

Big city parks & rec: making it work

» ANTHONY R. WISE, Division Manager City of Houston -
Parks & Recreation Sports Field Management Section



Facility & Operations By Anthony Wise

HOW WOULD YOU LIKE TO MANAGE 75 BASEBALL FIELDS, 31 softball fields, 88 soccer fields, 28 football fields and 2 lacrosse fields in a city where there is a demand for field use 52 weeks a year? All this with a staff of 15 fulltime employees and 6 seasonal employees? That is what my staff and I face within the City of Houston's Parks and Recreation Department.

In January 2007, under the direction of department director Joe Turner and deputy director Abel Gonzales, the Sports Field Management Division was formed. The adopted mission is to develop and maintain quality sports fields and facilities that encourage and create recreation, fitness and social opportunities for residents of Houston. Over the past 2 years we have learned many lessons with regards to user demand and our challenge to provide and maintain safe playing surfaces under intense field use. I have found that there are several keys to successfully managing sports fields in a city the size of Houston:

- Establish operating procedures that clearly define maintenance standards
- Develop budget strategies that maximize available resources
- Promote programs that encourage community participation in maintaining the fields
- Effectively communicate the mission and vision for your maintenance operation

Every successful team has a game plan. Our game plan is our "Standard Operating Procedures" (SOP) manual. This is a formal document that outlines an overall maintenance system for sports field care, establishes a field classification system and address the administration and permitting of sports fields. The SOP sets the standard of performance for our staff and applies to all field user groups.

In 2008 our department permitted 224 sport fields. Each field is classified based on SOP standards. There are three field classifications: Competitive/Tournament Field; Recreation Field; and Practice Field. The Sports Field Management (SFM) staff maintains 23

Competitive/Tournament field and 28 Recreation fields. Competitive level fields are used by permit only. Practice is not allowed on these fields and they are closed unless permitted for a game or tournament. Recreational level fields are open for public use; practice is allowed and can be permitted for games or practice. Practice level fields have no restrictions.

Field maintenance standards

- Total hours permitted limited to 50 hours per week for Softball/Baseball and 32 hours per week for Soccer, Football and Lacrosse.
- 600 cumulative permitted hours will constitute the Softball/Baseball field being taken out of service for a "rest period" of 28 consecutive days and 400 cumulative permitted hours for Soccer, Football and Lacrosse fields.
- The "rest period" will commence on the Monday following the cumulative contact hour limit.
- Extended contact hours will result in an extended "rest period". Sports Field Management will decide on the extended period based on field inspection.
- Turf and playing surface rebuilding program would commence as soon as the field is out and be completed within the first four days. This includes aerating, overseeding, fertilizing, topdressing and scheduled maintenance.
- Fields will be closed for inclement weather as determined by SFM staff. Determining factors are: How much precipitation has occurred? Is there standing water on the field? Is the field safe to play on? What kind and how much damage could occur if field remains open?
- Competitive Level Field maintenance includes: weekly field inspections; daily litter removal; daily skinned area maintenance; mowing/trimming (2x/week in March through October, 1x/week November through February); daily field marking, when permitted, Monday through Friday; and warm-season turfgrass maintenance program.

- Recreational Level Field maintenance includes: weekly field inspections; 2x/week litter removal; 2x/week skin maintenance; mowing/trimming (1x/week March through October, as needed November through February); field marking when permitted for games; and warm-season turfgrass maintenance program.

- Practice Level Field maintenance includes: monthly field inspections; litter removal every 3 days; skin maintenance once biweekly; and mowing/trimming every 10 days. Field marking becomes the responsibility of the permit group when permit begins.

The SOP also outlines our administrative and record keeping functions. Daily work assignments (tasks) are detailed on work order tracking forms. The crew supervisor notes tasks performed and completion time, travel, equipment and supplies used. This data is entered into a database that enables me to generate reports that help to quickly identify whether we are meeting our maintenance standards, track costs associated with field maintenance and compare cost versus revenue per field.

Municipalities across the nation are forced by today's economic downturn to tighten their budgets. Houston is no exception. As this article is

being written we are exploring ways to continue providing a high level of service to our community while reducing costs. The most important resource a sports turf manager can have when preparing a budget is data.

Look at the number of fields you are responsible for maintaining. Know the square foot or acreage of all your fields. Know what it cost to maintain fields at the various field classifications.

Some considerations that must be taken into account when preparing your budget are the expectation of the field user and city officials. Resources must be allocated strategically so as to maintain established standards. The sports turf manager must be aware of how their fields are being used for practice, for example, are user groups

allowed to exceed field capacity hours? This will greatly affect you budget allocation. We have found that by encouraging community participation in sports turf maintenance we are able to stretch our budget dollars.

