

## Saving San Francisco's Lakes

Guest Editorial by Linda Hunter

**D**id you know there are three natural fresh water lakes in San Francisco? Most people know about the plight of Lake Merced with its declining water levels, but few know that both Pine Lake and Mountain Lake – two gems nestled in beautiful parks – are also in danger because of human activity and urbanization. At one time, freshwater lakes and streams were common in San Francisco but today we have paved over most of them. The three remaining lakes face an accelerated road to extinction unless city residents recognize that leaving a lake legacy is essential and demands a public policy that acknowledges the importance of our lakes and our watersheds.

A year ago, the Neighborhood Parks Council (NPC) hired a talented hydrologist, Katie Pilat, to study the three lakes and to recommend to the Council some strategies for ensuring their survival. In her quest to learn as much as she could about the lakes, Katie attended Lake Merced Task Force meetings, met with Public Utility Commission officials and other hydrologists, and studied both the history of the three lakes and theories being proffered about how best to protect them. Ms. Pilat found that both Pine Lake and Lake Merced suffer from over pumping from the aquifer that lies underneath western San Francisco – the Westside Basin Aquifer. An aquifer is in essence an underground lake that is stored within the voids between the sandy soil similarly to how water is stored in a sponge. The two lakes are manifestations of the underlying aquifer.

Who are the pumpers? Cemeteries, golf courses, municipalities and even the Recreation and Park Department!

If we continue to deplete our underground water supply by pumping the water from the aquifer, the water levels at Lake Merced and Pine Lake will continue to decline. **San Francisco is one of the few cities in the state that does not use recycled water to irrigate its parks and golf courses.** Instead we use potable water from the Westside Basin. This is a shocking waste of resources. We must demand from the PUC and City officials that we begin to use recycled water immediately. We need to develop creative strategies such as Supervisor Sandoval's excellent legislation prohibiting the paving of front yards in San Francisco in order to protect the Westside Basin Aquifer.

Mountain Lake is not fed from the same aquifer as our other two lakes, but is also threatened. The lake suffered a catastrophic blow when Presidio Boulevard was built for cars to access the Golden Gate Bridge in the 1950's. More than a third of the lake was filled in. In addition, the Presidio Golf Course now sits on the lake's eastern shore. Two environmental nightmares – a freeway with lead contaminants and a golf course

*continued inside*

### NEIGHBORHOOD PARK REPORT #29

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Argonne Playground serves as a front yard for neighborhood kids, from toddlers to teens.



PHOTO: RICK GERHARTER

## Argonne Playground

**W**omen created the City's first playground in 1898, and women have been championing playgrounds ever since. Josephine Randall, who became the first woman Superintendent of Recreation in 1926, expanded the Department from 22 playgrounds to over 100 recreation units. When she engineered the transfer of the Argonne School Department's lot on 18th Avenue to the Recreation Commission, the lot was named after the nearby school and dedicated in November of 1926. A \$2500 allotment paid for the playground's first field house (480 sq. ft) which was built and swarming with kids by the late '20s. Worn down and out 27 years later, the little structure was replaced in 1953 with a new, 1000 sq. ft. club house. For \$23,800, it provided an office, club room, kitchen, restrooms and storage space, and, like its predecessor, has been overwhelmed and outgrown by nearly 50 years of constant and vigorous use. Source: San Francisco History Center.

Jump cut to the Millennium and the 2000 election in which voters passed a \$110 million bond to begin the renovation of the City's recreation facilities, playgrounds and parks. Argonne Playground was at the top of the list for rebuilding because of its less-than-welcome celebrity as "one of the three worst playgrounds in the Bay Area" in terms of safety. A survey by CALPIRG (California Public Interest Resource Group) found that its play equipment rose to hazardous heights and lacked protective surfacing; its protrusions, and gaping holes could cause serious injury, even death; that inadequate space between swings also posed the danger of serious injuries. Argonne was scheduled for replacement in the plan's first year (2003) but after a group of parents successfully lobbied Department officials last fall, they pushed back the start date for Argonne to 2004 or 2005 and elevated Rochambeau Playground to priority position. Parents and neighbors were dismayed and outraged.

The decision triggered a meeting in July with Neighborhood Parks Council's (NPC's) Richard Bressani and Maria Morgan Butcher, president of the Friends of Rochambeau (another of the five playgrounds in District One). Maria stressed the need for Argonne to organize community workshops and start a Friends group to advocate for reinstatement on the priority list. At the first meeting, Argonne Recreation Director, Janelle Pierce, was joined by parents including Lisa Auer whose two-

and-a half year-old son is a regular playground visitor. Word of mouth spread news about forming the group, and by the end of the third workshop, 100 families had signed up as Friends of Argonne Playground. Lisa, deeply concerned about the safety problems, had volunteered to take on responsibility as President. One of the first jobs she assigned to herself and her digital camera was taking a series of photos, documenting the playground's hazardous conditions and dangerous equipment. Meanwhile, with a new Friends organization in place, and noting the public censure by the Park and Open Space Advisory Committee (PROSAC) of the Department in bypassing its own Capital Plan, Rec and Park reversed its decision in October and restored Argonne to its priority position for improvement in 2003.

