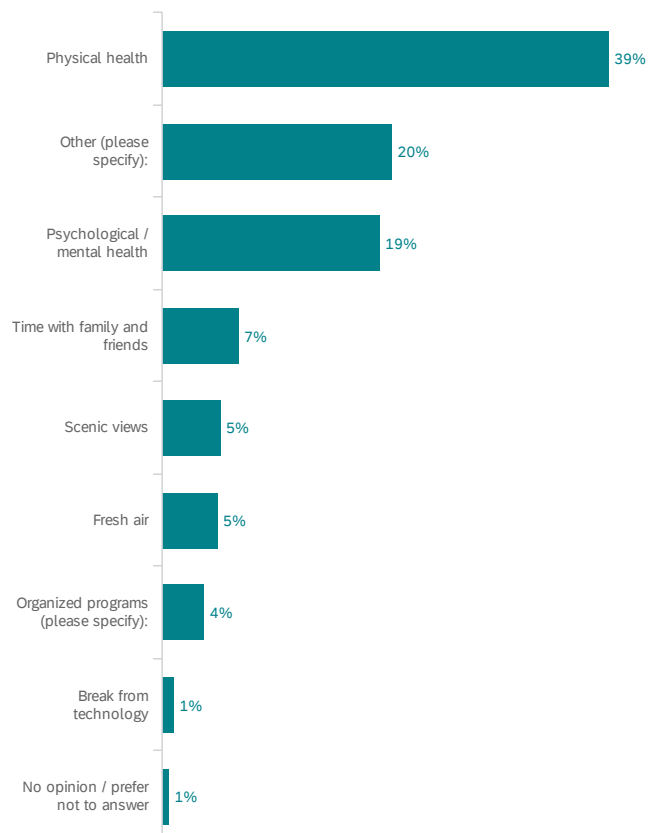
Experience Using the Parks and Trails

Survey respondents reported largely positive experiences at EBRPD parks and trails, with 34% reporting an overall excellent experience and 45% reporting an overall good experience. Very few people reported a fair or poor experience. According to the community survey, EBRPD parks and trails are primarily used by residents for physical health (39%) and psychological/mental health (19%). About 20% of respondents stated they use the parks for "other" reasons, and took this opportunity to list specific activities that they enjoy, primarily consisting of park/trail uses that support both physical and mental health, including hiking, mountain biking, dog walking, horseback riding, and the general enjoyment of nature. Others emphasized that physical and mental health are interconnected, and therefore indicated their desire to select both options from the list.

How would you rate your overall experience at East Bay Regional parks or trails?



What is your primary reason for visiting an East Bay Regional park or trail?



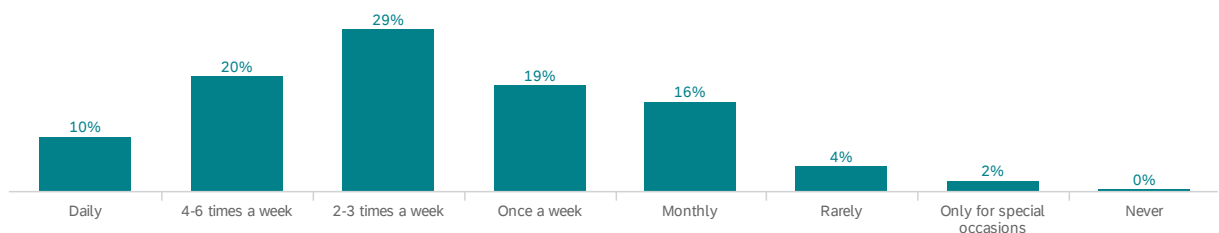
Activities that Park Users Most Enjoy

The survey asked people to identify which EBRPD activities they enjoy. Respondents most frequently selected hiking/walking (20%), natural and scenic views (14%), mountain biking on designated trails (11%), nature/bird watching (10%), dog walking on designated trails (9%), picnicking (6%), and road biking on designated trails (5%). Fewer responses were received for attending family/social events, camping, touring visitor centers, attending organized programs, horseback riding on designated trails, water sports, and open recreation (each composing less than 5% of selections). The least popular activity according to survey respondents was virtual and online programming, which amounted to only 1% of selected activities.

Frequency of Park Usage

Most people reported using the parks 2-3 times a week (29%), followed by those who visit 4-6 times a week (20%), and once a week (19%). Overall this indicates a high frequency of park usage among individuals who responded to the survey, which in turn provides valuable insight based on their experiences.

