MEMORANDUM

Date: April 7, 2016

To: Parks & Recreation Commission

Cc: Josh Durand, Parks Superintendent

From: Parks and Recreation Dept. and Project Partners

Project: PRC 2016-12 Nunaka Valley Learning Labs at Russian Jack Springs Park

INTRODUCTION

The Parks and Recreation Commission is asked to approve a proposed plan to install Learning Lab facilities at Russian Jack Springs Park to complement educational programs at nearby Nunaka Valley Elementary School.

Russian Jacks Springs Park is classified as a Special Use Area park located immediately across Boniface Parkway from Nunaka Valley Elementary School in East Anchorage. The Park is nearly 300 acres in size with the proposed project area encompassing three separate installations of Learning Lab improvements, roughly 400 square feet each (20 feet by 20 feet), and located in the southeast quadrant of the south park parcel near Boniface Parkway. Improvements outlined in this packet identify the intent and design of the three Learning Lab locations with interpretive and educational focuses specific to each location.

The first Learning Lab (Hydrology) is proposed to be installed at the lighted loop intersection and bridge crossing at the Russian Jack Spring, just southeast and downhill of the Lidia Selkregg Chalet. The second Lab (Fauna) is proposed at the intersection of the lighted loop with the Spur Trail leading to Boniface Parkway and Nunaka Valley Elementary School. The last installation (Flora) is proposed at the lighted loop trail intersection with the service drive accessing the former picnic shelter location, just south of the parking area on Boniface Parkway. The Learning Lab locations have been identified by teachers and administrators for their ability to be accessed by elementary students ranging in age from 5 years old to 12 years old and appropriate for those with mobility challenges.

BACKGROUND

The improvements were initially identified and requested by second-grade students in the spring of 2014 with handwritten letters to the Executive Director of the Anchorage Park Foundation, Beth Nordlund. Upon receipt of the letters she and Alaska Chapter ASLA members Kevin Doniere and Jonny Hayes were invited to a student site walk and presentation of their projects and interests.

The students had visited the park bi-weekly with their teachers, Jessica Nesset and Janell Larson, throughout the school year and had found areas of the Park needing improvements. The students specifically asked for park entry signage, wayfinding signage, improvements to the pedestrian tunnel connecting the Park to their neighborhood school, learning spaces, and interpretive signage educating the public about the history, flora, and fauna of the Park and surroundings. Students were also enthused about educating the public about stewardship and took it upon themselves to lead by example, cleaning up litter and notifying teachers of vandalism along the way.
This Nunaka Valley Learning Labs project was borne of these initial efforts of Nunaka Valley ES students and teachers and has since been refined based on input from MOA Parks and Recreation, UAF Cooperative Extension Service, the National Park Service: Rivers, Trails and Conservation Assistance Program, Alaska Pacific University, and other public and private “Schools on Trails” project partners. The Learning Labs project has twice been supported with resolutions of support from the Russian Jack Community Council, including unanimous support for the design features as presented herein. The project is slated to be installed with funding made available as an Anchorage Park Foundation Challenge Grant upon Parks and Recreation Commission approval.

PURPOSE
This project is one of two Schools on Trails pilot projects, pairing schools with agency and professional partners in an effort to improve education through outdoor observation and experience in public spaces. The other pilot project identified is the rehabilitation of Westchester Lagoon Nature Trail at Margaret Eagan Sullivan Park in Valley of the Moon. The purpose of the Learning Labs, Interpretive Signage, and Wayfinding Signage improvements at Russian Jack Springs Park is to create and designate spaces for teachers and students to participate in studies and share resources and information with the greater public. Permanent Learning Labs that serve as an interpretive feature are strongly desired by the students and staff at Nunaka Valley ES. The Labs will be identifiable as classroom destinations for students, and function as learning “hubs” for further exploration within the Park. Learning Lab features have been designed to minimize negative activity to the extent possible while providing utility and function. Readily available and durable materials are identified to reduce the effects of vandalism and make repair quick and easy.

