

Where do parks and recreation fit into our city priority setting (i.e. the budget process) when public safety and the economy are the mantra of the day?

The question is especially germane with the current crop of Supervisors since this is the first group elected in districts that have faced such an economic downturn – some say the worst since World War II. Can we hope that these leaders, who hear from their constituents every day on matters such as park cleanliness to potholes, will take an encompassing look at what makes a city tolerable – especially when times are tough? And, could we expect from the Mayor's Office a rational approach to budget cutting that might include a cross-department historical examination of previous cuts and current efficiency levels rather than just an across-the-board cut for all departments? Finally, if the true economic benefits of parks and recreation to our city were put into the equation, will our elected officials have the courage to conclude that they should look elsewhere before they chop \$8.6 million from the parks and recreation budget?

Mayor Brown has been a generous and stalwart proponent of better parks and recreation. He's also been Mayor in an amazing economic boom period. During past recessions, however, other Mayors and Supervisors elected citywide always found the Recreation and Park Department to be a soft target for making their cuts during a budget crisis. They have done this cutting both directly, which meant a serious decline in service delivery through position reductions, or indirectly by using funds for operations that were approved by the taxpayers for park improvements (i.e. the Open Space Fund). In 1999, NPC asked Controller Ed Harrington to compare the position of the Rec and Park Department with that of other city departments vis-a-vis cuts. His conclusion was that the Department had received a disproportionate share of cuts during the previous decade; more importantly, the Department was still behind compared to the gains made by other departments during the economic boom. In other words, the Department has been losing ground despite the support of Mayor Brown.

One need only consider the cut to gardening staff over the past quarter of a century (during a time period when we have added more than 70 acres to the park system) to understand the dire situation of parks. Union officials (including Tom Harrison) have indicated to us that in 1960, there were 291 gardeners; and in 2001-2002, according to the Salary Ordinance, there were only 249 gardener positions. According to the same ordinance, last year alone (2001-2002), 35 positions could not be filled because of budget shortfalls and 9 gardeners had to be saved by using the Open Space Fund. This "one time use" of the fund has now been proposed for a second year and probably longer (and even deeper) if the economy continues to sour.

continued inside

Sunset Recreation Center under construction in 1950.



PHOTO: HISTORICAL PHOTO ARCHIVE, SAN FRANCISCO RECREATION AND PARK DEPARTMENT.

Sunset Recreation Center

In 1937, the three-acre site at 29th Avenue and Lawton Street was bought for \$50,676 and began as a playground. Built by the Recreation and Park Department and the W.P.A. (Works Progress Administration), Sunset Playground opened in 1940 with a small field house, volleyball, basketball and tennis courts. As the neighborhood grew and more children crowded onto the courts, neighborhood improvement clubs began to work for an expanded facility. The Department chose a contractor to build Sunset Recreation Center and three other centers of similar architecture – Oceanview, St. Mary's, and Potrero Hill. In October of 1951, Mayor Elmer Robinson dedicated the new facility at Sunset which now included two play areas (one for tots), new outdoor courts, a gymnasium, an auditorium, kitchen and club-rooms. The ceremony was followed by a tour of the premises, an exhibition game in the gymnasium, and dancing. And the broad smiles pictured on the faces of the mayor and civic leaders in the dedication photo might have related to the fact that the total cost of the project was \$272,000.

Source: San Francisco History Center.

Activities for parents and children in the '50s reflected the era. Mothers' clubs of ten playgrounds sponsored benefit fashion shows at Sunset Rec Center to raise money for summer outings for their kids. Children from city playgrounds competed in a Story Play Contest, selecting a published story and turning it into a play with dialogue and action. Without script, narrator or costume, the story was told through the actors' speech and movement. In 1952, young Sunset thespians won first place. In those pre-video game years, the story play was seen as a way to stimulate creative self-expression among children.

Twenty years later, Rec and Park's printed "Datebook" lists such activities as "Slim and Trim" physical fitness classes, badminton, table tennis, boxing and a senior program. Cut to the millennial spring of '03 and there's a "sea change into something rich . . ." If Shakespeare had been describing the programs at Sunset Recreation Center when he wrote that, the name of Shawna McGrew might have surfaced in a sonnet.

