TO: Mayor and City Council

FROM: Sara L. Hensley, CPRP, Director
Parks and Recreation Department

SUBJECT: Zilker Park Great Lawn

DATE: September 4, 2009

Daily, Zilker Park's Great Lawn is enjoyed by many families and children who appreciate the wonderful downtown natural resource which is conducive to a broad mixture of activities. In addition, the Great Lawn hosts annual special events like the Austin City Limits Music Festival, the Trail of Lights, the Kite Festival, and Blues on the Green.

For fifty years, the Great Lawn was primarily an open space for informal play activities. In the 1980's, soccer games in Zilker park evolved to include seven game fields. The Austin Soccer Coalition organized and scheduled weekend games at Zilker, as well at other sites to meet their growth.

Soccer play continued in Zilker until 2006 when the Onion Creek Soccer Complex was built jointly by the City and the Austin Men's Soccer Association. Only one soccer organization continued to rent individual fields in Zilker for play league games. All other leagues have relocated to other locations offering more fields, specifically designed for soccer.

With the investment of $2.5 Million, the Great Lawn has been restored to its original purpose of general public use. The Parks and Recreation Department (PARD) re-graded the 46 acres north of Barton Spring Road to eliminate ponding and trip hazards, installed curb to curb irrigation using non-potable water and replaced the rough grass with an improved variety of Bermuda grass. The intention of the restoration project was to create an outstanding park lawn comparable to the great parks in New York City or Chicago.

The Great Lawn does not include the special grading and irrigation standards of a soccer complex, and the new turf is not intended for the concentrated use of athletic fields. The department's goal is to develop soccer complexes at other park locations and eliminate organized soccer in Zilker. PARD has acquired other large, flat tracts

of parkland for large athletic fields. Parkland on Johnny Morris Road already contains the new Austin Tennis Center, and land near the Onion Creek Soccer Complex have significant potential for future sport complex development. The department is interested in partnerships to develop more fields on suitable parkland, as occurred with the Onion Creek Soccer Complex.

On July 14, 2009 PARD met with the Austin Men's Soccer Association, the Women's Soccer Association and the Co-ed Soccer Association to discuss the new plans for the Great Lawn and future private/public partnerships for new soccer complex development. The mentioned Associations are in agreement with the changes and options PARD presented. We will also work with them in identifying alternative sites for soccer fields.

Also, staff briefed the Zilker Neighborhood Association on July 6 and the Barton Hills Neighborhood Association on July 14 about the cessation of organized, reservable sports fields, with positive responses from both associations.
On August 25, the Parks and Recreation Board unanimously approved the policy to not program or reserve the Zilker Great Lawn for athletic league play or tournament use.

Since opening the Great Lawn, a rich variety of uses have re-appeared, from pick-up sports, ultimate frisbee, dog walking, exercise and fitness classes, picnicking, kite flying and other activities. This range of informal activities will serve many community recreational needs and sustain the improved quality of the park for years to come.

We are happy to provide further information and/or meet with you to discuss. Staff will continue to assess the use to ensure that the majority of citizens are able to access their parkland.

Please feel free to contact me at 974-6717.

CC: Marc A. Ott, City Manager
Bert Lumbreras, Assistant City Manager
Stuart Strong, Assistant Director, Planning, Development & Construction
Joanna Mesecke, Division Manager, Central Park