

Park Ranger Program FAQs – July 2024 Update

We are providing this information to clarify questions from the public and the media regarding Sonoma County's proposal to modify the training, hiring requirements and penal code status of park rangers.

After notifying affected unions in July 2023, the County has prioritized every opportunity to discuss the proposal regularly with the labor organizations who requested to meet and confer. The County looks forward to reaching an agreement that provides a safe environment for our employees and our community.

Background

Regional Parks' mission is to provide essential opportunities for people to connect with nature. We contribute to the vibrancy and well-being of our community by expanding access to recreation experiences, serving as responsible stewards of cultural and natural resources and ensuring that our parks are clean, safe and welcoming.

Regional Parks' vision of the park ranger is one of community engagement, visibility and outreach. Rangers should be stewards of the environment and experts on the natural features and recreation opportunities in the parks. They should provide a welcoming, safe environment with their presence and be able to respond to medical emergencies when they arise in the parks. They should be able to enforce park rules and regulations and work jointly with local law enforcement against illegal activities in the parks.

Key points

- Regional Parks is not eliminating the park ranger job classification but is negotiating a potential change to working conditions to remove specific peace officer training requirements, status and duties, which will better align with the job specifications, philosophy and mission of the department.
- Removing the peace officer training and background requirements for applicants would accelerate recruitment and onboarding. Park Rangers will continue to receive extensive training in public safety, emergency medical response, customer service and in the numerous other services they provide to the parks.
- Park rangers will maintain their authority to issue parking and administrative citations for less-serious violations of park rules and regulations.
- Regional Parks researched various options and determined the status of "public officer" (Penal Code 836.5) is an appropriate modification for the park ranger job series. Utilizing a local ordinance and public officer status is common in California cities and counties,

aligns with the department's philosophy and mission for rangers, and keeps certain civil protections and authority for the ranger job series. Marin County Parks is an example of an agency that uses a public officer model.

Is Regional Parks removing park rangers?

Regional Parks is not proposing to eliminate the park ranger classification. It is negotiating a proposal with labor unions to modify the current minimum qualification that requires park ranger applicants to complete a law enforcement academy and undergo an extensive law enforcement background check.

Entry-level park ranger training is no longer available locally. Due to high costs and low enrollment, Santa Rosa Junior College in 2020 discontinued the National Park Service training academy it hosted. When the training was available, many of the topics – firearms, arrests, felony stops, building searches, transport and booking, evidence and crime scene processing – were not duties a Sonoma County park ranger performs.

What training will new park rangers receive?

The training program includes coursework at Santa Rosa Junior College's Public Safety Training Center and trainings by departmental, county and external sources. Entry-level training includes more than 300 hours on topics such as emergency medical response, strategic communications, customer service, de-escalation tactics, water and wildfire safety, defensive driving, public safety coordination and other skills applicable to the county park ranger job series.

Regional Parks has done extensive analysis and risk assessments with public safety and occupational safety consultants. In coordination with those recommendations and the County's Risk Management Division, the department has developed a customized training program consistent with the duties and services provided by a park ranger with public officer status.

Why is Regional Parks considering modifying the park ranger peace officer status?

Regional Parks has always articulated a low level of law enforcement responsibilities for rangers. However, the public, employees and other law enforcement agencies all have expressed confusion over the tools, activities and equipment that park rangers possess with their current peace officer status.

The primary tools rangers use to enforce park rules and regulations are education, warnings and issuance of parking or other administrative citations. Park rangers do not carry guns, do not have the ability to arrest and transport suspects and are not part of the 911 emergency dispatch system.

Transitioning to public officer status will clarify that rangers are not park police and that law enforcement is not their primary duty.

What if there is a serious crime or emergency in a park?

If there is a serious crime or emergency in a park, rangers will continue their current practice of requesting law enforcement services from the Sonoma County Sheriff's Office, local police, fire services and emergency medical services.

Additionally, with this proposal, Regional Parks is working with the Sheriff's Office to create a new level of law enforcement resources allocated to parks. A dedicated "County Regional Parks Unit" would patrol assigned park districts daily and be available to respond to crimes in progress, conduct field investigations, arrest and transport suspects and perform other law enforcement services that park rangers are unable to provide. Deputies would coordinate daily priorities with Regional Parks, focus their efforts at specific parks and visibly support employee and visitor safety. The County Regional Parks Unit also would be integrated into the County's 911 emergency response network.

Would we continue to see park rangers?

Rangers will continue providing daily operational services in the parks. These include engaging with visitors, directing operations staff, collecting fees, informing visitors about rules and regulations, enforcing park rules with parking or administrative citations, operating campgrounds, providing emergency medical care, inspecting parks for cleanliness and hazards, helping with unskilled and semi-skilled maintenance tasks and delivering interpretive programs.

By realigning the ranger training and background requirements with the park ranger job duties, Regional Parks will make the position accessible to more candidates and facilitate hiring, increasing the presence and availability of park rangers.

Would this change affect the salaries and benefits of park rangers?

Salaries and benefits would not change under this proposal. While the Park Ranger I and Park Ranger II positions currently are represented by Sonoma County Law Enforcement Association, they do not participate in the safety members' enhanced pension program. Park Ranger III positions are represented by Service Employees International Union and do not participate in a public safety pension program.