

2024-2025 KERN COUNTY GRAND JURY



McFARLAND RECREATION AND PARK DISTRICT

The Pulse of a Thriving City

Release Date

January 14, 2025

McFARLAND RECREATION AND PARK DISTRICT

The Pulse of a Thriving City



Photo Courtesy of the Grand Jury

SUMMARY:

Parks and recreational facilities can make or break a city's appeal; and real-estate agents cite city parks and recreational attractions as reasons to entice people to relocate. In most cases, parks and recreational amenities are as essential to interested buyers as schools, nearby shopping, and safe neighborhoods. World renowned parks, such as Central Park in New York City and Golden Gate Park in San Francisco are crown jewels of their city's parks system. Many parks and recreation departments provide extensive networks of recreational services which include recreation centers with indoor pools, weight rooms, basketball courts, dance studios, art studios, game rooms, and libraries.

The population of McFarland could easily fit into New York's Central Park or San Francisco's Golden Gate Park. McFarland Recreation and Park District (MRPD), with a fraction of the budget of the mega-parks, offers a busy schedule of year-round recreational and sports activities. There is a wide assortment of wholesome family-oriented programs in the community center that includes weightlifting, wrestling, full court basketball, as well as bingo and Zumba. Outdoor sports include soccer and baseball.

The McFarland Recreation and Park District was formed in 1976 to provide recreational activities, including swimming, for a growing farming community just north of Bakersfield. In 1978, the property that is Sherwood Park was transferred to MRPD from the Kern High School District. From a single park, MRPD has expanded into a comprehensive network of recreational facilities and services that include four parks and a recreational community center providing year-round family-oriented activities for a growing community.



McFarland Parks
Photos Courtesy of the Grand Jury

PURPOSE OF INQUIRY:

California Penal Code §933.5 authorizes the Grand Jury to inquire/investigate and report on the operations and management of all special districts within Kern County. In response to complaints received, the 2024-2025 Kern County Grand Jury (Grand Jury) reviewed the transparency of MRPD's Board Meetings, correct application of Brown Act requirements, financial reporting, the status of recreational activities/facilities for its youth including the community swimming pool.

METHODOLOGY:

The Grand Jury reviewed the most recent MRPD investigative report from the 2002-2003 Grand Jury. This report was generally complimentary and included no recommendations or required responses.

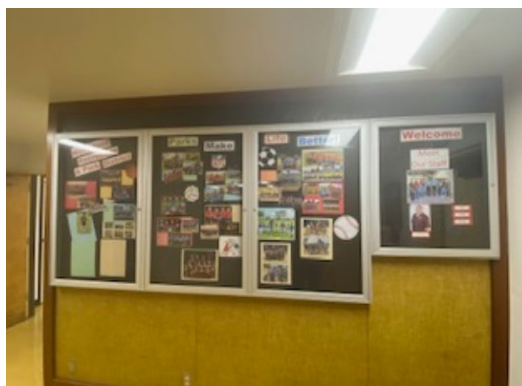
The Grand Jury conducted interviews with MRPD management and staff, analyzed Board Agendas, Meeting Minutes, Financial Statements, and other documents available from the MRPD's office and website. Interviews were also conducted with citizens of McFarland. In addition, the Grand Jury conducted cross-agency research regarding the cost of maintaining a community pool or aquatic center. The Grand Jury also attended one MRPD Board Meeting, toured the four parks, and the community center which includes the recreation areas, gymnasium, and office complex.

DISCUSSION OF FACTS:

MRPD serves the residents of McFarland with a wide variety of recreational and sport activities. Since its inception in 1976, MRPD has expanded to four parks and a community center providing recreational and sports activities to include: youth basketball, soccer, baseball, cross country running, weightlifting, wrestling club, volleyball, flag football, Hip Hop dance classes, and cheer camp. Additionally, adults are offered Zumba classes, co-ed softball and MRPD sponsored bingo nights.