PLANNING AND PUBLIC INVOLVEMENT
Public involvement is an important component of any site design process, especially in a community park and public asset as popular and well used as Russian Jack Springs Park. Two full years of project outreach and support have been undertaken to ensure the improvements are appropriate, desired and in alignment with community user groups.

Outreach has included the development and coordination of the project with Nunaka Valley ES students, teachers, and administrators; and agency partners including UAF Cooperative Extension Service and National Park Service. In addition, local community groups were involved by way of community council meetings, school and family night events, and presentations to professional organizations such as the Engineers Without Borders Alaska Chapter. Jessica Nesset, Janell Larson, Troy Nesset, Kevin Doniere, Jonny Hayes, Kay Shoemaker, Jennifer Howell, Paul Clark, Heather Rice, and Brendan Stuart have all been active participants in reaching out and providing input on the project. Jessica Nesset and Jonny Hayes serve as Project Champions for the Schools on Trails Challenge Grant. Troy Nesset has developed and refined layout and design concepts with input from many. The Parks and Recreation Department was briefed of milestones and has collaborated with the Nunaka Valley Learning Labs team to address issues and opportunities particular to the Park during design development.

STUDENT PARTICIPATION
The youth have played an important role in the development of the concept and content for this Project. Students and their teachers at Nunaka Valley are the champions and stewards of the Park. Approximately 95 students now visit the park bi-weekly for educational and recreational purposes. Ms. Nesset and Ms. Larson have dedicated significant time and energy, with support from school administration, to develop outdoor education opportunities at the Park within and among their peers by leading excursions, collecting and sharing lesson plan materials, and by engaging students in an exemplary way. Students have responded and exceeded expectations in many instances, as overall behavior and attendance improved leading up to field days. The students are highly observant and absorb the world around them, seeking ways to improve and make positive contributions along the way. A significant number of the elementary students have presented in public in support of the project and have participated and shared enthusiasm during family night events and class projects.
DESIGN CONSIDERATIONS AND INTENT

Considerations for the design were based upon discussions with school staff, students, and Anchorage Parks and Recreation Department staff. A goal was that the solution be versatile, functional, resilient, and contextually appropriate for locations along a multi-use path in a well forested and naturally aesthetic park. The Learning Lab features lightweight aluminum seats that will travel with students from the school to the Park. The aluminum seat also serves as a durable clipboard for carrying materials and upon which to write, and can serve as a desk surface. The Labs will be laid out to encourage student involvement in outdoor lessons while providing the teacher a platform from which to teach and oversee the Lab and students effectively. When not in use by students, the Learning Labs provide an interactive, contextual, and sculptural presence with which other park users may engage.

Wood posts are oversized and will be embedded a minimum of four feet into compacted gravel to prevent extraction by vandals. Posts are intended to be painted Park Brown to facilitate repairing graffiti. Students and artist partners may be given the opportunity to paint posts with a theme appropriate to each Learning Lab to further inspire and engage passers-by. Steel mesh or expanded sheet metal materials are specified for the “Talking Board” teacher and student presentation space to minimize marking surfaces and visual obtrusiveness, and to discourage vandalism while providing a necessary temporary display function. In addition to the Seat Post portable seats, teachers and staff will bring magnetic clips or hooks to hang or display material on the Talking Board.

The Learning Lab surface areas will be minimally sloped with fine-textured aggregate and compacted to provide a stable surface to ensure access for staff, students, or the public with mobility challenges. Ample space (36” minimum, 60” typical) will be provided between Seat Posts to allow for access and maneuvering through the space by all.

The Learning Labs are intended to be set back from the trail and connected with a gravel surface or short trail to serve as a pull-off space and to prevent active recreation user conflicts with students stopped along the trail. Vertical elements will be set back from the trail edge a minimum of 24”, 48” typical, and will be field-located to meet or exceed the offset distances of trees and light poles in the vicinity and along the trail.