In her 16 years at the center, Shawna, now a principal supervisor, and the recreation directors have managed, inspired and assisted an astonishing variety of neighborhood groups ranging from toddlers to seniors, who stream to the center every day to pursue their special inter-

ests and improve their skills. A partial list of offerings includes Tai Chi, badminton, ping pong, ceramics (the center has its own kiln), Polynesian and Irish Line Dancing, yoga, quilting, cooking, and art classes. There's a food giveaway on the second Tuesday of the month. The ethnically diverse population includes Asian-Americans (mainly Chinese), Russians and other Caucasians, some Hispanics and African-Americans.

Sports for youth take up the major portion of Recreation directors Steve Bell, Wayne Barry and Toby Wiley's time. In the basketball season, 39 teams from schools around the city are scheduled to play in the gymnasium every week. On an adult note, Shawna proudly says that the gym's cross-court was recognized in the book "Hoop Nation" as "the best pick-up court in the Bay Area." (Ed. Note: In sports speak, a pick-up court is where athletes informally assemble for a game.) Basketball is also played on the outdoor courts as well as tennis and baseball and signups for teams playing baseball began on Valentine's Day (a special day helps players remember).

The Sunset Neighborhood Community Board is made up of representatives from the area's ethnic organizations, fire and police departments, artists, merchants and politicians, including District 4's newly-elected Supervisor Fiona Ma. For Shawna, they represent an extended "Friends of" group ready to help whenever she calls on them.

Repairs on the building (the leak in the roof seriously threatens the gymnasium floor) will be made as a long-term capital improvement when the Center comes up on '03-'04 of Rec and Park's Capital Plan. It's a process of stages, carried out by Rec and Park Project Directors working with the facility and the community and involving a renovation program, a Project Plan, design, a schedule and a budget. After approval by the Rec and Park Commission, the project is put to bid and construction begins. Meanwhile at Sunset Rec the beat goes on. Admitting to a slight bias, Shawna declares, "We are the best recreation center in the city. We have a great staff and an appreciative community that supports everything we do."

– Jeanne Alexander, Neighborhood Parks Council

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UPDATES

On The Waterfront: Planning for People, Parks, and the Bay Save the Date! Friday, May 2, 2002 • 8:30 a.m. - 4:00 p.m. Ferry Building San Francisco

Join civic leaders, agency staff and advocates in an interesting and important day-long symposium devoted to recreation and open space on the waterfront. The meeting is being co-sponsored by the Neighborhood Parks Council (NPC) and San Francisco Planning and Urban Research Association (SPUR). For more information visit: www.sfneighborhoodparks.org.

Your Name Here: Stadium Rights Looking Up

The budget crisis has caused the Board of Supervisors to reconsider naming Candlestick Park. The right deal could bring millions to the desperate Rec and Park Department facing an \$8.6 million cutback this coming year. The name doesn't have to be corporate – Herb Caen Park sounds good – we just need an angel! Thanks to **Supervisors Gavin Newsom, Bevan Dufty, Fiona Ma, Sophie Maxwell and Aaron Peskin** for their support! All we need is one more vote. Can **Supervisor Hall** come to the rescue to help save rec. programs for our kids and seniors?

Playground Design Ideas – Free!

Thinking of getting a jumpstart on renovating your neighborhood playground by getting your design done through community initiative? You won't want to miss Rossi Playground Community Design Day, Saturday, March 22nd, 9:00AM - Noon, Richmond Recreation Center (19th Ave. between California & Lake) organized by NPC's Playground Campaign! Following Crocker Amazon Playground, this will be the second playground to be built by the Playground Campaign. The Playground Campaign is generously supported by a grant from **Home Depot**.

For more information contact RichardBressani@www.playgroundcampaign.org.

Back by Popular Demand

It's that time of year again! NPC is pleased to announce our upcoming **Nature in the City 2003 Series**. We've got a great schedule of diverse and eclectic walking tours and even a lake tour hosted by an outstanding group of naturalists – all free of charge. To check our upcoming calendar of tours or for more information visit www.sfneighborhoodparks.org/nite/index.html.