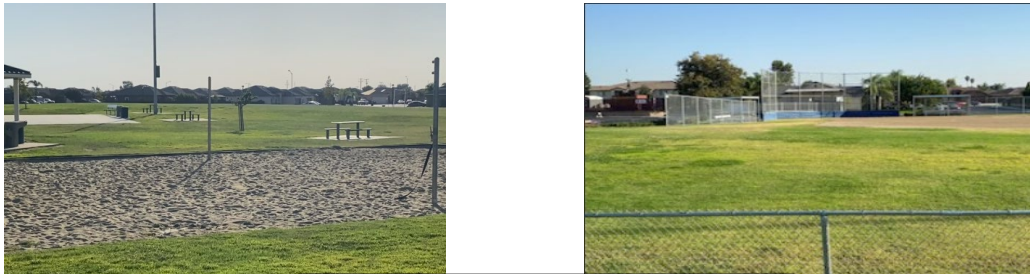
Facts include the following:

- A. The MRPD was approved as a Special District by the Local Agency Formation Commission (LAFCO) on April 12, 2017:
- MRPD is governed by an elected Board of Directors that serve without remuneration
- B. In June 1982, funded by a state grant, the swimming facility was opened:
- In 2020, the pool was drained for annual maintenance, but due to COVID-19 it could not be reopened for three years
 - The 40-year-old aluminum pool lining suffered irreparable damage from the ground shifting and shrinkage due to the changes in temperature. The MRPD's insurance company would not allow the pool to reopen in 2022
- C. The pandemic had a significant impact on parks and recreation districts. The masking requirements, social distancing and partial closure restrictions seriously disrupted MRPD operations:
- COVID-19 mandated decreased activities and the subsequent loss of revenue, primarily because of the reduced user fees, made it impossible to maintain parks and services at pre-COVID-19 levels
 - Budget cuts and health issues led to staff reductions
 - The restrictions imposed by the pandemic renewed emphasis on the importance of recreation parks and activities
- D. The MRPD continues to offer a wide variety of year-round recreational and sports activities:
- Coaches are volunteers
 - Activities are supported by user fees



Activities Bulletin Board
Photo Courtesy of the Grand Jury

- E. MRPD currently manages four multi-purpose parks: Browning Road Park, Ritchey Park, Sherwood Park, and Villa del Caribe Park.



Well-kept parks in McFarland
Photos Courtesy of the Grand Jury

- F. MRPD is in the planning and designing stage for Lyons Park:
- Lyons Park will be paid for by construction impact fees
- G. MRPD initiated the funding, planning, and designing of a pool and aquatic center:
- McFarland Recreation and Park District Swimming Pool Study by an independent outside agency, was completed in November 2022, determined that repairing the existing pool was not cost effective or insurable
- H. MRPD placed a \$15 million Bond Measure (Measure S) in the November 5, 2024, General Election to fund District improvements which included a pool and an aquatic center. This measure received 60.31% of the vote, but did not meet the required supermajority threshold of 66.67%.
- I. MRPD holds regular board meetings in compliance with the Brown Act. Agendas are posted 72 hours prior to the meetings to allow for public participation, and minutes are posted when available.
- J. The MRPD requested the City of McFarland's support and endorsement for this Bond Measure; however, the McFarland City Council was unable to reach a consensus that would have allowed MRPD to present the Measure during a Board Meeting.
- K. For the fiscal year ending June 30, 2022, McFarland Recreation and Park District Financial Statements were reviewed by an independent auditor:
- There were no instances of noncompliance
 - Bank statements had not been reconciled in a timely manner, indicating deficiencies in internal control due to a staffing shortage
- L. The MRPD has chosen not to recite the Pledge of Allegiance or allow for a moment of silence at the beginning of meetings.

M. MRPD's funding is based primarily on a percentage of property taxes, impound funds, user fees and grants for specific projects:

- Tax assessments are based on sixty cents (\$0.60) of each one hundred dollars (\$100.00) of assessed value and dispersed twice a year
- Impact fees are due when development occurs.
- Grants and private contributions are restricted to specific operational or capital improvements

FINDINGS:

The Grand Jury finds:

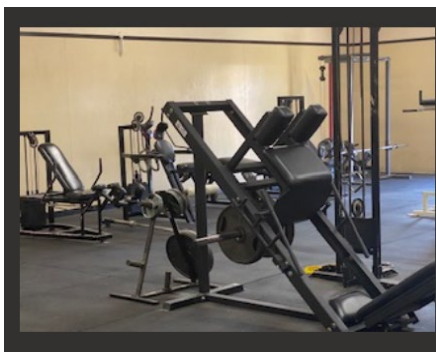
F1. Based on the 2002-2003 Grand Jury report, the MRPD exceeded the expected needs of a community of 17,000 residents in activities and events.

