

## Thompson defends County workers in TNT editorial

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Check out the following editorial, *Union wants clarity - not an end to volunteer efforts*, by Teamsters Local 117 Secretary-Treasurer, Tracey A. Thompson, published in the Tacoma News Tribune on August 4, 2010. [To read the article on the News Tribune website, click here.](#)

### **Union wants clarity - not an end to volunteer efforts**

In the last few days, some have accused the Teamsters of opposing community volunteerism within the parks system in Pierce County. This accusation couldn't be further from the truth, and it's time to set the record straight.

The attacks come as a result of a complaint that Teamsters Local 117 filed with the Public Employment Relations Commission (PERC) on behalf of a group of parks maintenance workers in the County's Parks and Recreation Department. Parks Maintenance Technicians perform a variety of duties to ensure that the parks we enjoy are safe and well-maintained, including landscaping, painting, carpentry work, plumbing, and electrical work.

In June, six of these employees were threatened with layoffs. The County argued that it needed to cut staffing levels because a park – the Sprinkler Recreation Center – was slated for closure. As you can imagine, both workers and community members were upset. No one wants to get laid off, especially in this economy. And no one wants to see a park in their neighborhood shut down. Faced with the threat of layoffs, the workers appealed to their Union for help, while the community rallied to save its park.

The Teamsters investigated the case and determined that the County may have committed violations of State law and our labor agreement. The County has a legal obligation to notify the Union of and bargain with the Union over any proposed changes in wages, hours or working conditions. These are mandatory subjects of bargaining under the laws governing represented public employees. Additionally, the County cannot unilaterally alter the negotiated terms of its collective bargaining agreements.

The Teamsters do not oppose the use of community groups to help with the maintenance of County-operated parks. On the contrary, Teamsters support programs like Adopt-a-Park and applaud community groups for the role they play in helping to make our parks safer and cleaner for all of us to enjoy. The question is not whether community groups should be allowed to assist in the maintenance of our parks – both sides agree that they should. The question is to what degree should community groups be responsible for the maintenance of our County parks? Should volunteers be responsible for picking up litter and mowing the grass? Should they clean and maintain the bathrooms? What about painting, plumbing, and electrical work? Are volunteer groups prepared to assume these responsibilities long-term? What happens when the volunteer groups disband? What happens when a group allows a park to fall into disrepair? Is the County liable if a volunteer gets hurt on the job?

These are questions that the County is legally obligated to address with the Union, and these are

questions that all members of the community should want answered so that parameters can be established and all parties understand what their relative responsibilities are. Without clear parameters, we cannot be assured that our parks will remain safe and well-maintained open spaces that our families can enjoy.

Teamsters Local 117 is part of the community and has a strong record of volunteerism in Pierce County. This summer, as it did last summer, a crew of Local 117 members will be painting the home of an elderly low-income resident of Pierce County in the Paint Tacoma Beautiful program. Last year, Local 117 members donated over 100 pints of blood to area blood banks and organized the donations of over 90,000 lbs of food for Tacoma's Emergency Food Network. For this work, Teamsters Local 117 was recognized as one of this year's City of Destiny award winners for outstanding community volunteerism.

To say, as Dori Monson and others have, that the Teamsters are opposed to community volunteer work in our parks is simply not true. It is true, however, that Teamsters 117 will not back down from defending the legal and contractual rights of workers, particularly when jobs and livelihoods are in jeopardy.

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