Just Announced! Lake Merced on Saturday, March 22, 2003 Amphibians & Reptiles Field Biology Exploration – GREAT FOR KIDS! Time: 12pm - 1:30pm; Meeting place: Boathouse Sports Club Grill at 1 Harding Road, (Northern end of the lake) Tour Leader: **Chris Giorni, Director, Tree Frog Treks**; Educator, California Academy of Sciences. If you have ideas or suggestions for our upcoming **2003 Nature in the City** tour series, please e-mail jstemmler@sfneighborhoodparks.org.

The Power of Community

A small group of volunteers and RPD employees gathered to prepare soil and plant a variety of shrubs and greenery at the Merced Heights Playground on Saturday, February 22nd. Everyone worked quickly to dig holes in the rocky soil and fill them with plants. Though they were short on hands, the group managed to get about 70 plants in the ground in 3 hours and gardeners at the park have committed to adding more shrubs in the next few weeks. If you're interested in helping the Merced Heights group with future workdays, please contact **Wilma Gardner**: (415) 587-1460.

Success Story!

Located at the West entrance to the Broadway Tunnel, Helen Wills Playground is a chunk of asphalt, concrete and rusted chain-link fencing. Due to physical safety and chemical contamination, the play equipment has been removed and the clubhouse is an almost windowless bunker. In conjunction with other fundraising efforts to rebuild the playground, Friends of Helen Wills Park recently received a well-deserved

\$1.5 million grant from the State of California's Department of Parks and Recreation. The new playground will be complete by 2004 . . . congrats to **Julie Christensen** and **Friends of Helen Wills** for a job well done!

Crime Pays

Brooks Park is the happy beneficiary of a grant from the Mayor's Office of Criminal Justice to continue their Tai Chi in the park program. This pot of money comes from penalties charged to scofflaws to benefit the communities of San Francisco. If you'd like to participate in good exercise at a unique neighborhood park, contact Peter Vaernet: (415) 586-1451.

Mission Rocks

Park advocates in the Mission district are on a tear to improve their parks and playgrounds. Friends of Rolph Playground and Lower 24th Street Neighbors Association have been painting, prodding, and scanning to spruce up their very dilapidated and previously ignored open spaces. Thanks to **Supervisor Tom Ammiano** and RPD's go-getter **Robert Watkins** for their help!

Parks Go High-Tech

Rec and Park staff members at Sunnyside Park's after school program continue to develop creative new activities for children. The **"Imagined Bus Project"** will soon offer art projects every other Monday and, in addition, the clubhouse now has Internet access. Community members can drop in afternoons to check email, surf the Web and take advantage of the computer resource center. For more information on adult computer classes, please call (415) 337-4720.

Spring is in the Air

On Saturday, April 26th, 10 a.m. - 3 p.m., the **Randall Museum** will celebrate its new 'Outdoor Living Environment' that features level, easy access to Randall's spectacular cityscape views. The Randall is one of SF's best resources for families and also offers programs for all ages. Programs include ceramics, lapidary, and woodworking workshops, astronomy courses, storytelling and theater, a new teaching garden, live animal exhibits, a large, working model railway, and more. Randall Museum is located at 199 Museum Way (off Roosevelt at Corona Heights). For more information, call (415) 554-9600 or go to www.randallmuseum.org.

Party Time at South Park

South Park has been selected as the site for NPC's Second Annual Dinner Gala in October. Stay tuned for event details. In the meantime, if you have some spare time and love to organize fun and festivities, please call **Isabel Wade** at NPC: (415) 621-3260.

Salute to a Stalwart Park Activist

We are sad to note the death of long-time greening advocate, **Jean McClatchy Bricker**, in February after a short illness. Jean, representing Friends of Recreation and Parks, was one of the organizers and fundraisers extraordinaire for the BetterParks Campaign in March 2000. She also served as a Board member of Friends of the Urban Forest in the early '80s. She will be dearly missed.

Drum Roll, Please

Thanks to everyone who bought NPC raffle tickets for a free vacation at Camp Mather. RPD generously donated a weeklong stay for a family of four (retail value of \$1,150) at this summer recreation paradise located in a setting unparalleled in the West. And the lucky winner is . . . **Joanne Marlowe!**

– Amber Rosenberg

EMPLOYER MATCH?