EDUCATIONAL USES AND RESOURCES

The park is currently being accessed by roughly 75 students bi-weekly. Once the Learning Labs are installed, the goal is that visits will become more frequent and the park will be used by more students and staff. The Nunaka Valley ES teaching staff is supportive and is working collaboratively to institute outdoor learning and cross-curriculum lessons using the Labs. The defined location should increase the confidence of teachers taking their students beyond the four walls of the school, and will give students a clear and obvious gathering space for learning.

Most if not all lessons taught inside the school could be taught in the proposed Labs and encourage curiosity with enrichment and excitement added from being outdoors. Students in Ms. Nesset’s class have found Russian Jack Springs Park to be “theirs,” and have become advocates and stewards of the park. With the outdoor Labs, students in other classrooms will begin to feel that sense of ownership and pride towards the park as well, with the hope that the stewards of the future are engaged and active in their community park.

Ms. Nesset and Ms. Larson have created learning wagons to carry instructional supplies such as tape measures, clipboards, emergency kits, pencils, and magnifying glasses for exploring and learning within the park. These resources were made possible by an Anchorage Schools Foundation grant. Many of the teachers at Nunaka Valley ES have taken outdoor instruction classes, such as Project Learning Tree and Project WILD courses, to encourage safe, engaging lessons presented in the Park and Labs, aligned with Common Core State Standards for teaching.
The administration of Nunaka Valley ES and its teachers are excited to incorporate the park into weekly lessons with various grade levels. This project is envisioned as developing spaces and places to be used for years to come by current and future staff and students. The students who experienced learning outdoors in years past have successfully persuaded subsequent teachers to take their learning outside. Becoming stewards for our community and our Park will be a trait that continues to define Nunaka Valley students and carries from Pre-K through 5th Grade, and beyond.

INTERPRETIVE MATERIALS

Alaska Pacific University has entered into a partnership with the Nunaka Valley ES Learning Labs project to assist with developing interpretive and educational material. Notably, classes of both undergraduate and graduate students are involved with a community interpretation challenge project at Nunaka Valley. The instructors for the BA in Outdoor Studies (Interpretation) and MS in Outdoor Environmental Education (Research Methods) have stepped in to support the Learning Labs. As part of this project, students will submit designs related to the tunnel, trail elements, and Learning Lab themes (flora, fauna, stream/hydrology). Selected student designs and content win an award and are finalized for printing.

These students have four class workshop days with Kay Shoemaker-Howell at UAF Cooperative Extension Service, and homework in the form of designing elements for the Learning Labs that are place-based, would be fun for elementary students, and would engage these students in exploring and interacting with the natural world in their outdoor learning labs. In addition, the APU students have joined Ms. Nesset and Ms. Larson on class field trips to Russian Jack Springs Park as chaperones to interact and enjoy outdoor learning with NVES students.

Final Lab interpretive material designs are due in early May.

PARTNERSHIPS

This project has gained widespread support and has benefited from establishment of multiple partnerships to advance outdoor learning and understanding. The following partners are recognized as having provided significant technical expertise, chaperone assistance, financial support, and administrative capacity to help move this project and mission forward. The Parks and Recreation Department will provide additional guidance as appropriate in final planning and construction.

- Anchorage Parks and Recreation – Technical Expertise + Programming Support
- Anchorage Park Foundation - Challenge Grant Award
- U.S. Department of the Interior - Schools on Trails Program Administrator
- University of Alaska Fairbanks Cooperative Extension Service – Outdoor Education Resources
- National Park Service: Rivers, Trails, and Conservation Assistance Program – Technical Resources
- Alaska Chapter of the American Society of Landscape Architects – Technical Assistance + Project Support
- Anchorage School District Health and Physical Education Department – Advocacy, Agency + Technical Support
- Engineers Without Borders – Volunteer Construction Resources
- Alaska Pacific University – Interpretive Material Development

STAFF RECOMMENDATION

The Parks and Recreation Department recommends that the Parks and Recreation Commission adopt the attached resolution of support for the proposed Learning Lab installation at Russian Jack Springs Park.
Resolution No. 2016-11
Russian Jack Springs Park Learning Laboratories with Nunaka Valley Elementary School

WHEREAS, the Anchorage Parks and Recreation Commission serves in an advisory capacity to both the Mayor and the Assembly; and

