

W

hat's happening with the Neighborhood Park bond funds approved by the voters in March 2000?

We've heard this question a lot lately, especially since the 'expose' in the Chronicle regarding the misuse of school bond funds. The answer is that while lots of good things are being done to improve our parks, as per the voters expectations, there are some fundamental problems in San Francisco with the accounting process for bond expenditures.

At this point, we don't believe there is anything wrong with the way money of our hard-won bond funds for neighborhood parks has been spent. According to Rec and Park, there are currently 77 projects initiated or underway in the newly established Capital Program. We would argue, however, that this is a misleading figure since the majority of these projects were "on line" under pre-2000 capital funding and would have been completed without the passage of the "Parks Package." Nonetheless, Rec and Park has moved ahead doggedly to get some new projects underway despite the road blocks put up from the Board of Supervisors and the standard (and outrageous) delays incumbent to the city's bureaucratic process.

The project process has begun at numerous sites such as the playgrounds at Rochambeau in District 1 and Moscone in District 2. An erosion control project of long delay has begun at Buena Vista Park in District 5. Another long-delayed project has begun to improve Stern Grove and Pine Lake in District 4. New plans for pools are being developed at Sava Pool in the Sunset and North Beach Pool and Clubhouse in District 3. And a brand new park is being created at 23rd and Treat Sts. in the Mission, to name just a few of the "real" projects where bond funds are being spent.

What is not as comforting is the unacceptable lack of required accountability for the expenditure of these funds. The Neighborhood Parks Council had largely assumed that essentially little or no funds were being expended from the neighborhood park bond. Our assumption was based on the fact that the director of the capital program was not hired until January 2001. He was not authorized to hire any of the new positions necessary for the capital program until June 2001 – meaning that no one could even start work until December 2001—almost 2 years

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NEIGHBORHOOD PARKS COUNCIL #25

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In 1915, the Palace of Fine Arts, an octagonal temple of Roman arches, was ringed by a peristyle of Grecian columns

The Palace of Fine Arts

It was the star attraction at the Panama-Pacific International Exposition of 1915, but architect Bernard Maybeck never intended it to last. At the time, exposition buildings were meant to readily collapse after a year, and like the other PPIE structures, the Palace's Greco-Romanesque rotunda and colonnades were framed in wood and covered with a burlap-fiber mixture called "staff." But the crescent-shaped gallery behind it had a steel frame and concrete walls to protect the 11,000 works of art displayed during the Exposition. Mules, dragging scrapers, turned the adjoining sump into the lagoon which, in the 1850's, was known as Washerwoman's Lagoon, site of the city's first laundries. The Palace's success and popular acclaim moved the Fine Arts League to try to preserve it through continuing art exhibits after the Exposition's close in December, but maintenance costs proved too heavy and funding fell short. In 1927, the Federal government deeded the 15 acres of Presidio land to the city of San Francisco for "educational, art, exposition and park purposes," and it was placed under the jurisdiction of the Recreation and Park Department. Like other survivors of 75 years, it shows evidence of a colorful life. Source: Various publications, San Francisco Library History Center.

Patchwork improvements in the 1930's produced 18 lighted tennis courts installed by Rec and Park and artwork by non-acrophobic WPA artists who restored the fading paintings on the rotunda ceiling. During World War II, the U.S. Army commandeered the Palace for a motor pool of jeeps and trucks; and in 1945, it stashed the limousines of visiting diplomats during the founding of the United Nations. After the War, the U.S. Army returned the building to the city and to its saga of makeshift use and steady decay. In the early '50s, the gallery hosted the San Francisco Art Festival, drill practice teams from the San Francisco Fire Department, and University of California architecture classes. It stored farm equipment and properties of the State Fish and Game, Civilian Defense, and School Departments. It served as a distribution station for telephone books and a center for sorting Christmas mail.

By the mid-fifties, the building and grounds were declared unsafe for public use and fenced off. Convinced that the Palace could only be saved for future generations by restoring it in permanent building materials, in 1957 the newly formed, non-profit Palace of Fine Arts

League and two powerful San Francisco advocates joined forces. Assemblyman Caspar Weinberger secured a \$2 million matching grant from the State, and the League sponsored a \$3.6 million bond issue that was narrowly defeated. Whereupon industrialist and League president, Walter Johnson, donated \$2 million to the city, inspiring other contributions and the subsequent passage of a \$1.8 million bond in 1960. Funding in place, architect Hans Gerson duplicated Maybeck's original plan and demolition and reconstruction began in 1964. Completion of the Rotunda in 1967 was celebrated in a week-long public festival mounted by the League and Rec and Park.

The '70s saw the Palace's north and south colonnades rise again—thanks to a gift from Walter Johnson—and the gallery become a permanent home for the Palace of Fine Arts Theater- to which Johnson had donated \$250,000. Described, when he died in 1978, as "the patron who rebuilt the Palace of Fine Arts," Johnson contributed over \$4.5 million to the building he called "a symbol of San Francisco." A plaque to "The Walter S. Johnson Park" graces a column inside the park's walkway at Bay and Lyon.