Does your company have a matching gift program? Please investigate and let us know because it is a fabulous way to double the impact of donations. In fact, we just received a generous employee match donation from John Wiley and Sons. Please email us at council@sfneighborhoodparks.org with your name, company's name and phone number.

CONTINUED

Where do Parks and Rec fit? . . . *continued*

Why (beyond the dishonest grab of tax dollars specifically earmarked for "added value" rather than normal operations) is this emergency use of the fund problematic if it saves positions? The answer is twofold. First, given the siphoning of other specially earmarked funds last year (e.g. Children's Fund as well as Open Space Fund) and again this year, it is questionable whether the voters are going to continue to support extra taxes for anything in the future. Second, the pattern of using the Open Space Fund for emergencies over the last 30 years has resulted in many "temporary" operating positions in the fund becoming permanent. Right now, over 60 percent of the Fund is consumed for basic departmental operations and not for the purposes of open space acquisition, new facility development, and upkeep of the newly acquired sites. For those inclined to say "So What?," perhaps self-interest will spur your understanding. Parks cause the value of properties adjacent to them to increase, leading to higher taxes paid by the proximate property owners to the city coffers. According to the American Planning Association, these new parks essentially pay for themselves in twenty years and yet continue to provide extra taxes to a city's general fund.¹

A side benefit of parks for cities, but an important one, is the evidence suggesting that investment in open space also affects the comparative advantage of a community in attracting future businesses and desirable residential "newbies" to a city, such as retirees. These civic benefits also become a personal benefit when a property owner goes to sell her home. Parks and excellent recreation opportunities in a city are truly the "little engine that could" and we're about to derail it with a blow that will mean inadequate maintenance, closed facilities and reduced programs, and even elimination of the Park Patrol.

The Recreation and Park Department has made tremendous strides in the last few years toward becoming a better-managed, more efficient operation. The Department has put a lot of thought based on its new Strategic Plan into its budget proposals this year. They have also engaged in cost savings in an exemplary way – everything from buying smaller and cheaper equipment than originally planned, to utilizing an "efficiency expert" (a former city employee) who is volunteering her services to find cost savings. While belt tightening is always possible, Rec and Park is already in the slim category from years of diets while some departments are quite frankly obese. Poor people count on parks and recreation programs close to their apartments and all of us count on the tranquility that nature offers in these stressful times. It is neither fair nor economically smart for the Mayor's office to gouge the Open Space Fund and to fail to hold the line for departments that have borne the brunt of cutbacks in the past. We strongly urge you to contact the Mayor to protect the Recreation and Park budget and his own track record in enhancing these vital public assets. Let's look under every rock and behind every tree before we cut services like parks and recreation that offer so much to so many.

– Isabel Wade, Editor

¹ John Crompton, Parks and Economic Development, American Planning Association Report #502, November 2001.

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PARKSCAN

ParkScan: Private Eyes for Public Space

What is ParkScan?

ParkScan, the Neighborhood Parks Council's (NPC) newest program, 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**, funded by the Alfred P. Sloan Foundation of New York, also establishes standards of upkeep, sets priorities, and helps to substantiate the need for more resources to meet public expectations for great parks.

How does ParkScan work?

Volunteer observers from NPC's coalition of park groups visit their park on a regular basis (usually twice a month). Using handheld computers loaded with an aerial image of their park, along with routes to follow, they observe park features and rate their condition. In addition, the volunteers use digital cameras to photograph park conditions they observe (both good and bad). These photos, and the survey results, are sent to a central database at NPC, and are then forwarded to the agency managing the park for action after a final priority check by the observer group. Survey results are available to the public on the **ParkScan** website: www.parkscansf.org.

Which parks are involved?

As part of the pilot phase of the **ParkScan** program, volunteers are currently busy tracking and recording data for the following parks in Supervisorial District 9: Rolph Playground (26th St. and Hampshire), Precita Park (Precita and Folsom) and 24th St. Mini Park (24th St. between Bryant and York Sts.). For the next phase of the project, **ParkScan** will be expanding into additional Supervisorial districts with at least one park in each district participating.

How can I get (my park) involved?

For more information on **ParkScan** or to find out how you can get involved, please contact Sam Shaw at the Neighborhood Parks Council (415) 621-3260, sshaw@sfneighborhoodparks.org.

– Amber Rosenberg

THANK YOU

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