October brought more good news. At the monthly District Park Planning meeting, Friends were joined by Supervisor Jake McGoldrick, and representatives from NPC and PROSAC. In again making the case for repairs, the Friends pointed out that former requests from the community to Rec and Park had gone unanswered. Lisa's photos provided graphic evidence of the danger and the need. And Friends of Argonne, supported by their friends, won the day. RPD sent out a maintenance crew two days after the meeting which strengthened structures, replaced rotted wood, filled holes, and repainted benches and tables. "Although the wood is still splintery, we're very grateful to have our kids playing on safer equipment," says Lisa.

Their priority status meant that Friends of Argonne needed quickly to determine the community's own priorities for the playground. A 22-question survey created by Richard, Lisa and her friends, was printed by NPC in English, Russian and Chinese and sent to a huge mailing list. At press time, the surveys were scheduled to be returned and tabulated in December for discussion at the January meeting with park planner Lizzy Hirsch, whom RPD has assigned to the project.

Lisa says, "We're looking forward to having a space that's designed to be used by all our neighbors – from toddlers to teens to seniors. We want the whole community to enjoy a new Argonne Playground."

– Jeanne Alexander, Neighborhood Parks Council

**ESTABLISHED: 1926**

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## NEIGHBORHOOD PARKS COUNCIL #29

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# UPDATES

## Budget Crisis 2003

Please go to [www.sfneighborhoodparks.org](http://www.sfneighborhoodparks.org) for more information on the budget crisis. This is your chance to give the Recreation and Park Department your input as to what should be prioritized in next year's budget. Remember – the squeaky wheel gets the grease!

## A Brisk Morning's Work in Little Hollywood Park

The workdays in Little Hollywood Park are gaining momentum. While Rick Graham and other members of the Friends of Little Hollywood Park regularly clean the park on weekends, they took the workday to a new level on Saturday December 7th. Joined by 15 volunteers from the Presidential Scholars Program at San Francisco State University, as well as staff from the Recreation and Park Department (RPD), the group weeded and spread mulch over a large expanse of the park. The next workday is scheduled for Saturday, February 8th at 9 am. Come see this gem of a park in the Southeast corner of The City (Lathrop Ave. and Tocoloma Ave.)

## Sound Off with Bessie Carmichael Park

In winter 2002, District Park Planning (DPP) co-hosted two meetings with RPD to gather community input for the proposed Bessie Carmichael Park in SOMA. In addition, Neighborhood Parks Council (NPC) developed a survey to distribute to the community, the results of which have just been released. Please contact Vidya Tikku at NPC for more information: (415) 621-3260.

## The Ballots are In!

Congrats to Supervisors Bevan Dufty and Fiona Ma, who are great additions to the Board, and who were also ranked "Park Friendly" in a recent survey by the Committee for Better Parks, a political action committee of which NPC is a member.

## Make a Difference Day 2002

For Make a Difference Day 2002, DPP and RPD staff organized the creation of a new vegetable garden at the Sunset Recreation Center. Shawna McGrew (RPD) spearheaded the event with Vidya and Leslie from DPP and RPD staff members, Toby Wiley and Ben Price.



Activities for kids included planting a garden and cleaning sand-boxes. Adults installed the fence around the garden space, built the pathway, raked the sand and cleaned the paths, tree basins, and park grounds. A special thanks to our Americorps volunteers; SF Credit Company for donating food; David Hasegawa, volunteer landscape architect and Supervisor Fiona Ma for helping out. And thanks to all involved, we have a new vegetable garden and green space at Sunset!

## We Can Work it Out

At a recent district 10 DPP meeting, the community raised concerns about the proposed use of Jackson Playground by Live Oak School, a non-profit that recently relocated to the neighborhood. The park was recently renovated with open space funds and the

effect of the heavy use of the facility was a concern shared by many. Also, the access (or lack of access) to the park by the neighborhood residents during school hours was becoming a hot topic.

Committed to being a good neighbor, Jake Sproull from the Live Oak School worked with the DPP and RPD staff to introduce it's Buddy Program to help maintain the facility. Kids from the school came out one early morning in November to clean up the facility - including the playground, sand-boxes, vegetable garden and pathways. The school has committed to run this as an ongoing monthly program. It just goes to show that communication goes a long way!



## An Hour a Day Keeps the People Away

New guidelines on diet and health are now adding an hour a day of exercise to the recipe for senior citizens, in order to avoid weight gain. The International Council on Active Aging is concerned that such a high threshold will increase barriers to exercise among older adults. They note that there are substantial health benefits accrued from a 30 minute walk a day, and that people who meet the lower threshold are more likely to move on to higher levels. So, get out to your park and start walking!

## Rain, Rain, Go Away

Another big THANK YOU to all who participated in Crocker Amazon Playground Build Day in November and to our major project sponsors (Home Depot, McKesson Corporation and the Hellman Family Fund). Your support helped build the largest play structure in San Francisco!