F2. MRPD has eight full-time staff and hundreds of volunteers. This mixture of staff and volunteers, along with user fees, allows the district to manage on a shoestring budget (\$1.24 million) while providing a wholesome and essential community service.

F3. Parks are well maintained and manicured. They are heavily utilized in the evenings and weekends for recreational activities and family events. These parks are the centerpieces of MRPD's outreach efforts to encourage overall fitness and community participation.

F4. The recreation center allows for a plethora of activities and a meaningful gathering place for both youths and adults. This enhances the charm of the community and encourages the active participation of its residents. The center is also available to rent for private functions.

F5. The supervised weight room is open from 4:00 pm – 7:00 pm weekdays for public use. There is a daily or annual fee that is kept low to encourage participation.



Exercise Room
Photo Courtesy of the Grand Jury

F6. The MRPD Board of Directors complies with the Brown Act and Proposition 218 requirements. Agendas and minutes are posted in a timely manner. Financial information is provided by a website link to the California State Controller's Office. This simplifies communication between the MRPD and the community, affords participation and ensures transparency of MRPD proceedings.

F7. The Pledge of Allegiance and/or a moment of silence, at the start of a meeting, is at the discretion of the organizers. MRPD has chosen not to implement either. However, this formality does signal the beginning of an official meeting, sets a business tone, and can foster a sense of tradition and community solidarity.

F8. The Fiscal Year ending June 30, 2022, McFarland Recreation and Park District Financial Statements indicated no errors or areas of concern. However, MRPD had not reconciled its bank accounts in a timely fashion indicating a lack of internal controls created by staffing shortages. A good faith effort is underway to rectify this discrepancy, which will improve its transparency and the public's trust.

F9. MRPD recently received a \$211,712 award from the State of California to help MRPD continue its recovery from the lingering effects of the pandemic. The amount of the award was attributed to excellent maintenance of records pertaining to the cost of COVID-19. This award will also assist MRPD to reach pre-COVID-19 levels of recreational activities offered to the community.

F10. MRPD Board of Directors has taken the requisite steps for a voter-approved swimming pool and aquatic center and improvements to existing infrastructure. Building a swimming pool had broad community support and would further contribute to the overall physical fitness for both youths and adults.



Artist Rendering of the New Aquatic Center –
MRPD Website

F11. The MRPD submitted Bond Measure S on the November 5, 2024, ballot. The Bond Measure required 66.67% voter approval. However, the measure failed to reach this threshold with only 60.31% of the vote. Consequently, MRPD does not have the funding to construct a pool/aquatic facility, and the community will have to continue to endure without this vital amenity.

BOND MEASURE S - Vote For 1

Completed Precincts: 26 of 26

	VOTE COUNT	PERCENTAGE
BONDS YES	1492	60.31%
BONDS NO	982	39.69%

Election Results from
Electionsapps.KernCounty.com

F12. Bond Measure S may have had a better chance of passage with the support and collaboration of the MRPD, the City of McFarland, and other regional entities that would have mutually benefitted from the pool and aquatic facility.

COMMENTS:

The Grand Jury extends its appreciation to the MRPD's executive management staff and Board of Directors for their cooperation and professionalism. All their public facilities offer the community opportunities to participate in athletic, as well as leisure time activities for family and friends gatherings, or a simple walk in the park.

The Grand Jury also acknowledges MRPD is still recovering from the COVID-19 pandemic. The management and office staff are continuing to update its website, complete backlogged Board Meeting Minutes, and financial and audit reports. The current management staff seems eager to fulfill its obligation to manage MRPD responsibly with transparency.

The Grand Jury completed this investigation with a better understanding of the complexities and financial demands of operating on a shoestring budget while providing a beneficial and essential community service.