Fast forward to the problems and pleasures of the '90s. A study found unsafe bacteria levels in the lagoon and neighbors complained about a terrible odor. Rains caused a leak in the rotunda dome and a piece of concrete fell into the ground below, causing the central area of the palace to be closed for nearly a year. And a "Light Up The Palace" campaign added a golden nighttime glow to the rotunda.

Delays in repair and the need for more maintenance than two gardeners provide have driven Anna Pope to connect with the Friends of the Palace of Fine Arts group. On her daily park walk she observes, "No care is taken until something breaks," adding, "but with the active support of the neighborhood, I think we can make some changes."

—Jeanne Alexander, Neighborhood Parks Council

ESTABLISHED: 1927
LOCATION: 3301 LYON STREET
BUS: #30 STOCKTON, BAY & BRODERICK STOP
CONTACTS: ANNA POPE
415-440-9802; E-MAIL:
APOPE@COOLEY.COM
GAYLE HAGERTY
415-474-2027; E-MAIL:
GHAG0727@AOL.COM

UPDATES

NPC Native Plants Seminar

An audience of eighty was on hand to learn about the intricacies of habitat restoration with native plants at an NPC seminar in December. **Lisa Hokholt** of the SF Urban Team/USDA, **Art Shapiro** of the Center for Population Biology, UC Davis, and **Mike Vasey** of SFSU's biology department were the panel speakers. Minutes are available from NPC.

Playground Campaign Auction

NPC nominates for city auctioneer none other than **Supervisor Gavin Newsom**, whose silver-tongued blandishments before a crowd of fifty brought in \$3,000 toward rebuilding **Crocker Amazon** playground. ABC-TV weather anchor and all-around great guy **Joel Bartlett** emceed the auction fundraiser at Patio Espanol. If you missed out on the festivities, you can still help by sending in a donation.

For more information, visit www.playgroundcampaign.org.

On the Ballot, Pt. 1

NPC is throwing its support behind a sensible provision on the March ballot to prohibit visual pollution. **Proposition E** permanently limits the number of billboards in San Francisco, allowing the relocation of existing billboards only through a rigorous public approval process. Huzzah to S.F. Beautiful for spearheading this important quality-of-life initiative.

On the Ballot, Pt. 2

Will San Franciscans ever feel confident in the city's use of bond financing? Yes, if **Proposition F** passes. On the March ballot, Prop F creates a bond oversight committee of unpaid citizens that has the power to review capital expenditures of all general obligation funds—and to stop the sale of additional bonds under the same voter authorization if the committee finds a misuse of funds. For the cost of one-tenth of one percent of the value of a bond (e.g., \$100,000 of a \$100 million bond), outside auditors can be hired to investigate suspected misappropriation. In 2000, NPC was instrumental in securing a \$110 million bond for parks and we strongly support Prop F as the only guaranteed way proposed to date to make sure that every penny of our hard-won tax dollars is spent the way voters intended.

On the Ballot, Pt. 3

In many communities, neighborhood park have deteriorated and become unsafe for children to play in or adults to enjoy. Playgrounds sorely lack safe equipment, and are frequently used for harmful activities.

The California Clean Water, Clean Air, Safe Neighborhood Parks and Coastal Protection Act of 2002 (**Prop 40**) tackles these problems head-on, with substantial grants to local park districts and cities to provide safer equipment, fencing, lighting, and other facilities to make our parks safe for children and neighborhood residents. Prop 40 will provide \$1.275 billion for land conservation and improved air and water quality, and \$1.325 billion dedicated to California's State and local parks, recreation, and historic and cultural resources. NPC urges you to vote for Prop 40.

The Makings of a Dog Park

Dog owners in St Mary's Park are thrilled with a new dog park in the works in the lower terrace of the playground. Once installed, the sod, wood chips and drinking fountain (designed for both two and four-legged visitors) will add up to one great facility.

Who Says Meetings Can't Be Fun?

Starting in February, we'll be meeting at NPC headquarters for a relaxed, informal chat over wine, cheese and other savories. (From then on, we'll meet here every other month.) These "show-and-tell" meetings will be your opportunity to share what you know about park stewardship and socialize among folks as committed to urban open space as you are. The monthly meeting schedule is below.

Days we'll be **meeting at SPUR** (312 Sutter St.) from 5:45 to 7:30
March 13, May 8, July 10, September 11, November 13

Days we'll be **meeting at NPC** offices from 5:45 to 7:30 for "show-and-tell": February 13, April 10, June 12, August 14, October 9

New Neighborhood Services and Recreation Committee

Looks like parks have been demoted in the new line-up since the Committee title has changed from "parks" to "recreation." At least the new members are all park-friendly: Supervisor **Gavin Newsom**, Chair; Supervisor **Mark Leno**, Vice-Chair; and Supervisor **Jake McGoldrick**.

