

BLUE HOLE PARK PROJECT

TRANSFORMING A PROBLEM PARK INTO A FAMILY GET-AWAY

GEORGETOWN POLICE SERVICES DIVISION, TEXAS, 1995

- THE PROBLEM:** Blue Hole Park was plagued with alcohol-related crimes and accidents, litter, and ecological problems, which increased in summer months when out-of-town visitors used the park. The park received a disproportionate share of the total calls for service and deprived citizens of desired police services in other areas of the city.
- ANALYSIS:** An examination of past calls for service and the observations of police officers revealed that alcohol was contributing to accidents, injuries, crime, and disorder. The park was responsible for a disproportionate share of the city's crime and other social problems. The single, narrow road to the park created traffic problems and delayed emergency vehicles responding to calls. The lack of a designated parking area led to ecological damage to the riverbank.
- RESPONSE:** The police enacted a "zero tolerance" policy for Blue Hole Park, patrolled the area more frequently, and strictly enforced city ordinances and state laws. The cliffs, where intoxicated visitors would then jump off and climb back up, were located on private property and "No Trespassing" signs were posted on the area. Boulders were used to designate roadways and prevent vehicles from parking on the riverbank. Ordinances were passed to alleviate parking and traffic problems.
- ASSESSMENT:** Blue Hole Park was transformed into a safe, family park, virtually free of crime and disorder. Calls for police service were nearly eliminated, traffic problems were alleviated, and pedestrians are now able to safely park and walk along the riverbank. Individuals under the influence of alcohol or other illegal drugs were not endangering themselves. The amount of litter has been reduced substantially.
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SCANNING

Georgetown is located on the "Main Street" of Texas, Interstate Highway 35, just 20 minutes north of Austin. Blue Hole Park is in the heart of Georgetown on a stretch of the South San Gabriel River and is surrounded by limestone cliffs, shrouded in vines and overhung with live oak trees. The Imhoff Dam in Blue Hole Park runs across the river and creates a unique, picturesque swimming hole.

Before Georgetown was established in 1848, the spring-fed waters drew Indian tribes, whose artifacts have been found all around the park area. Since the early decade of this century, Blue Hole Park has provided special memories for many longtime Georgetown residents who remember the area as the site where they learned to swim or the place where they were baptized.

In recent years, however, Blue Hole Park has become a trouble spot where alcohol-related crimes and accidents frequently occurred. For several years, between the months of May and August a large percentage of the total calls for police services for the central district were to Blue Hole Park. The calls included drowning, disorderly conduct, fighting, public intoxication, drug offenses, assaults, aggravated assaults, indecent exposure, sexual assaults/rape, robbery, and a double suicide.

These calls for service constantly tied up beat officers who patrolled the area.

Given the small department size, this, at times, left only one officer to patrol the entire city. This not only caused safety problems for the single officer, but it deprived citizens in other parts of the city of desired police services.

During the summer months, the park was used predominately by out-of-town visitors from the Dallas, Houston, Austin metropolitan areas and from the Killeen area that included soldiers stationed at Fort Hood Army Base, the largest military installation in the world. Many of the patrons who visited had little or no vested interest in the life of the park.

Over time, the park became littered with broken bottles, cans and trash. Additionally, environmental problems occurred due to random parking on the ecologically fragile banks, which resulted in four feet deep silt in the water along the banks on the park side opposite the enticing cliffs.

It is believed that the “undesirable element” was drawn to the park due to several reasons. The location of the park is somewhat isolated and not in the public view. This gave the impression that the park was, “out of sight, out of mind.” The park had a reputation had become a “party place” and created the perception that nobody cared and that rules and laws would not be enforced.

In 1994, the Georgetown Police Services Division adopted a philosophy of policing that is an interactive, results-oriented process between the police and community. The process is information driven and should create partnerships between the

police and employees, the division, and those we serve; identify problems that impact the quality of life in the community; devise strategies to address those problems; and work collaboratively to solve them by utilizing all resources available. The goal of the process is that Georgetown be a competent community in the pursuit of peace and tranquility.

ANALYSIS

Driven by this philosophy, Sergeant David Morgan, evening watch commander, identified Blue Hole Park as a significant public safety problem in the city and began to gather the pertinent data. In April 1995, Sergeant Morgan, along with evening Officers, Robert Newell and Fred Pitcher, started a problem-solving project for Blue Hole Park.

Through personal observations and from past calls for service it was obvious that the city had many public safety issues at Blue Hole Park. It was decided that the goal of this project would be to eliminate the public safety issues and return Blue Hole to a “family” park where families could swim, fish, have quiet picnics along the shores of the South San Gabriel River and enjoy the natural beauty of the landscape. The officers felt that if the reputation of the park could be changed, then many of the other problems would cease.