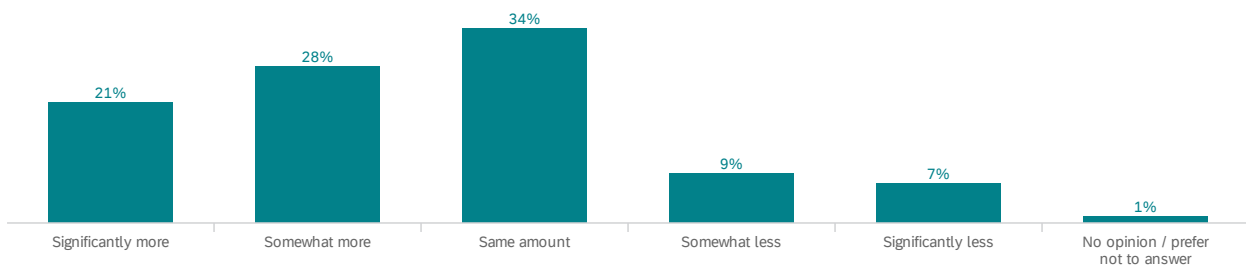
How often do you utilize the East Bay Regional parks, trails, or other resources (e.g., virtual programs)?



Park Usage as a Result of COVID-19

One of the new questions added to the survey in 2021 was about people's use of the parks and trails during the COVID-19 pandemic. In response to this question, almost 50% of respondents reported using the parks and trails somewhat more or significantly more since the start of the pandemic, and approximately one-third of respondents reported using the parks with the same frequency as before. The survey also asked individuals if they intend to continue their increased park usage following the pandemic, and 95% responded positively that they plan to continue their visitation to the parks and trails.

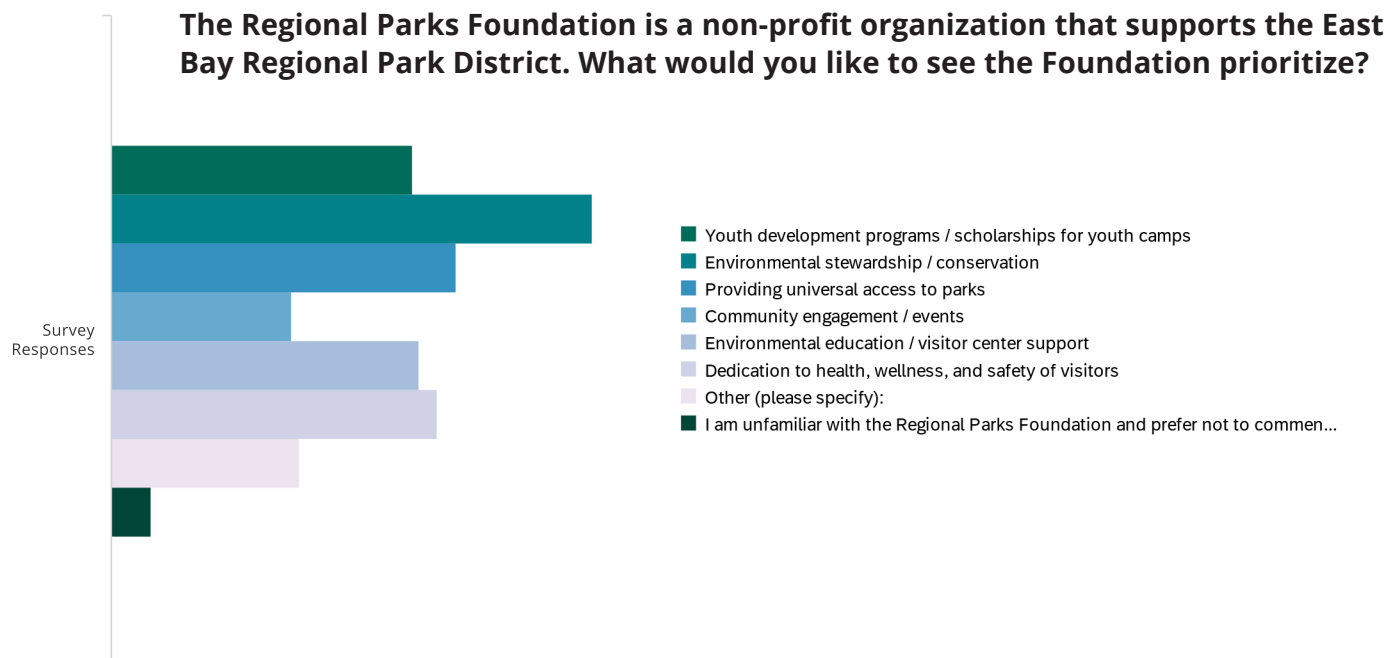
Have you visited East Bay Regional parks or trails more or less since the start of the COVID-19 pandemic?