RECOMMENDATIONS:

The 2024-2025 Kern County Grand Jury recommends that:

- R1. MRPD continues to pursue construction of a pool/aquatic facility applying for grants, community renewal government resources, mutually interested regional partners, and consider resubmitting a Bond Measure to its voters. This should be completed no later than June 30, 2025. (Findings #11 and #12)
- R2. The posting date should be added to the Agenda to eliminate questions about timely posting. This should be initiated by March 31, 2025. (Finding #6)

- R3. Board Meetings should start with the Pledge of Allegiance and a moment of silence. Starting meetings with the Pledge of Allegiance is a reminder of the Board's shared commitment to the values and principles of the District and the Country. This should be initiated by May 1, 2025. (Finding #7)
- R4. Bank statements be reconciled within 30 days of issuance. This will help eliminate deficiencies in internal controls and allow the District to identify potential issues before they explode into problems. This should be initiated by May 1, 2025. (Finding #8)
- R5. Develop a plan to increase utilization of the Recreation Center that will benefit McFarland residents by June 30, 2025. (Findings #4 and #5)
- R6. Develop educational programs and research available grants and scholarships that will allow cost-effective and expanded access to the Recreation Center by June 30, 2025. (Findings #4 and #5)

NOTES:

- The McFarland Recreation and Park District should post a copy of this report where it will be available for public review.
- Persons wishing to receive an email notification of newly released reports may sign up at: <https://www.kerncounty.com/government/other-agencies/grand-jury>
- Present and past Kern County Grand Jury Final Reports and Responses can be accessed on the Kern County Grand Jury website <https://www.kerncounty.com/government/other-agencies/grand-jury>

RESPONSE DEADLINE:

- **REQUIRED WITHIN 90 DAYS FROM:**
McFarland Recreation and Park District
 - Findings #2 through #12
 - Recommendations #1 through #6
- **REQUIRED WITHIN 60 DAYS FROM:**
McFarland City Council
 - Finding #12
 - Recommendations #1, #5 and #6

**RESPONSES ARE REQUIRED PURSUANT TO PENAL CODE §§933(c)
AND 933.05:**

- **PRESIDING JUDGE
SUPERIOR COURT OF CALIFORNIA
COUNTY OF KERN
1415 TRUXTUN AVENUE, SUITE 212
BAKERSFIELD, CA 93301**
- **FOREPERSON
KERN COUNTY GRAND JURY
1415 TRUXTUN AVENUE, SUITE 600
BAKERSFIELD, CA 93301**

Reports issued by the Grand Jury do not identify individuals interviewed. Cal. Penal Code §929 requires that reports of the Grand Jury not contain the name of any person or facts leading to the identity of any person who provides information to the Grand Jury.
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McFarland Recreation and Park District
Response to Grand Jury Findings and Recommendations
January 9, 2025

F7. The Pledge of Allegiance and/or a moment of silence, at the start of a meeting, is at the discretion of the organizers. MRPD has chosen not to implement either. However, this formality does signal the beginning of an official meeting, sets a business tone, and can foster a sense of tradition and community solidarity.

The Pledge of Allegiance was included at the November 20, 2024, meeting and will be included in subsequent meetings.

F8. The Fiscal Year ending June 30, 2022, McFarland Recreation and Park District Financial Statements indicated no errors or areas of concern. However, MRPD had not reconciled its bank accounts in a timely fashion indicating a lack of internal controls created by staffing shortages. A good faith effort is underway to rectify this discrepancy, which will improve its transparency and the public's trust.

This is a challenge facing all small special districts. Our administration is addressing this although it is difficult with a small workforce. Due to decreased property taxes, the District currently has an open position in our maintenance department and only has three office staff, including the District Manager. The opening causes the District Manager who is now directly supervising all maintenance activities. We are proud that our past eight audits have been clean.

F9. MRPD recently received a \$211,712 award from the State of California to help MRPD continue its recovery from the lingering effects of the pandemic. The amount of the award was attributed to excellent maintenance of records pertaining to the cost of COVID-19. This award will also assist MRPD to reach pre-COVID-19 levels of recreational activities offered to the community.