The team of officers met with a neighborhood group living in the park area to identify the problems. Reports taken by officers over the years were reviewed and all of the collected data was analyzed. The major problems were identified as follows:

1. Patrons under the influence of alcohol were jumping and diving from 30 feet high cliffs into the river resulting in injuries and drowning.
2. Excessive alcohol consumption was contributing to crime and disorder.
3. A narrow road that ran parallel to the river could not accommodate traffic.
4. There was no designated parking, which caused 85 or more cars to be parked randomly along the banks of the river.

5. At peak times, as many as 200 pedestrians walked in the way of vehicular traffic.
6. Emergency vehicles had difficulty maneuvering through the park to respond to medical and rescue calls.
7. The only road into the park exited into a neighborhood where many children played throughout the summer.
8. Massive erosions and ecological damage had occurred to the riverbank on the park side.
9. People living in the surrounding neighborhood feared for their safety.
10. Vandalism and careless damage had been done to a historical cemetery bordering the park.
11. A disproportional amount of the city's crime was occurring in the Blue Hole Park.

The first step taken in addressing the problems at Blue Hole Park was to further analyze the calls for service to the area in order to identify root causes. It was determined that the majority of calls were alcohol related.

RESPONSE

The police enacted a "zero tolerance" policy for Blue Hole Park and began to patrol the area more frequently. All city ordinances and state laws were strictly enforced. During the first month of this enforcement posture, police issued over 200 citations and made many arrests.

Violations included various traffic offenses, glass bottles in the park, juvenile runaways, warrant arrests, possession of drugs and narcotics, minor in possession of alcohol, public intoxication and driving while intoxicated. Through an analysis of the citations and arrests made, it was learned that over 90 percent of the people committing these offenses were not local residents but were from out of town.

The next problem solving focus was the primary attraction to Blue Hole—the cliffs. People with coolers of beer flocked to the park on the weekends to walk across the dam and go to the top of the cliffs. They would then jump off and climb back up.

Officers contacted the people who had control of the cliff area. The land is a 52-acre lot that lies between the North and South San Gabriel Rivers. It was thought that the cliff side was part of the park and that it was all right if people went over there. After research it was found that the Resolution Trust Corporation (RTC.) Division of the Federal Government owned the land.

Through investigation, officers determined that Dick Matz Real Estate was the representing agency selling the land for RTC. A representative for Dick Matz advised that the land was being leased by a Georgetown resident by the name of Luther Laubach. Mr. Laubach was using the land for his cattle. Officers contacted Mr. Laubach and confirmed that he was indeed leasing the land.

After learning of the project, Mr. Laubach supported the efforts completely and agreed to assist by prosecuting anyone found on his property for criminal trespass. He not only was angered by the trash that was left on his property, but he was also angry over the fact that he had fences cut and gates left opened. He also said he did not want to be liable for the safety of people who were on his property illegally. Mr. Laubach agreed to let the city post "No Trespassing" signs on the cliffs, and he sent us a letter stating his concerns.

The officers also developed a plan for the control of vehicular traffic in and around Blue Hole Park. Other parks in the city used the placement of large boulders to define roadways and to regulate parking. Texas Crushed Stone (TCS), a local quarry, donated the boulders.

The boulders were placed along the roadway, away from the water's edge, to prevent vehicles from parking near the water. This would not only control the number of cars parking in the park but also would prevent the contamination of the water by fluids that leak from the vehicles, such as motor oil and gasoline.

By limiting the parking inside the park, consideration had to be given to what would happen to the overflow cars. We did not want to cause the overflow parking to end up in the neighborhood.

Additional no parking zones were recommended along Scenic Drive, the residential road at the exit to Blue Hole. Houses are only built on the South side of the road and the majority of the residents do not park on the North side of the road.

By denying parking along the street by the exit, the residents in that area would not be burdened with unwanted cars in their neighborhood. The officers proposed adding parallel parking on Rock Street, near the entrance to Blue Hole.

The officers discovered that current one-way and no parking signs installed in the park were unenforceable due to the lack of a city ordinance establishing them. The officers contacted the City Attorneys' office and talked to Assistant City Attorney Sheree Rabee.

The creation of city ordinances covering the Blue Hole Park roadway was discussed. The officers created several new ordinances that would establish the road as a public road, define each no parking zone in and around the park, establish a speed limit for the road and officially designate the road as one-way.

While developing a response to the problems, the officers learned that there were other issues that needed to be considered in the response.

1. The residential area surrounding Blue Hole Park is primarily a minority community who had historically been omitted from the decision making process regarding the area.
2. There was sentiment and nostalgia from the larger community regarding the tradition of the cliffs.
3. There was much concern in the neighborhood about the disregard of the historical cemetery.