WHEREAS, the Anchorage Parks and Recreation Commission has the responsibility and duty to provide for the long term vision of our park system by ensuring that a balance of parks, natural resources, and recreation facilities provides for the health, welfare, and safety of all residents of the Anchorage Bowl; and

WHEREAS, the Anchorage Bowl Park, Natural Resource, and Recreation Facility Plan recommends development of facilities in support of School-Park Partnerships to enhance the potential community benefits of such associations; and

WHEREAS, the Schools on Trails program—under the Anchorage Trails Initiative of the Anchorage Economic Development Corporation, Live.Work.Play—is supported by the Anchorage Park Foundation with a challenge grant to develop the Learning Labs with Nunaka Valley Elementary School; and

WHEREAS, the grantees have worked with the school and community to develop plans to improve portions of Russian Jack Springs Park and install features to establish the Learning Lab areas under the challenge grant and Schools on Trails programs; and

WHEREAS, the Learning Labs would be a valuable asset to the community and enhance the park for educational use and increase appreciation for natural resource values of the park, in particular the flora, fauna, and streams; now, therefore,

BE IT RESOLVED, that the Anchorage Parks and Recreation Commission approves the proposed plans for the Learning Labs at Russian Jack Springs Park generally as proposed.

PASSED AND APPROVED by the Anchorage Parks and Recreation Commission this 14th day of April 2016.

____________________________________
Chair
Parks and Recreation Commission

ATTEST:

____________________________________
John H. Rodda, Director,
Parks & Recreation Department
Leave No Trace.
Enjoy Our Learning Space!

The Nunaka Valley Elementary School trail connection to Russian Jack Springs Park and Learning Labs is part of the Schools on Trails initiative to promote outdoor learning, student health and environmental education.

For more information visit www.anchoragemunicipality.org/programs/trails-initiative/school-visitor-camps
STUDENT SEAT

ALUMINUM CAP
- Protects wood post from elements
- Will not rust
- Heavy gauge to prevent denting
- Easily cleaned

WOOD POST
- 10"x10"
- Pressure treated lumber
- Maintenance-free
- Slow to deteriorate

WOOD SLOTS
- Variable heights
- Multiple uses
- Accommodates all ages/sizes
- Protected from abuse

ALUMINUM SEAT
- Writing surface
- Mobile seating
- Durable
- Low weight

SCHOOLS ON TRAILS
NUNAKA VALLEY ELEMENTARY
RUSSIAN JACK SPRINGS PARK
TALKING BOARD

ALUMINUM CAP
- Protects wood post from elements
- Will not rust
- Heavy gauge to prevent denting
- Easily cleaned

WOOD POST
- 10"x10"
- Pressure treated lumber
- Maintenance-free
- Slow to deteriorate

EXPANDED METAL BOARD
- Graffiti resistant
- Versatile display
- Low maintenance
- Climbing deterrent

ALUMINUM SUPPORTS
- Tamper resistant
- Low maintenance
- Structurally stable

SCHOOLS ON TRAILS
NUNAKA VALLEY ELEMENTARY
RUSSIAN JACK SPRINGS PARK
LAB ENTRANCE SIGN

ALUMINUM CAP
- Protects wood post from elements
- Will not rust
- Heavy gauge to prevent denting
- Easily cleaned

WOOD POST
- 10"x10"
- Pressure treated lumber
- Maintenance-free
- Slow to deteriorate

LAB IDENTITY SIGNAGE
- Establishes identity of lab
- Provides an entrance marker
- Provides interest in the lab
- Tamper resistant

SCHOOLS ON TRAILS
NUNAKA VALLEY ELEMENTARY
RUSSIAN JACK SPRINGS PARK
INTERPRETIVE SIGN

ALUMINUM CAP
- Protects wood post from elements
- Will not rust
- Heavy gauge to prevent denting
- Easily cleaned

WOOD POST
- 10"x10"
- Pressure treated lumber
- Maintenance-free
- Slow to deteriorate

