

PARKS,

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He checks two different areas of the park and finds some heads that need to be adjusted. Nothing that needs to be replaced, but several of the heads are clearly limping along trying to perform their duty.

The next stop is Keizer Rapids Park at the west end of Chemawa Road North. Past the main park entrance, the road turns to gravel with some additional parking areas for those choosing to enter the most heavily-wooded section. The gravel road has caught the attention of drivers looking to do doughnuts. That would be a problem in and of itself, but the vehicles have struck a fence separating the park from a quarry and it's up to Johnson to attend to it. He takes photos of a half-dozen spots where the fence has separated from support poles.

"The reality is my guys don't have time to take care of this, so I have to call a contractor and get them to fix it," Johnson said. More money disappears from his budget.

Whenever Johnson visits a park, he tries to check in on all areas, so the trip includes a quick drive down an asphalt road leading deeper into the park. The roadway is pitted with deep potholes, one side of the road is bermed with bark chips, the other is slowly turning into a mess because off-road vehicles churned up mud during wet weather. There are already a couple of visitors parking and owners unloading canine friends. Despite adding the road to the list of things the parks crew is responsible for, no additional funding was attached.

"We had a little money left over at the end of June so we bought some rock. We'll use that to fill the holes and build up the side of the road, but all the problems are going to come back. We also got some free wood chips from a local business that we'll use to build up berms in the areas where people are mudding," Johnson said. "A cheap fix is still a fix, but it's not exactly solving the problem."

A month and a half after purchase, both the gravel and the bark chips still sit in piles because the project hasn't yet risen to the top of the priority list.

"There's things that are higher up. And, at any time, someone can call us and we've got to drop everything we're doing and go chase down another problem," Johnson said.

The busy season for the Keizer's parks workers is April through September, which means the budget (July to June) lines up just about as poorly as it could. By the end of June, Johnson is counting every penny and waiting for the solvency July brings.

"It's very challenging and oftentimes things need to wait," he said. "We had a couple of trees that were growing in the park, but also into a neighbor's yard — like 30 to 40 feet into her yard — enough that they were impacting her fruit trees and affecting her garden's growth. She told me about it last year, but our tree money was long gone and it wasn't a safety issue. I promised her that when the cycle started over she would be first on our list, and we finally



KEIZERTIMES/Eric A. Howald

Keizer Parks Supervisor Robert Johnson surveys the amenities at Wallace Manor Park.

got it done last month."

One of the future amenities for Keizer Rapids is a long and wide field at the edge of the park bordering the Willamette River. Because current funding can't cover the costs of irrigation, the field is currently a thigh-high tangle of brambles, blackberries and brown grasses. Plans also call for some covered picnic areas in the space, but even if the funding were available tomorrow, it would take a while to rehabilitate the turf.

"The thing is people are hungry for this space, I've gotten call after call after call this summer from people hoping to reserve a picnic spot here and we don't have anything to offer them," Johnson said. "We don't have anything to reserve down here other than the amphitheater."

Johnson's interim fix is mowing the grass closest to the woods as short as he can. It's not attractive, but it reduces the chance of a fire spreading to the wooded area. The primary misconception is that the park is fully developed and that's fairly adrift from reality. Volunteer labor and local business support has installed everything from the amphitheater to The Big Toy to the dog park and sand volleyball courts, but the city hasn't been able to contribute much more than the purchase of land for future development.

"There's also a problem in developing parks in stages rather than all at once. You are constantly running into issues that no one anticipated," Johnson said.

Despite that, Johnson still

finds ways to improve the parks in ways that provide increased safety as well as beautification. For example, the front fence of The Big Toy sits only about 10 yards from the parking lot. Johnson was concerned that a distracted driver might hit the wrong pedal and go careening into the play area. He built up a two-foot berm that will high-center a runaway car and populated it with a garden of native plants. Ideally, he's hoping school groups that visit the park use the space for education while they help pull weeds and do some minor pruning.

Next year, a grant will be used to install a rubberized surface at The Big Toy, additional pedestrian pathways and the city's first flushing toilets in a park. It's a double-edged sword.

"The rubberized surface is a huge benefit because that means we don't have to hassle with wood chips. The pathways are needed because right now we have moms with strollers fighting for the same space as cars. The bathrooms are needed, I want them, but I don't have the manpower to maintain them," Johnson said.

Johnson's next stop is Bair Park in north Keizer. Several years ago, the park was hardly usable. It had been overrun with a deep thicket of blackberries, but Johnson made the park a

priority. Regular mowing and a concerted effort to remove the invasive species have turned it into a natural space that several area residents walk through in the few minutes he spends on the site. He's also checking on some trees recently planted, a park neighbor is volunteering to help water trees and maintain the entrance.

Most calls Johnson receives start as a complaint, but he usually ends up trying to enlist the caller as a volunteer. "They have certain things they want to see done, and I usually have a list ready to go, but we develop the relationships and sometimes the bigger projects result from that," he said. He wishes he had more time to spend working with volunteers and enlisting new ones.

Eagle Scouts looking to complete community service

requirements are some of his favorite people. Scouts have helped refurbish a shelter and a bridge at Bob Newton Park in the Gubser neighborhood, which is Johnson's next stop.

Newton Park is a decent example of the kinds of sacrifices made in Keizer parks. Johnson would like to see better weed control, landscaped entrances, a pair of horseshoe pits could be rehabbed, and then there's the tennis court. The court surface has one crack running its entire length and it's beginning to branch.

"This surface is still playable, but it needs attention. We need to fill those cracks because, right now, the water is still getting in. If enough water gets in, the foundation is going to settle unevenly and make the whole thing unusable," he said.

Resurfacing the court would cost about \$8,000 to \$10,000. Ripping it out and starting over, which is what will have to happen if it settles, would cost \$60,000.

One of the many things that gets lost in the struggle to simply maintain what currently

exists in Keizer parks is beautification.

"I would love to have all the entries bark dusted and landscaped, but we simply can't afford it and it means there's no curb appeal," he said. "If someone moves here and they decide to go to a park, they're going to get in the car, drive around and then make a decision whether to get out at each place they stop. They might go from Keizer to Salem before they pull the trigger."

The first complaint call of the day comes in about 8 a.m. Someone visited The Big Toy the night before and found feces in one of the turrets. The origin was unknown, but it meant Johnson had to stop what he was doing and find someone in the vicinity of the park who could go check on it. Fortunately, Shelton was just finishing his repairs on the dog park leak.

While complaints come in from all over the city, one park has become so high-maintenance that Johnson has to schedule one of his two seasonal workers around its operation — Chalmers-Jones Park and the splash fountain.

"I basically lost a seasonal worker," Johnson said. "Don't get me wrong, there's nothing like seeing 30 kids out there on a hot day, but it requires a lot of attention. Every time something goes wrong, he's out here fixing it and, when he's not doing that, he's handling reservations. He also has to get everything tested and ready to go each morning it's open, he's barely able to get away to do some of the other things that need doing."

The current budget only allows Johnson to tackle one major project a year, this year it will be repaving the parking lot at the south end of Claggett Creek Park. Last year, it was resurfacing a tennis court at Willemette Manor Park in south Keizer.

That tennis court had gotten so bad that most of the contractors Johnson asked for bids wouldn't touch it without starting over. He eventually found one who would, and the new surface is smooth, green, inviting and has a new use as well.

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"The bathrooms are needed, I want them, but I don't have the manpower to maintain them."

— Robert Johnson
Parks supervisor

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