

## Neighborhood Parks Council Fact Sheet

The Neighborhood Parks Council (NPC), [www.sfneighborhoodparks.org](http://www.sfneighborhoodparks.org), is a coalition of community-based park groups actively involved in improving neighborhood parks throughout San Francisco. In addition to technical assistance and organizing help to our network and new park groups, NPC provides a forum for sharing information and experience at park planning meetings in each District, including educational presentations and workshops with guest speakers and topic experts. Through these events, NPC strives to increase public and private support for, and commitment to, the restoration and improved maintenance of our neighborhood parks, playgrounds, and recreation facilities.

Since 1996, NPC has grown to include 67 **District Park Planning** (DPP) organizations, 120+ park groups and 4,000 park volunteers, establishing itself as San Francisco's premier park advocacy group. Our focus on a well-articulated mission and energetic agenda has inspired positive change within our city's parks.

### **PUBLIC AWARENESS**

NPC galvanizes public awareness of, and involvement in, the major issues facing our neighborhood parks. Through our quarterly member meetings and DPP meetings, NPC brings city leaders and the community together to foster a shared vision for clean, safe, beautiful parks and quality recreation programs.

### **PARK ADVOCACY**

Our clout as an advocacy group shows in the placement of the "Parks Package" on the March 2000 ballot responsible for securing a \$110 million bond to upgrade our neighborhood parks – the first citywide bond in over 50 years—and the renewal of the cherished Open Space Fund for another 30 years! We continue to actively campaign on behalf of our parks. Over the last seven years, our voice has been heard at over 300 city hearings.

### **EDUCATION**

NPC helps park groups acquire the technical information and contacts they need to realize their goals. In addition, we provide a variety of forums through which San Franciscans can learn about their parks and plan for the improvement of these precious spaces. Through programs such as **Nature In The City**, community members learn about myriad environmental topics from renowned naturalists while also enjoying the City's many unique neighborhood parks.

### **COMMUNITY INVOLVEMENT**

NPC is dedicated to developing a strong working relationship between our community and the Recreation and Park Department. Through innovative projects such as **ParkScan**, NPC helps establish long-needed standards of park maintenance as well as provide city agencies with useful, accurate information about park conditions and community priorities.

### **PARK IMPROVEMENTS**

In addition to the thousands of hours of volunteer labor NPC affiliate groups contribute in their parks, NPC launched the **Playground Campaign** to rebuild San Francisco's dilapidated playgrounds. With the help of the community and corporate sponsors, the campaign is creating safe, fun, cost-effective, destination playgrounds. The success of the Campaign is evident in its instrumental role in the impressive overhaul of Crocker Amazon Playground – formerly one of the most rundown playgrounds in San Francisco.

For more information contact NPC at (415) 621-3260 or [council@sfneighborhoodparks.org](mailto:council@sfneighborhoodparks.org)

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All Quotes from Enrique Peñalosa from Keynote Address at Urban Parks Institute’s “Great Parks/ Great Cities” Conference. July 30, 2001.

***Dear Fellow San Franciscan,***

*Our City has more than 200 open spaces, playgrounds and parks (see Map 1). Still, many neighborhoods lack these vital assets so essential to our quality of life.*

*Parks are not simply desirable, they are one of the main reasons many residents and businesses choose to locate in the San Francisco Bay Area. As Enrique Peñalosa, former Mayor of Bogota observed, “If only children had as much public space as cars, most cities in the world would become marvelous.” Sadly, here in the City we still have far less public space for parks than we have parking spaces for cars.*

*San Francisco enjoys many great parks and public spaces, but we must do a better job if we are going to ensure green spaces and playgrounds for all neighborhoods. During the next half-century we need to fill the gaps (see Map 2) in our existing park system — and plan great parks and public space for the new neighborhoods that will be developed.*

*Acquisition of open space in one of the world’s most expensive real estate markets is a major challenge. The high cost of property, coupled with the City’s failure to recognize maintenance of public space as a high priority, has led some to conclude that we should not acquire additional parks. Our failure to maintain existing parks should not be compounded by failing to serve those neighborhoods without these vital assets that Peñalosa argues are as “essential to the physical and emotional health of a city as the water supply.”*

*The Neighborhood Parks Council believes that the City has the resources needed to improve the balance of parks and facilities in the highest need areas. We also can and must develop a better process to ensure that we get the best quality parks for our future neighborhoods. To further these dual objectives, we have conducted a 1-year long study of open space. In our research we:*

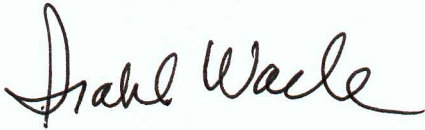
- Reviewed the history of San Francisco’s early open space acquisition and development (See Appendix 1)*
- Analyzed the 30-year history of open space acquisition from 1974 to 2003*
- Conducted a gap analysis of the existing park and recreation facility system using geographic information system (G.I.S.) technology and comparative category analysis*
- Examined acquisition programs in other cities to glean best practices.*