4. The Parks and Recreation Department had obtained a grant from the Texas Parks and Wildlife for funds to build a hike and bike trail along the San Gabriel River Corridor that would include Blue Hole Park.
5. There were resource and budgetary concerns for implementation of the project plan.
6. Neighborhood residents wanted uniformity in the treatment of Blue Hole Park: same appearance; same rules as other parks in the community. (If other parks did not prohibit alcohol, neither should Blue Hole.)

All of these issues were primary factors in guiding the project process and in developing strategies for implementation.

The officers developed a comprehensive plan for the park. The officers met with Randy Morrow, Director of the Parks and Recreation Department. Mr. Morrow was very enthusiastic about our proposal and said it would fit in well with the proposed hike and bike trail. The plan was presented to Police Chief Harry Hesser.

During the first week of May 1995, Chief Hesser presented the officers' plan to the Division Directors of the city. Randy Morrow was at the meeting along with Jim Briggs, Director of Community Owned Utilities (COU). COU is also responsible for street maintenance. The directors liked the plan. Mr. Briggs proposed using a pipe and cable system instead of the boulders. This was the only alternative suggestion for the plan.

On May 11, 1995, the officers brought their plan before the Citizens Police Advisory Committee (CPAC) and the Parks and Recreation Road's Public Safety Committee. The plan received a unanimous approval from the members of both committees. With the help of a member of the CPAC, a meeting was scheduled with the community surrounding Blue Hole Park. On June 1, 1995, officers presented their plan to the neighborhood.

After a brief question and answer session the plan was unanimously approved. The boulder approach was liked more than the pipe and cable approach.

The community had strong concerns about the preservation of the cemetery. They strongly opposed the use of pipe and cable near the cemetery.

The officers then presented the community reaction to the Parks and Recreation Department and to COU. The Parks and Recreation Department liked the boulder approach. By using the boulders the park would mirror those of other city parks. There was some opposition from COU about using the boulders primarily because of the cost and lack of manpower and equipment in transporting the boulders to the park.

Chief Hesser was approached and told about the opposition that the officers were encountering. Chief Hesser met with Jim Briggs and an alternative source was found to move the boulders. It was determined that trucks from a local business would be used. The JC Evans Company was used to transport the boulders.

On June 17, 1995, officers met with Colonel Pearson of the Fort Hood Provost Marshall's Office. The meeting was held at Blue Hole Park. Colonel Pearson was told about the public safety issues and concerns in Blue Hole Park. He was told about the fact that soldiers from Fort Hood were often a part of the problem. Sgt. Morgan shared with Colonel Pearson the plan.

It was further explained to the Colonel that the cliff side was private property and the owner requested that the criminal trespass statute be enforced disallowing jumping and diving from the cliffs. He agreed to relay the information to his soldiers and we agreed to inform his office about any violations committed by Fort Hood soldiers.

Throughout the entire project pictures were taken of the problems associated with the park. On June 27, 1995, a slide program and a video were presented to the Council. At this meeting the Police Division presented the proposed city ordinance changes to the City Council. The Council approved the plan.

The Council passed the ordinances submitted by the police and the City Attorney. The Council reviewed the hike and bike trail plans to see if the two plans

were in conflict in any way and determined that they were not.

The plan was immediately started and the improvements were under way. Patrol Commander Lieutenant Kevin Stoffe met with TCS and obtained the boulders. The boulders were transported and installed by COU under the direction of street department supervisor Mark Miller. In all, the JC Evans Company transported and the city street department personnel strategically placed approximately 260 tons of boulders.

The one-way signs and no parking signs were installed. The no trespassing signs were also installed on the cliff side and officers began to enforce the criminal trespass statute. Community Service Restitution (CSR) workers were utilized to clear brush and pick up trash in order to beautify the park. A large wooden sign was made by Georgetown High School students and was installed at the entrance to the park. The sign welcomed people to the park and listed several ordinances pertaining to the park area.

Jim Briggs also contacted Williamson County and found out that they owned a lot near the entrance to the park. The lot was cleaned and was used for overflow parking. The entire Blue Hole Park plan was completed prior to our target date of July 4, 1995.

ASSESSMENT

Blue Hole Park was finally turned around. The traffic flow was now orderly, safe and efficient during peak periods. Pedestrians in the park could now walk safely along the river's edge. Individuals under the influence of alcohol or other illegal drugs were not endangering themselves by jumping off the 30' cliffs.

The clientele of the park has shifted from drunks and rowdies to families and children. There has been a major reduction in the amount of trash left at the park. Undesirable and criminal behavior is now non-existent. We have seen the calls for police service reduced to near zero. We realize there has been a short time between implementation of the plan and the writing of this project paper. But, we

believe this short evaluation period is an accurate forecast for the future of the park.

Blue Hole Park was once a blemish in the heart of a quiet little community in Central Texas. Blue Hole has once again become a family park proving to be that special get-a-way place.

