

D'Anna: For Mesa parks, more wreck than rec?

John D'Anna, The Republic | azcentral.com 11:23 a.m. MST June 6, 2014



(Photo: Republic file photo)

There must be some serious cognitive dissonance going on inside the Mesa Parks and Recreation Department right about now.

Last week, the city learned it is among four finalists in the National Gold Medal Awards for Excellence in Park and Recreation Management, which Mesa won in 1978, 1992 and 2000.

According to Mesa's Information Ministry, the award recognizes cities "that demonstrate excellence in parks and recreation through long-range planning, resource management, volunteerism, environmental stewardship" and a whole bunch of other stuff.

All well and good. But on the exact same day the recognition was announced, The national Trust for Public Land came out with its national rankings for city parks systems, and let's just say they're a lot less kind to our fair city.

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In fact, they rank us 56th. Out of 60.

The survey measures things like a city's total parks acreage, the percentage of city land devoted to parks, the amount of money spent per capita on parks and the percentage of the population that lives within walking distance — half a mile — of a park.

Out of 120 possible points Mesa mustered a meager 39. It scored lowest in median park size (3.1 acres); parkland percentage (2.7 percent); playgrounds per 10,000 people (1.3 playgrounds); and per capita spending (\$75.46).

Mesa finished behind such garden spots as Wichita, Kan., Oklahoma City, El Paso and Bakersfield, Calif. But hey, at least we can say we're better than Fresno.

As for the other contest, Mesa's up against the Chicago Park District, the Maryland-National Capital Park and Planning Commission, and Gwinnett County (Ga.) Parks and Recreation.

The winners will be announced in October at the National Recreation and Park Association conference in Charlotte, N.C., which by the way, checked in at 57 on the National Trust list, one place behind Mesa.

Gold medal award info: nrpa.org/goldmedal or aapra.org. Trust lands rankings: parkscore.tpl.org.

Where champions play ... Let's hear it for the Mesa Community College athletic department, which has produced not one, but two national-championship teams this year.

The first was the women's basketball team, which captured its first-ever NJCAA Division II national crown by beating a team from Highland, Kan., 82-72 in an overtime thriller in March.

Guard Peace Amukamara of Mesa was tournament MVP, and Madi Austin and Lacey Viselli were named to the all-tournament team.

Amukamara was also named Division II player of the year, and coach Kori Stephenson, who is in her seventh year at MCC, was named coach of the year.

The men's baseball team also used a little overtime magic to win it all, beating a team from Hinds, Miss., 9-7 in 11 innings last week to win its fourth national championship.

Freshman Jordan Zimmerman was named tournament MVP. He hit .500 and had a tournament-record 14 RBIs.

In leading the team to a 52-13 record, head coach Tony Cirelli got his milestone 700th win in 20 seasons, and was named ACCAC coach of the year.

Nice work, Thunderbirds!

A stand-up guy ... A very wise man, my dad, once told me that a good manager won't make his employees do anything he or she wouldn't do.

And since most Mesa teachers and staff won't be cashing in on huge raises this year, neither will Mesa Public Schools honcho Mike Cowan.

For the third year in a row, he's refusing to take a pay raise or bonus.

It's a nice gesture of solidarity. Especially because I'm sure Cowan could use the extra money to fix the huge hole in his office wall.

The one he bangs his head against every time the Legislature comes out with a new public-education budget.

John D'Anna's column appears every Friday online and in print on Saturdays. To submit an item, just meet John in the park. If you can find one. Or e-mail john.d'anna@arizonarepublic.com. Follow John on Twitter @azgreenday.

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