Priorities for Parks and Trails

When asked, “What would you like to see added or expanded at East Bay Regional parks or trails,” the top five responses included: designated mountain bike trails (12%), water bottle filling stations (11%), indigenous land acknowledgements (9%), recycling/compost containers (8%), and off-leash dog areas (7%). Other options that received a smaller number of responses included volunteer-day opportunities, additional restrooms, expanded wildlife conservation areas, educational programs for school and community groups, accessibility signage, natural art installations, short-loop trails, celebrations for multicultural holidays, swimming lessons, additional paved trails, multi-language educational signage, programs for caregivers, veterans, and other adult service groups, additional picnicking sites, and trail lighting.

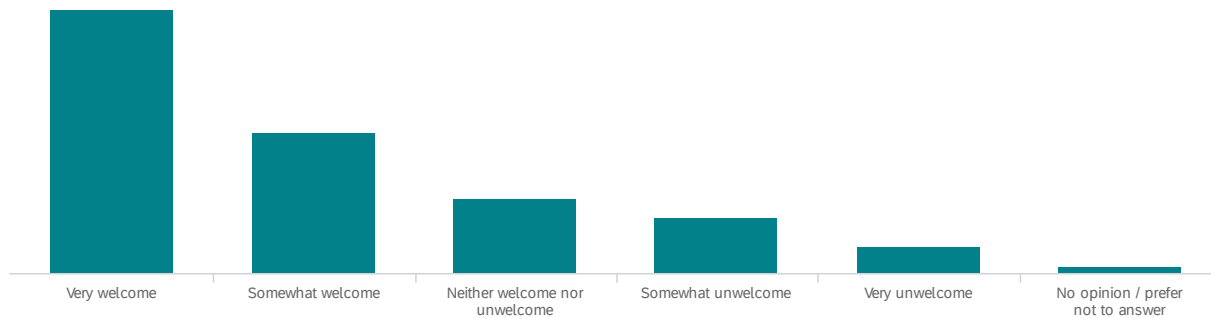
To help inform the Regional Parks Foundation, people were also asked to select their top three priorities among the foundation’s key program initiatives. As a non-profit organization that supports the East Bay Regional Park District, these priorities guide the allocation of funds. Among the initiatives that the Foundation supports, the highest priority as indicated by the survey respondents was environmental stewardship/conservation, receiving 22% of responses. The distribution of responses across the remaining initiatives was relatively even, including universal access to parks (16%), dedication to health, wellness, and safety of visitors (15%), environmental education/visitor center support (14.5%), and youth development programs/scholarships for youth camps (13.9%). The initiative that received the fewest responses was community engagement/events (8.3%).



Feeling Welcome at Parks and Trails

When asked whether people feel welcome when they visit East Bay Regional parks and trails, the overwhelming majority of people responded positively, with almost half stating they feel very welcome and a quarter stating they feel somewhat welcome. When broken down by age, gender, and race/ethnicity, some differences exist in how individuals responded.

Do you feel welcome when you visit East Bay Regional parks and trails?



Notably, fewer young people reported feeling welcome at East Bay Regional parks and trails. Female respondents reported feeling “very welcome” at higher rates than both male respondents and non-binary/gender nonconforming respondents. Male respondents were also more likely to report feeling “somewhat unwelcome” compared to others. Additionally, people who identified as Black/African American or Native Hawaiian/Other Pacific Islander were more likely to report feeling “somewhat unwelcome.”

When asked to elaborate on the factors that contribute to feeling welcome or unwelcome at East Bay Regional parks and trails, there was substantial feedback that reflected the following themes:

- **Familiarity with the parks and trails:** This theme suggests that people who are familiar with the parks, trails, and resources offered through EBRPD are more at ease with using the regional park system. As such, if there are populations in the East Bay that do not currently use the parks and trails, it will be important for EBRPD to reduce barriers to participation. This mirrors the feedback received through the listening sessions that identified a strong sense of belonging as the predominant reason for people feeling comfortable and welcome using the parks.
- **Open to all:** This theme primarily focused on the factors that improve accessibility of the regional parks and trails, including the absence of entrance fees for hikers, providing well-maintained trails and facilities, and having park district staff that are responsive to communications from the public. Furthermore, the general cleanliness and upkeep of the facilities was underscored by many as a sign of care and attention from the park district, which in turn makes people feel welcome.
- **Friendly park visitors and staff:** The presence of park visitors and staff was frequently noted as a positive factor contributing to a welcome atmosphere. Many choose to enjoy the parks and trails in groups or with a companion, and suggested that park staff are approachable when needed.