*In this report the Neighborhood Parks Council argues that what is needed to achieve equity in open space are supportive policies and multi-agency coordination, a coherent and proactive plan to address current and future needs, and a community-guided process to implement the plan. San Francisco needs to develop low-cost acquisition methodology and inter-agency resource sharing.*

*We can learn a great deal by studying the best practices around the country. Most of all, however, we need to develop a vision, one that not only sees state-of-the-art green and play spaces for every neighborhood, but one that also includes another grand flagship park in the eastern corridor—or perhaps even two! Great parks don't have to be a resource only on the western side of San Francisco.*

*All San Franciscans deserve to have beautiful, well-maintained parks and open spaces. As Peñalosa points out: "Higher income groups always have access to nature at beach houses, lake cabins, mountain chalets, on vacations – or in urban settings at golf courses or large gardens. Parks allow the rest of society that contact as well." Our City needs to effectively tackle this fundamental equity issue. The Neighborhood Parks Council offers our recommendations as a starting place to move ahead toward this important goal.*

Sincerely,

A handwritten signature in black ink that reads "Isabel Wade". The signature is written in a cursive, flowing style.

*Isabel Wade, Ph.D.  
Executive Director, Neighborhood Parks Council (NPC)*

12/03

## EXECUTIVE SUMMARY

San Francisco boasts many great neighborhood parks and public spaces, but not nearly enough to accommodate the needs of all residents. Population growth is occurring primarily in the eastern corridor on formerly industrial land where there are no parks. During the next half-century we need to fill the gaps in our existing park system — and also ensure new development projects include quality space for recreation and parks.

In this report the Neighborhood Parks Council argues that what is needed to achieve equity in open space are supportive policies and multi-agency coordination, a coherent and proactive plan to address current and future needs, and a community-guided process to implement the plan. As a city, we have not focused on acquisition and working smart to achieve our goal. There are ways to acquire land with little or no money. We can use the limited money we have to acquire the most difficult and necessary parcels that have no other obvious acquisition option. We can share resources among public agencies. We can create open space zoning, following the footsteps of other cities.

In the past three decades San Francisco has added less than 90 acres to our park system through our Open Space Fund, representing a mere 3% growth in City managed parkland. Fortunately, we received over 2000 acres of federal land formerly used as military bases during this time period – now a tremendous enhancement of our parkland managed by the Golden Gate National Recreation Area. We also transferred over 40 acres from other public agencies to our city-managed system. Clearly, transfers, shared use and soliciting gifts (e.g. Esprit Park) are much more cost-effective and produce more park acreage than outright purchase.

With this in mind, we need to strive to fill the open space gaps in the most strategic manner to balance the inequities that do exist. The Eastern corridor of San Francisco remains very deficient in usable green space, especially in the North Beach Chinatown/Financial District neighborhoods. Many other areas lack certain types of recreational facilities like playgrounds. Even the ‘park rich’ western half of San Francisco needs more ‘neighbor spaces’ within a 10-minute walk of many sections.

NPC believes that the issues around open space, including maintenance of parks, are best addressed in a multi-stakeholder process that should start with an Open Space Summit. This summit will highlight topics and directions for an Open Space Task Force to consider and develop, over 12-18 months, and produce a detailed, citywide Open Space Plan and Implementation Program (see Part III for recommendations).

We urge the reader to review our recommendations carefully, contact us with your own suggestions and ideas, and help the Neighborhood Parks Council get this important and needed initiative underway as soon as possible.

Please contact: Isabel Wade, Executive Director @ 621-3260 or [iwade@sfneighborhoodparks.org](mailto:iwade@sfneighborhoodparks.org)

## PART I: OPEN SPACE ACQUISITION IN SAN FRANCISCO (1974-2003)

### PARKS FOR A LIVABLE AND THRIVING CITY

Green spaces provide an essential contribution to the quality of life we expect in a world-class city. For some, open space is about running trails, playgrounds, or a place to walk the dog. For others, the availability of nature in a jungle of concrete and asphalt is a mental and physical life preserver. Behavioral research has shown that the opportunity to experience nature in our lives is a necessary requirement for human beings to function effectively.<sup>1</sup>

Parks support economic development through increased tourist revenues. Few visitors to San Francisco miss a visit to Golden Gate Park, Alamo Square to see the painted ladies, or Pioneer Park where Coit Tower is located. Those from Cleveland to Cairo seek out spaces like Union Square, Yerba Buena Gardens, and Aquatic Park. Some even find their way to hidden and historic South Park, the Marina Green, Lake Merced, and beautiful Dolores Park in the Mission District.