We promote community involvement in sports field maintenance through our "Adopt-a-Sports Field" program. This program welcomes organizations or individuals who wish to "adopt" a sports field in lieu of paying permitting fees associated with the use of ball fields. This adoption



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Field Technician

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is available for youth leagues only. We currently have 75 fields that are adopted and maintained by youth organizations. We have had an increase in participation each year since the program's inception in 2005.

Youth organizations enter into an agreement with the Parks and Recreation Department to provide field maintenance for a 6-month period. All maintenance tasks are clearly defined. The organization essentially agrees to perform field maintenance at our Recreational Field level. The organization conducts weekly field inspections and forwards the report to my office. My staff inspects each adopted field monthly to ensure compliance with maintenance standards.

Our sports field staff conducts two field maintenance clinics each year. We invite all Adopt-a-Sports Field participants and other field use groups to attend. We review maintenance standards, explain our field inspection form and demonstrate proper maintenance procedures. An annual meeting is held each year with field users where department guidelines are reviewed. The objective is to have open lines of communication with our user groups.

I am always looking for opportunities to speak with field users. It could be at a field maintenance clinic that we host or the opening day of little league season. My job is to educate and inform individuals, and organizations on proper field maintenance techniques, tools or supplies that will enable them to be effective in maintaining sports fields.

To facilitate communication with city officials, department directors, recreation program managers, and the general public we are working on the enhancement of our department

website. This generation depends more and more on web-based information. Using our department website offers us the opportunity to convey our mission and vision.

Our goal is to have a website that communicates field standards, procedures for permitting fields, field locations and the ability to voice comments or express concerns regarding their field use experience. We will use the site to feature a monthly article with field maintenance tips and our exceptional fields along with the responsible staff. The site will list current programs and highlighting historical event such as the 2008 Division II Women Softball and Lacrosse Championship and the USA Olympic Softball Team exhibition game.

The positive impact of sports facilities at the community level is frequently overlooked.

Every city would like to boost about the "quality of life" it provides for the residents. By providing safe, playable and aesthetically pleasing fields, we enhance the "quality of life" in our community. Yes, you too can make a difference in your community.

Thanks to the many members of STMA who have shared their winning strategies with me. Thanks also to my department director Joe Turner and deputy director Abel Gonzales who encourage my staff and I to take advantage of training opportunities through STMA, Texas Turfgrass Association and numerous video resources. ■

Anthony R. Wise is Division Manager for the Sports Field Management Section, City of Houston-Parks & Recreation.

EXHIBIT E Level 1 Maintenance Schedule

Field Name: _____ Address: _____
 Type of Field: _____

Condition: _____ Compaction: _____
 Type of Grass: _____ Drainage: _____
 Type of Mower: _____ Irrigation: _____
 Type of Soil: _____ Thatch: _____

Soil Test: _____ Notes: _____
 Date: _____ Nitrogen: _____
 pH: _____ Phosphor: _____
 Potassium: _____

Time of Year	Fertilization	Aeration	Topdress	Overseed	1/3 Rule Mowing Ht.	Watering	Weed Control
March	24-6-12 w/ 50% SCU 1lb. N				1 1/2"	As Needed	Pre-Emergent Herbicide
April					1"	As Needed	Apply Ant Bait
May	21-0-0 1 1/2 lb. N	Core 4" 2 Directions	Drag Cores		1"	3/8" - 3x per week	
June	21-0-0 1 1/2 lb. N	Solid Tine			1"	3/8" - 3x per week	Post-Emergent Herbicide
July		Solid Tine			1"	3/8" - 3x per week	
August	24-6-12 w/ 50% SCU 1 lb. N				1"	3/8" - 3x per week	Post-Emergent Herbicide As Needed
September		Core 4" 2 Directions	Drag Cores		1"	3/8" - 3x per week	Apply Ant Bait
October	21-0-0 1/2lb. N	Verticle mow before overseeding		Perennial Rye 12 lbs.	1 1/2"	Light & Frequent	
November				Perennial Rye 3 lbs.	2"	As Needed	
December					2"	As Needed	
January	21-0-0 1/2lb. N				2"	As Needed	
February					2"	As Needed	

*FERTILIZER N-P-K BASED ON SOIL AND TISSUE ANALYSIS.
 **APPLICATION RATE SHOULD YEILD 6LBS. N PER YEAR.



➤ **MIGUEL BARROSO**, Field Supervisor