As we conclude our POP project on Blue Hole Park we are able to look back and take great pleasure in what we have accomplished. The concept of problem-solving policing is relatively new to our department. Other projects have been done in the city with success and have been proven to be valuable learning tools for us. This project, however, has come to be known as the flagship for our department and the rest of the city government in conducting public safety problem solving processes.

This project could not have been accomplished without the cooperation and support of many people who devoted their time, equipment, and effort to assist us in meeting our goal.

As we all know, it is difficult to get all of the other city departments involved in a problem-oriented policing process. In this particular case, personnel from the other departments were shocked by the impact this project had on their resources.

After their initial shock, they provided all the necessary resources to accomplish our goal. In an effort to communicate our appreciation and to keep this kind of teamwork alive, the police employees involved in this project expressed their heartfelt thanks to the other city employees by serving them a grilled steak meal in Blue Hole Park.

Figure #1

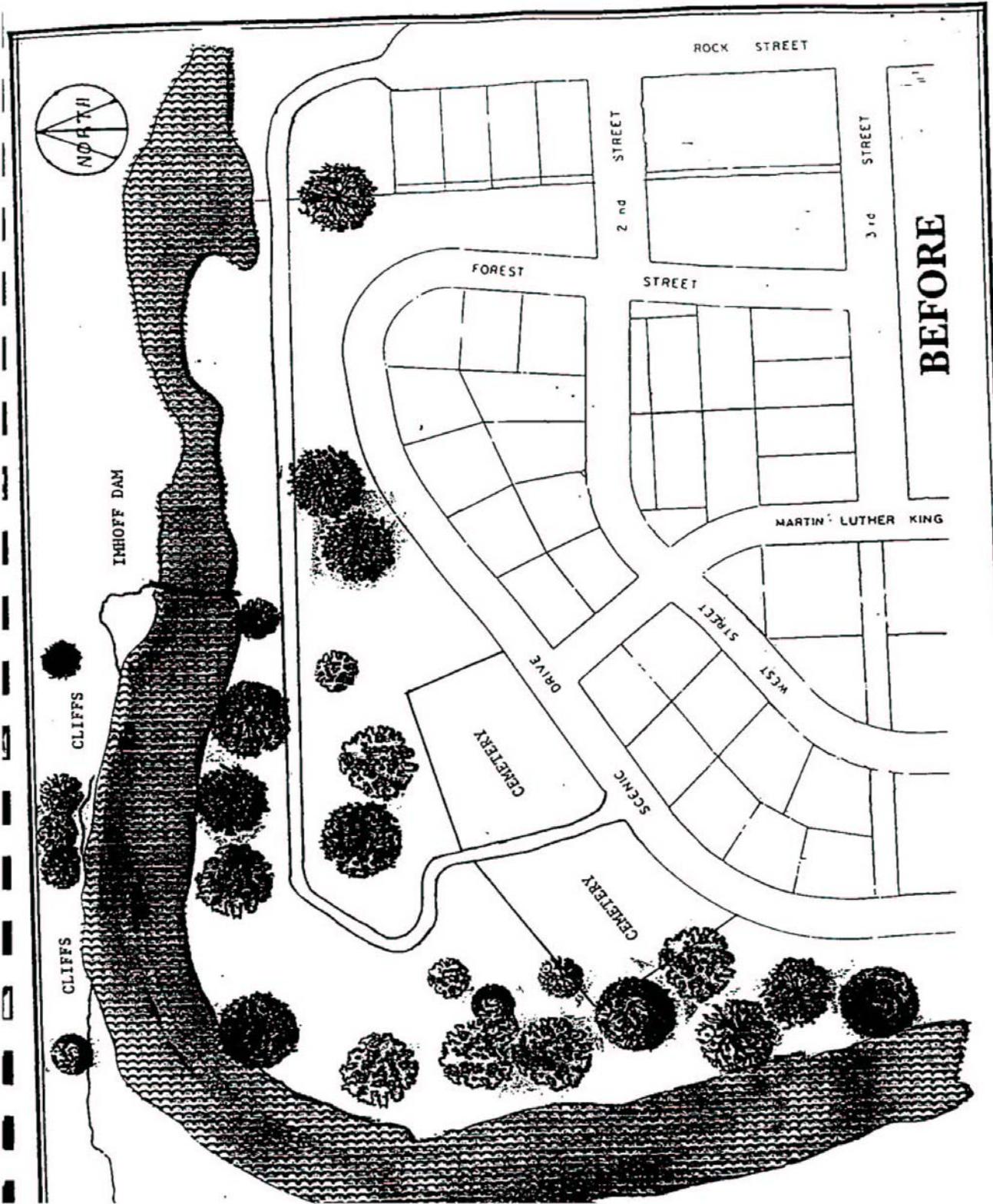


Figure #2