Parks add to the City's tax base, as property located near open and green spaces achieves even greater market value.

### ACQUISITION METHODS: HOW WE DO IT AND HOW OTHER CITIES DO IT

Given the tremendous benefits of parks, it would seem to make sense that cities would obtain as much open space as possible. The economics of urban land use and the required population density for optimum use of parks, however, make new park development more complex than it appears at first glance. Both Frederick Law Olmsted Senior and Junior cautioned about acquiring too much open space as well as too little. Effective park development considers the "right amount" in the "right place," configured for the "right" uses. As we shall see later in this report, this is why open space standards are essential that consider open space size in relation to the surrounding population density (current or projected). For instance, McLaren Park is far too large for the surrounding density and Portsmouth Square (in a neighborhood with little open space) is way too small for the surrounding density.

Acreage alone, therefore, is not necessarily a good measure of success in appraising an open space system and it is certainly not the only standard needed. Further analysis of San Francisco's park system using a multi-tiered screen is needed in order to effectively meet both geographical gaps in park land as well as category deficiencies (e.g. no playing field within two miles). A combined analysis would consider population density as it applies to the needed size of new parks in specific neighborhoods, and also citywide needs for both types of park land and recreation facilities.

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<sup>1</sup> Erica Rex, "Urban Renewal," Forest Magazine, Fall 2002, pg. 40-41

Given the high cost of urban land, examining the effectiveness of different types of acquisition methods and what they produced over the past three decades is useful in developing a highly-targeted approach to acquisition for the next century. It is also interesting to see how the raw numbers (e.g. total acres acquired) compare with other cities' acquisition efforts during the same timeframe.

San Francisco has used the following methods targeted to acquire open space and recreation facilities:

- **Enforcing zoning requirements** for residential (private open space) and commercial development (public access)
- **Transferring public land** from one agency (federal, state) to a locally-controlled agency (Rec and Park Department)
- **Collecting fees** set in development negotiations
- **Creating parkland in land controlled by non-city agencies (e.g. Redevelopment Agency, Port Authority, Housing Authority, Golden Gate National Recreation Area, Candlestick Park)**
- **Purchasing property** using Open Space Funds, bond funds, or state and federal funds
- **Using eminent domain** proceedings against a non-willing seller to acquire property with public funds
- **Negotiating large public park (at least 1/2 acre) development on private property with continued management by private business owners**

In addition to these methods, other cities utilize:

- **Converting tax delinquency foreclosures** to land or property for open space
- **Specifying "Open Space Zone"** requirements
- Purchasing land through local **levy of special taxes**
- Establishing **public benefit zoning districts**
- **Requiring developers to acquire and develop public parks.**

East Coast cities often use tax delinquency foreclosure to acquire property for open space. This approach is facilitated by the large amount of abandoned property available in many inner cities in the East, but is less relevant in San Francisco.

West Coast cities tend to use inter-agency transfers of public land frequently (i.e. DPW transferred Ferry Park to Rec and Park and the School District traded land, allowing both Michelangelo Playground and Bessie Carmichael Playground to be developed), shared use of property with other public agencies like the school district (e.g. Tule Elk Park in the Marina), the sale of bonds (Proposition A in 2000) and the levy of special taxes for specific time periods to acquire property as open space. Seattle and Portland have been very effective at the ballot with the levy of special taxes for specific park

acquisition programs (e.g. ProParks Levy 2000) and San Francisco's Open Space Fund is a set aside tax of the city budget.

San Francisco has benefited greatly from the decommissioning of military bases in the 1970's and 1980's, adding both Fort Mason and the Presidio to our available parkland (we transferred Ocean Beach and Fort Funston to the GGNRA to reduce these maintenance burdens). These types of acquisitions obviously depend on luck rather than strategy. However, the city has benefited from the targeted development of green space on federally-controlled properties managed by the Redevelopment Agency and the Housing Authority. This development has brought over 40 acres of new parks into our open space system and has been a very cost-effective method to expand our park acreage (See Table 1 for list of Redevelopment Agency park properties).