LAB SIGNAGE
- Based on theme of lab
- Tamper resistant
- Educational component
- Encourages community use

SCHOOLS ON TRAILS
NUNAKA VALLEY ELEMENTARY
RUSSIAN JACK SPRINGS PARK
LEARNING LAB:
20' x 20' = 400 SF
6" DEPTH x 400 SF = 200 CUBIC FEET
COMPACTED IN PLACE

MATERIAL REQUIRED: 12 CY REQ'D
7.5 CUBIC YARDS x 1.6 (LOOSE FILL)

POST FOOTINGS:
20 EACH x 4 CUBIC FEET
48" DEPTH x 1 SF = 4 CUBIC FEET
COMPACTED IN PLACE

MATERIAL REQUIRED: 5 CY REQ'D
3 CUBIC YARDS x 1.6 (LOOSE FILL)
Welcome to Russia in Jack Spring Park.
Here is history about the park.
Jack was from Russia and he flew to Alaska.
And the army asked him if they can use his house for a jail.
When your dog does its business, please pick it up.
Welcome to RJSP here is a QR code if you don't here is some going to help the community by to know
I think the learning space should have some picnic tables.
DEAR LADIES AND GENTLEMEN:

Greetings and Salutations!

We would like to inform you of a proposed project initiated by the Second Grade students at Nunaka Valley Elementary School for education and signage improvements at Russian Jack Springs Park. The project is one of two prioritized for implementation by the Anchorage Schools on Trails Program.

The Schools on Trails Program operates under the umbrella of the Anchorage Economic Development Corporation’s Live.Work.Play. campaign and the Anchorage Trails Initiative. Additional partners of Schools on Trails include representatives of the UAF Cooperative Extension Service, Anchorage School District, Alaska Chapter of the American Society of Landscape Architects, the National Park Service and a growing list of community organizations and individuals.

The Schools on Trails Program seeks an Anchorage Park Foundation Challenge Grant for one of two pilot projects in progress:

☐ Nunaka Valley Elementary School Learning Labs at Russian Jack Springs Park

The project offers a wonderful opportunity as outdoor learning spaces for the neighboring school to educate in the natural environment in accordance with the Common Core Curriculum.

The project also benefits the larger community by providing modest improvements in an existing park that includes wayfinding and park identification signage in areas identified by students and users to help better navigate within the public park.

The Schools on Trails Program supports and seeks an Anchorage Park Foundation Challenge Grant to support the implementation of the Nunaka Valley Elementary School Learning Labs at Russian Jack Springs Park.

Please contact Jonny Hayes (Alaska Chapter ASLA) with requests for additional information.

THANK YOU!
**VISION**

Engage Anchorage schools in nearby trails, parks, streams and natural habitats to educate students and staff about community assets and enrich neighborhoods through increased local awareness. Establish connections with students and create opportunities to share in civic engagement, participate in the project planning process, foster stewardship of our lands, and instill the value of safe public spaces as a key component in the quality of life.

**MISSION**

- Identify and raise awareness of trails, parks, streams and natural habitat near Anchorage schools
- Connect schools and families to these nearby public spaces and encourage outdoor educational opportunities
- Engage staff and students in creation, planning and implementation of improvement projects
- Leverage school interest for project fundraising and long-term success
- Involve students in each step of the process as real-life lessons in civic engagement and project management
- Provide continuing education incentives to school staff and other volunteers for professional participation.

*We are seeking an Anchorage Park Foundation Challenge Grant for the Nunaka Valley Elementary School Learning Labs at Russian Jack Springs Park*
Celebrate the next 100 years of Russian Jack Springs Park by practicing Stewardship!

Russian Jack Springs Park is named for Jacob Marunenko, a Russian emigrant who arrived in Anchorage.

Russian Jack built a cabin located between the natural spring and present-day chalet. The surrounding area became known as Russian Jack Springs.

U.S. Army claimed area lands for wartime security reasons and paid the homesteaders for the confiscation.

After the war, the growing city purchased the land as a war asset. The land was used as a park and prison, known as the “Prison Farm.”