Honoring Minne and Lovie Ward

Crack dealing. Pitbull fighting. Oceanview Park was once a scary, seemingly hopeless mess until longtime activists Minnie and Lovie Ward began a campaign to clean things up. Not everyone supported their efforts: the windows of their home were once shot out by rogues who resented any encroachment on their turf. But Minnie and Lovie held steady, organizing a candlelight vigil at the park and spearheading the formation of the Oceanview advisory board to enhance the quality of life in their community. Thanks to them, today's Oceanview Park is much more inviting and safe for visitors. And to thank them for their hard—and sometimes dangerous work—the Rec and Park Department not only declared January 17th Minne and Lovie Ward Day but also approved renaming the Oceanview Rec Center in the couple's honor, much to the delight of appreciative neighbors.

Remembering David Graves

McLaren Park lost a true friend of parks on January 26th. Felled by a massive heart attack after a morning in the park with "his" kids, David Graves will be remembered for his devotion to the environment.

To David, neighborhood parks were not just places for kids to play and learn. Starting the Kids in Parks program in 1997, he introduced hundreds of youths from low-income areas such as Bayview/ Hunters-Point and Visitacion Valley to the ecological splendors hidden in McLaren Park. But although David Graves was an ecology teacher at the John F. Kennedy University in Orinda, his approach was never didactic. "He inspired kids in a gentle, low key way," recalls NPC executive director Isabel Wade. "I think that was why he was so effective and why so many youth enjoyed learning from him."

—Tracy Baxter

A Special Thanks to Playground Campaign Sponsors:

**The Villas ParkMerced
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Neighborhood Parks Bond...continued

after the passage of Proposition A. However, this delay should have provided Rec and Park with plenty of time to work with the City Controller's office to set up the accounting system to provide the public with a thorough and transparent record of how their tax dollars were being spent. Rec and Park's situation is complicated because they are piecing together numerous sources of funding to make projects happen, but it is simply an accounting task.

The demands of the Neighborhood Parks Council and the newly created Parks, Recreation and Open Space Advisory Committee (PROSAC) for detailed accountability seemed to take Rec and Park by surprise. What we have learned since is that there is essentially no typical or required accounting format for bond expenditures in San Francisco and that any accounting provided seems to be dependent on the level of public scrutiny. Rec and Park has had two bonds of recent origin ('87 and '92) but apparently no one has asked the department to account in detail for these funds and hence no accounting format is in place that would satisfy the average tax payer and park customer.

It is for this obvious lack of adequate safeguards for bond funds that the Neighborhood Parks Council is supporting Proposition F, the bond oversight measure on the March ballot proposed by Supervisor Mark Leno. Of course, the Board of Supervisors is theoretically in a position to look at these expenditures and demand an accounting, but they haven't done it! Nor, from my experience, are they likely to do so since they have other fish to fry with department heads. After all, it's only tax dollars as opposed to ongoing relations with people that can sabotage proposed legislation or any kind of delivery on actual service in our city. So, while NPC fully expects the Rec and Park Department to be an exemplary model of how to provide full and user-friendly accounting of all capital funding, we sure would like to know that we could get a full audit of the taxpayers funds if we need it. Don't forget to vote on March 5.

—Isabel Wade,
Executive Director

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DRUM ROLL, PLEASE!

The **Neighborhood Parks Council** and the **Recreation and Park Department** are tallying the nominations for the first annual city employee awards. Proposed by Supervisor Newsom, the awards will honor stellar city employees in each district.

Several weeks ago, we sent an email to our coalition of park groups asking for nominations. Here are the RPD staff who have emerged as favorites.

- **Dan Maurer**, project director
- **Sean Sweeny**, area supervisor, Brooks Park
- **Lisa Wayne**, area supervisor, Natural Areas Program
- **Demi Bracerros**, gardener, Cayuga Park
- **Marilyn Cassol**, gardener, Michelangelo Park, Allyne Park, Fay Park
- **Scott Greenlaw**, recreation director, Moscone Recreation Center
- **Patrick Uriarte**, gardener, Southern 2
- **Robert Watkins**, supervisor, Southern 2
- **Candie Mattson**, park session supervisor, Park Presidio and the **Richmond District gardening crew**
- **Terra Wattles**, recreation director, Richmond Recreation Center
- **Deborah Holtzman**, former gardener, Mission Dolores Park
- **Jon Campo**, gardener
- **Adrian Field**, gardener, Duboce Park

Congratulations to all!

If you're interested in nominating your favorite city employee, please contact **Amber Rosenberg, Neighborhood Parks Council**, 415-621-3260.

THANK YOU

Bernal Heights Neighborhood Association	Rebecca Adams Nestor
Joel Bartlett	Nurseryman's Exchange
Christy Cameron	Rowena Panganiban
Barbara Christensen	Viola Rabb
Cole Hardware	The Reality Group
John Curtin	Alberto and Nelly Ruiz
Mary Jane Dorazi	Margaret Shamlian
Rachel Ellis	Sloat Garden Center
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