While we wait for the ribbon-cutting ceremony and the grand opening of the new playground (date TBD, depending on the rain's effect on the final construction schedule), we thought we'd remind you of just how amazing this play space will be.

The new playground will feature: The City's largest play structure with over 50 play elements; a tot-lot with play equipment for toddlers; a sunken boat with water play and sand; a stage element; a fantasy forest created with little paths and bird feeders underneath the trees; interpretive geology; a community maintained butterfly garden; benches/picnic tables near the play equipment and an open lawn for play and exercise.

## Time Left to Carve Your Name in Stone

In the meantime, there's still time for you to purchase a donor brick to help support the Crocker Amazon Playground and to record your name or favorite saying in perpetuity! Please contact Linda Hunter at NPC for more information: (415) 621-3260.

## ParkScan Takes Flight

NPC's recently-launched ParkScan program, funded by the Alfred P. Sloan Foundation, teams dedicated volunteers and user-friendly technology to help the City, the general public, and park advocates communicate more effectively to achieve measurable improvements in park upkeep. ParkScan was featured on two recent programs on TechTV, the technology lifestyle network that is available in more than 37 million US households and distributes content to more than 70 countries.

– Amber Rosenberg

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## Saving San Francisco Lakes . . . *continued*

with pesticide and fertilizer runoff – make the preservation of Mountain Lake a challenge, to say the least.

San Francisco does not manage its storm water well. We send most of it down into the sewers and out into the ocean. Water is an invaluable resource and we need to do a better job of safeguarding it. By simply directing the waterspout from the roofs of our homes down to the ground rather than to the sewer, the relatively clean rainwater from our roofs could be absorbed through our sandy soils and thus replenish the aquifers. Likewise, by not paving over our lawns and using pervious concrete for sidewalks, playgrounds and parking lots, we can direct more rainwater back into the aquifers.

Why should we care about these lakes? Well, for one thing, they're beautiful. They are the remnants of what was once a thriving riparian culture that still attracts thousands of birds and other wildlife. In our role as park stewards, we should seek to preserve and enhance these important environmental and visual assets of three of our most beautiful parks. A second vital reason to save Lake Merced especially is to restore the once-significant recreational values of the lakes – values such as fishing and boating that have been so eloquently written about by *San Francisco Chronicle* columnist Tom Stienstra. These recreational activities are also important generators of revenue that contribute to economic development in our city.

### What can you do as a citizen to save our lakes?

- Be proactive – understand the consequences of paving yards and of using groundwater for irrigation. Work to educate our elected officials to propose water-saving legislation.
- The PUC will be reviewing their storm-water management practices and is interested in starting a pilot project for downspout disconnection in the western part of the city. Call General Manager Pat Martel (415-554-3160) and encourage her to develop a comprehensive storm-water program that promotes aquifer recharge through all means possible.
- Find ways to undo damage in your own yard, especially in the Westside Basin area: when San Francisco is ready to move forward with a downspout disconnection program or with pervious pavement use, volunteer to have your house retrofitted to increase rainwater infiltration into the ground.
- Be vocal – find a way to allow the use of recycled water on public landscaping, even if we need legislative change at the State level.
- Volunteer for lake restoration projects – go to NPC's Web site, [www.sfneighborhoodparks.org](http://www.sfneighborhoodparks.org), for the three lakes' park group information.
- Go visit the lakes – see why they're worth saving!
- Go to NPC's Web site to read Ms. Pilat's study: [www.sfneighborhoodparks.org/events/lakelegacypaper.html](http://www.sfneighborhoodparks.org/events/lakelegacypaper.html) or call NPC at 621-3260 to receive a hard copy.

Thanks to our funder, The GAIA Fund for making this study possible.

THANK YOU

## THANK YOU

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| Joseph Barbaccia                  | Jeff Leibovitz & Louise Bird |
| Baum Thornley Architects          | Marilyn Masters Levine       |
| Bonacker Associates               | Meagan Levitan               |
| Daniel Bucko                      | Mike Lew                     |
| Mark Buell                        | Franco Mancini               |
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| Robert & Daryl David              | Flicka McGurrin              |
| Sean Dries                        | Thomas Murphy                |
| Michael Frank                     | Bill Newsom                  |
| Friends of the Urban Forest       | Debra Niemann                |
| Robert Friese                     | M. Paige Nittler             |
| Burt Fuererstein & Janet Shalwitz | NPO Birth                    |
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|                                   | Wells Whitney                |
|                                   | Barbara & Chris Wilson       |

In addition, thank you to everyone who bought donor bricks in support of the Crocker Amazon Playground.

San Francisco Neighborhood Parks Report, Volume 7, Number 29, is published bi-monthly by the Neighborhood Parks Council, 783 Buena Vista West, San Francisco CA 94117. Telephone: 415/621-3260; Facsimile: 415/431-9030. E-mail: [council@sfneighborhoodparks.org](mailto:council@sfneighborhoodparks.org). Web: [www.sfneighborhoodparks.org](http://www.sfneighborhoodparks.org). Editor: Isabel Wade; Contributors: Jeanne Alexander, Linda Hunter, Amber Rosenberg. Production: Giraffe-X.