When asked about the factors that contribute to feeling unwelcome at the East Bay Regional parks and trails, the overwhelming majority of respondents acknowledged that substantial tension exists between different types of trail users, including mountain bikers, cyclists, hikers, dog walkers, and equestrians. Respondents were vocal about their concerns of not having full access to the trails or needing to compete for trail usage (e.g., hikers being driven off trails by mountain bikers, mountain biking being disproportionately regulated despite legitimate use of designated trails).

People who indicated they feel unwelcome at parks or trails were also asked to provide feedback about what improvements could be made. The themes repeated throughout the open-ended responses included:

- Implementing a public “share the trail” education campaign about respecting all trail uses and how to follow the proper right away rules and yielding etiquette.
- Improving signage that clearly indicates which activities are approved for specific trails (e.g., horseback riding, hiking, mountain biking).
- Cultivating respect between all trail users, raising awareness about approved trail activities, and ensuring that trail rules are followed without disproportionately restricting access for specific users.

Other common responses indicated that people feel neither welcome or unwelcome; rather they are simply enjoying the parks and keeping to themselves. Many respondents elaborated by explaining that they visit the parks and trails to enjoy the serenity of nature, and in doing so they don't expect or desire to interact with other people. Therefore there isn't an expectation of people or park staff making them feel welcome.

“Let's share the space. Let's be equitable. Let's be fair. Let's support all types of people and activities. This would be the very best solution.”

- Survey Respondent



Barriers to Visiting Parks and Trails

In assessing the barriers and obstacles that make it challenging to visit East Bay Regional parks or trails, the most popular response indicated that no barriers exist (selected by 17% of survey respondents), which positively suggests that EBRPD is a generally accessible park district. The top five remaining survey responses included “other” (16%), parking availability (13%), personal safety (9%), not the right recreational activities offered (6%), and limited or no trail maps and information (6%).

Upon further analysis of the written responses provided by those who selected “other,” these barriers and obstacles predominantly fit into the categories already provided as multiple choice options and align with the top responses. Many respondents used this open-ended option to elaborate on their individual experiences with these barriers/obstacles. Personal safety largely captured specific feedback about vehicle break-ins and property theft, as well as significant concerns that exist between competing trail uses (e.g., mountain bikes, dogs off leash, horses, and hikers/walkers). This overlaps with sentiments about the recreational activities offered, with responses indicating that people do not feel they are able to use the parks and trails for their preferred interests and activities when they are in competition with others for use of the space.

Safety is an important factor in how people feel about using and visiting the parks. Considering the emphasis that was placed on the concept of safety in the listening sessions, a separate survey question was included that asked all participants, “What contributes to your sense of safety?” This open-ended question allowed respondents to provide a written response and elaborate about the factors that support feelings of safety when using EBRPD parks and trails. After analyzing the written responses, several key themes emerged that substantially overlap with the factors that contribute to people feeling welcome at the regional parks:

- **Familiarity with the parks and trails:** Respondents emphasized the importance of being familiar with the parks and trails in order to feel safe using them. Conversely, East Bay residents who are unfamiliar with the parks may also feel unwelcome because of it. Consideration should be given to bridging this gap through park education, organized programming, and community events.
- **Clear signage:** Park and trail users indicated feeling safe when facilities are marked with clear signs, maps, and posted rules. This alleviates confusion regarding the proper use of parks and trails, and the activities best suited for these areas.
- **Presence of park staff and visitors:** Many respondents referred to the presence of park staff and visitors as a positive factor contributing to their sense of safety. However, it is difficult to determine from the survey responses how this sentiment varies across demographics. Nuances exist around perceptions of safety, including differences between how people perceive other park users as a benefit or a threat, as well as their relationship to park personnel, which can largely vary between park staff, rangers, and law enforcement. Competing perspectives were apparent as some park users noted the importance of law enforcement presence, while others feel disproportionately targeted by officers.
- **Organized groups programs:** Providing intentional and appropriate programming has the potential to cultivate an inclusive atmosphere for specific groups (e.g., BIPOC, LGBTQ+, people with disabilities). EBRPD should work with organizations that serve these populations to support healthy community relationships and signal to East Bay residents that they are safe and welcome at parks and trails.
- **Additional trails designated for mountain biking:** Substantial feedback was received regarding the need for more designated mountain bike trails to reduce conflict between trail users. EBRPD should consider developing new single track trails that are bike-specific or shared-use. Respondents indicated a desire for long distance, technical, and directional trails that offer elevation change, bumps, berms, and jumps. Opportunities may exist to partner with mountain bike organizations to help plan/build additional trails and conduct trail maintenance. Many examples of successfully managed recreation areas that allow mountain biking were provided by survey respondents, including China Camp, Tamarancho, Auburn, and Tahoe. Increasing trail access would help move mountain bikers off of high frequency trails, allow for greater dispersion, fair access, and lower overall impact both for trail use and conflict.