This was awarded in 2022 and has no impact on our current budget. It repaid the District for keeping staff employed and for providing the limited activities that were provided during the COVID-19 crisis.

F11. The MRPD submitted Bond Measure S on the November 5, 2024, ballot. The Bond Measure required 66.67% voter approval. However, the measure failed to reach this threshold with only 60.31% of the vote. Consequently, MRPD does not have the funding to construct a pool/aquatic facility, and the community will have to continue to endure without this vital amenity.

The District views this as vital but the voters denied the request. Readying and running the campaign cost the District thousands of dollars. It does not have funds to do this again since property tax revenue was down over 9% in 2024 (mainly due to the decrease in oil valuations). Furthermore, ERAF funds taken from districts and other local government for

schools has hurt MRPD. ERAF is a complicated issue that is currently being researched by local government entities and state legislators.

F12. Bond Measure S may have had a better chance of passage with the support and collaboration of the MRPD, the City of McFarland, and other regional entities that would have mutually benefitted from the pool and aquatic facility.

For the most part, MRPD had widespread support for the bond measure. If the District were a school, it would have passed soundly as the threshold would have been 55%. Prop 5, on the statewide ballot, would have remedied this with all local government entities being treated the same as schools. Prop 5 was defeated handily.

R1. MRPD continues to pursue construction of a pool/aquatic facility applying for grants, community renewal government resources, mutually interested regional partners, and consider resubmitting a Bond Measure to its voters. This should be completed no later than June 30, 2025. (Findings #11 and #12)

MRPD has pursued funding through our insurance carrier, the State of California and the Federal government via appropriations (as well as major corporations and private foundations). None were successful. We applied for Proposition 68 and was not awarded funds (the State took five points off our score due to the current pool being grant funded in the 1980s). No grants were awarded with scores of 90% and lower. MRPD continues to seek State funding but with the current climate it is not likely making McFarland residents suffer through more summers without an aquatics facility.

R2. The posting date should be added to the Agenda to eliminate questions about timely posting. This should be initiated by March 31, 2025. (Finding #6)

The posting date was on the December 18, 2024 board meeting agenda and will be included in subsequent postings.

R3. Board Meetings should start with the Pledge of Allegiance and a moment of silence. Starting meetings with the Pledge of Allegiance is a reminder of the Board's shared commitment to the values and principles of the District and the Country. This should be initiated by May 1, 2025. (Finding #7)

The Pledge of Allegiance was included at the November 20, 2024, meeting and will be included in subsequent meetings.

R4. Bank statements be reconciled within 30 days of issuance. This will help eliminate deficiencies in internal controls and allow the District to identify potential issues before they explode into problems. This should be initiated by May 1, 2025. (Finding #8)

District Manager is meeting with the Administrative Supervisor regularly to ensure that they are completed in a timely manner. See F8 for more information.

R5. Develop a plan to increase utilization of the Recreation Center that will benefit McFarland residents by June 30, 2025. (Findings #4 and #5)

Finding 4 and 5 state MRPD is utilizing the facility well. It is utilized for McFarland High School basketball and wrestling practices, our own indoor sports (basketball, volleyball, wrestling), the McFarland Basketball Adult League that brings in players from across Kern County, McFarland Madness (a nonprofit school level program), club volleyball teams, and a variety of private rentals. MRPD staff was trained by the United States Tennis Association and was given equipment to start a beginner tennis classes. The recreation center/gymnasium is also a hub for the community during crisis. FEMA used the facility for one-month after McFarland's last flood. Our facilities are also used for health clinics by the County of Kern and various community meetings.

R6. Develop educational programs and research available grants and scholarships that will allow cost-effective and expanded access to the Recreation Center by June 30, 2025. (Findings #4 and #5)

MRPD is researching grants. The State is not currently offering any grant support. Most grant funding for recreation and park districts is focused on providing new facilities or greenspace. The District is currently trying to obtain a grant along with the Arts Council of Kern to bring art activities and/or an arts event to the North County. The District instituted a sports sponsorship program to keep participation rates costs as low as possible.

The State will offer new grants due to the passage of the Prop 4 in the November 2024 election. It is not known when the application window will open. Once it is open, MRPD is well-positioned to have a successful application.