Girl Scouts lease land from city for day camp north portion of park.

Alaska enters Statehood and the prison is closed. The south portion of the park included gardens and an alcohol rehabilitation center.

First ski trails developed in Russian Jack Springs Park.

Lions Club built a camper park off of Boniface Parkway and immediately gave the city a quick claim deed for the land.

Chalet completed and Golf Course construction begins.

Sport field improvements constructed at 6th Ave. and Pine.

Ski chalet repaired after damage by vandals, only to be burned down in 1979.

Chalet rebuilt between 1981-83. Sport field improvements to Cartee Complex north of Debarr Rd. Multi-use trails and lighting installed.

Polar Bear Playground was constructed in North Russian Jack Springs Park.

Nunaka Valley Elementary School
2nd Grade Kindly Reminds You That
THE FUTURE DEPENDS
ON WHAT YOU DO TODAY
DID YOU KNOW? Since 2004, the Anchorage Park Foundation has invested more than $10 million in Anchorage parks, trails and recreation programs. Join us this summer to revitalize parks in your district.

2014
ANCHORAGE TRAILS INITIATIVE

ANCHORAGE PARK FOUNDATION

quotes from letters from Ms. Nesser’s 2nd grade students:

"...we go on nature walks every Wednesday. We would like a learning space like seats and tables."

"My class and I got lost because there are no signs, so we did not know we were in Russian Jack."

"We would like to help build a learning space and visit the greenhouse to learn about plants."

"...we are trying to be stewards and help our neighborhood."

"I would like to tell you that there isn’t a sign telling us that we are in Russian Jack Park."

"I would like to help you with the graffiti on the signs and tunnel. We would like to help you with Russian Jack Springs Park."

NUNAKA VALLEY ELEMENTARY SCHOOL LEARNING LABS AT RUSSIAN JACK SPRINGS PARK

Starting in the fall of 2013 and carrying through the fall spring term of 2014 the Nunaka Valley Elementary School 2nd Grade Class incorporated the neighboring Russian Jack Springs Park for place-based learning activities. Each Wednesday afternoon, Ms. Jessica Nesser (2nd grade teacher), Ms. Jonell Larson (school librarian), and a supporting cast of chaperones would lead the students across the street, through the tunnel below Boniface Parkway, and into Russian Jack Springs Park (RJSP). Along the way and once in the park, the teachers would initiate learning that incorporated the Anchorage School District’s Core Curriculum requirements while promoting community responsibility and stewardship within one of Anchorage’s premier regional parks.

Throughout the experience the students used the inspiring setting to improve their writing, perform scientific observations, and document their surroundings. The walking field trips also generated numerous desires to improve the park and initiated a larger discussion within Nunaka Valley Elementary School about RJSP. In an impressive feat, the 2nd Grade pol led the entire student body with ONLY 36.2% being aware of RJSP, located directly across from the bus drop-off loop. Further evaluations noted that not a single student outside of the 2nd Grade knew about RJSP’s colorful history. Ms. Nesser and Ms. Larson encouraged the students to develop a list of ideas about ways in which to improve the park for the community and for learning, and approached the Anchorage Park Foundation (APF) and the Alaska Chapter of the American Society of Landscape Architects (ASLA) for help.

APF and ASLA came together and met with the students in the classroom as they presented ideas, sketches, and photographs of their visits to the park. The students hosted a site visit asking APF and ASLA representatives to join them, to demonstrate their needs and desires for making RJSP a more accessible place for learning and to enhance their field visits into the park. APF recently received a grant of technical assistance from the National Park Service Rivers, Trails, and Conservation Assistance program to help the students achieve their vision.
Project Cost Estimate

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<td>2. Learning Labs</td>
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<td>3. Trail Improvements</td>
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<td>TOTAL</td>
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ANCHORAGE TRAILS INITIATIVE

- Pedestrian Welcome Sign
- (2) Learning Labs
- Tunnel Improvements
- Trail Safety Improvement

Nunaka Valley Elementary School Learning Labs at Russian Jack Springs Park

PARK IMPROVEMENTS: Outdoor Education