“The parks are [well] maintained and most folks observe and comply with posted rules. That helps create a safe environment.”

- Survey Respondent



Connecting with EBRPD

Survey respondents indicated that they most often receive information about or engage with the park district through the EBRPD website (22%); friends, family, or colleagues (16%); in the parks or from park staff (11%); other websites (e.g., All Trails) (10%); and EBRPD social media (9%). Respondents also provided names of organizations that they receive information from, including civic centers, cultural groups, schools, faith-based organizations, and advocacy groups. These have been added to the list of groups that EBRPD could potentially partner with to reach a greater number of East Bay residents (see supplemental materials). When asked how the East Bay Regional Park District can engage better with the community, there was substantial alignment with the feedback received through the listening sessions. In addition to partnering with outside organizations, survey respondents underscored the importance of collaborating with user groups (e.g., hikers, cyclists, mountain bikers) as a way to supplement the park resources and grow the next generation of park stewards. Please refer to “Listening Session Findings” for more detailed strategies.

Lessons Learned

Drawing upon survey responses and feedback from the community listening sessions, valuable lessons have been identified to further support inclusive outreach and engagement efforts by EBRPD.

1. Developing a more complex understanding of people’s needs and priorities necessitates the use of multiple data collection methods.

Mixed methods research provides both depth and breadth of understanding through the combination of both qualitative and quantitative data collection, respectively. As demonstrated by the valuable feedback captured in the listening sessions, it’s important to acknowledge the benefits of these intentional conversations as a way to gather insight that would not have been revealed through the survey. Data collection through focus groups or interviews offers a more complex understanding of the needs and interests of key constituencies. These methods are complementary to surveying and especially lend themselves well to reaching populations that have largely been underrepresented in previous outreach efforts.

EBRPD’s decision to conduct listening sessions is well-aligned with their goal to reach the diverse populations in the East Bay. In future years, EBRPD should consider allocating additional time and resources to gathering qualitative data. When COVID-19 restrictions are lifted, these focus groups can be conducted in person and co-hosted with local community groups and organizations. Often

greater attendance can be achieved by integrating these sessions with an existing meeting or event being held by trusted partners. Virtual convenings remain an effective strategy as well, especially considering the ease of access that it provides for individuals who may have travel limitations or time restrictions. By conducting additional listening sessions, EBRPD can continue to identify key populations they want to hear from, and gather additional input from these individuals.

2. Outreach and communication should remain an iterative process in order to yield strong partnerships.

The community engagement and outreach efforts were designed to be iterative, and this approach lends itself well to relationship building. To further support these efforts in the future, communication should be maintained with new organizations that participated in the 2021 listening sessions. Maintaining these relationships will ensure that EBRPD has inroads to reach a wide range of populations, and these partnerships will be essential to amplifying the voices and needs of key constituents that EBRPD has been unable to reach in the past.

To substantially expand the reach of the community survey, EBRPD should consider allocating funding for these organizations to do deliberate outreach. If staff at these organizations were paid to support this work, they could dedicate the necessary time to getting the word out about the survey. As a best practice, it's important to compensate community partners for their time, especially when asking them to expend social capital as trusted messengers to the communities they serve. This reciprocity is valuable and can help facilitate long-term District outreach and relationship building strategies.

3. The leadership of the park district should reflect the diversity of the East Bay communities.

To achieve a more inclusive environment, EBRPD must be intentional about diversifying the leadership and staff of the park district, not just the park users themselves. Existing leadership bodies include the EBRPD Board and advisory committees, but new leadership and decision-making roles could be established, such as a youth board or park ambassador program. Representation is key to building a welcoming park district that understands the needs of its users and reflects the communities it serves.

“East Bay Parks could hire a more inclusive workforce. I would like to see more diversity of staff that reflect how truly diverse the Bay Area is.”

- Survey Respondent



Conclusion

The East Bay Regional Park District has demonstrated a concerted effort to reach residents in the East Bay and support their access to parks and trails. Through EBRPD's inclusive outreach and engagement process, the park district is making substantial progress toward forming trusted relationships with local organizations that serve the diverse residents in the East Bay, while also gaining greater insight about the experiences of community members who have not previously engaged with EBRPD. This work is critical to bolstering the information that EBRPD can rely on to make informed decisions about park district investments, while also informing long-term relationship building strategies.

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