In looking at mechanisms other than one-time transfer of military land or development and/or transfer of park land by other public agencies, San Francisco has added fewer than 90 acres in 30 years to Rec and Park's managed land through direct purchase of private property or the sale/transfer of public property to Rec Park's jurisdiction (see Map 3 Acquisition and Development and Table 3). This represents a mere 3% growth in City managed parkland (as opposed to federal and state). In comparison, Portland, Oregon's parkland has grown 20% in this period, and Seattle has achieved a 48% increase. Chicago, a high-density city like San Francisco with serious land constraints, has achieved a growth in parkland of 17%.<sup>2</sup>

Cost of land is certainly an important factor shaping the purchase of property for parks in any major metropolitan area. Recognizing that fact, San Franciscans approved a set-aside of property taxes in 1974 that has provided more than \$334 million to the Open Space Fund for property acquisition and development and care of new parks. The City also established a Downtown Park Fund in 1986 that taxed developers of new office buildings so that new parks in the dense downtown area could be provided at no cost to City residents. This Fund has garnered more than \$9 million. In addition, voters approved the Neighborhood Park Bond in 2000 that can also be used for open space acquisitions and development of new facilities in areas without them. In theory, at least, San Francisco has had more resources than most cities to purchase open space.

To understand how the City has not been able to fill in the gaps in our park system with all these resources, we need to look at the actual practices guiding acquisition of open space and the expenditure of funds raised for this purpose in San Francisco during the past three decades. The key to a good acquisition program, however, is not just money, but strategy. Cities that have been effective in building their park system follow several guidelines:

- Don't pay if you don't have to; use public land where possible
- Use the cheapest method possible when you must pay

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<sup>2</sup> All city data from Peter Harnik, Inside City Parks, Urban Land Institute, 2002

- Pay for property with appropriate sources (i.e. use local tax dollars for properties that are not easily matched with state, federal or private source).
- Use public policy to conduct acquisitions that improve the equitable distribution of open space
- Make acquisition a priority and develop a plan to meet objectives

San Francisco does not commonly follow these guidelines. In the last fifteen years, the City's acquisition efforts have been more reactive than proactive in filling the gaps of the open space system. The Open Space Committee established in 1975 was initially responsive to the Recreation Open Space Element of the General Plan, adopted in 1974 and amended in 1986, that did indicate specific sites for acquisition and mapped the high need areas (economic criteria only). But we have been miserly (allocating only \$24 million for acquisitions in over 30 years) in overall expenditures from the Fund and we lost track of high needs in many neighborhoods. Moreover, we have not always been frugal in individual transactions due to neighborhood pressure to acquire parcels at all costs. Finally, our public policy regarding open space is not comprehensive, lacks priorities, and does not include open space as a land use.

#### **OPEN SPACE FUNDING AND ACQUISITION IN SAN FRANCISCO**

- The principal method of acquiring open space in San Francisco has been through the transfer of public lands and the private development process, not through the purchase of properties
- Passed by voters in 1974, the Open Space fund provides an annual set-aside of 2.5 cents of every \$100 of assessed property value for property acquisition, development and care of new parks
- The Open Space fund has raised \$334 Million during the past 30 years; of this total, only \$24 million(7%) was actually spent on acquisition
- In 1986, the City also developed a Downtown Park Fund that taxed developers of new office buildings for the creation of new downtown parks
- The Downtown Park Fund has garnered more than \$9 million in the past 17 years; from this total, not a single acre of new open space was purchased
- In 2000, voters approved a renewal of the Open Space Fund - the Neighborhood Parks Bond - that can be used for open space acquisitions and development of new facilities
- In the past three decades, we have added less than 90 acres to the park system through the Open Space Fund, representing a mere 3% growth in City managed parkland

#### **OPEN SPACE GOALS AND STANDARDS**

The larger framework in which acquisition methods operate is the city's goal, or standard, for open space. Every city should establish a goal, in terms of metrics such as acres of open space per thousand residents, for the amount of open space that will be provided to its population. However, it is critical that this standard be applied to existing neighborhoods, not just to new development.

The key to any standard is implementation. A goal is only meaningful if there is a plan to reach it. Some cities have a standard for open space in their General Plan but make

little effort to support it. As in San Francisco, there are often loopholes in the development process because there is no political will or civic vision to enforce the standard. It is useful, therefore, to study the range of standards for open space and to see what cities actually implement them and with what methods.

When reviewing standards for open space among several West Coast cities we found a wide variety of requirements. These range from 2.75 acres per 1,000 residents for new development in Vancouver, Canada's (pop. 550,000) downtown area, to 3.5 acres per 1,000 residents in San Jose, California (pop. 895,000) and as much as 10 acres per 1,000 residents for the most dense areas of Seattle (pop. 563,000).

San Francisco has a citywide standard indicated for open space only in the City's Sustainability Plan and not in the Planning Code. The standard in the Sustainability Plan, approved by the Board of Supervisors, is 5.5 acres per 1000 residents -- essentially recognizing the status quo --the existing open space in San Francisco including city, state and federally-owned public open space. There is no goal for open space relating to each district—a serious deficiency in developing an action plan to redress the lack of green space in dense neighborhoods and those far from the large parks that skew our city open space total.

The standards for open space in San Francisco's General Plan relate only to new development. Requirements are stated in terms of square feet of open space per square feet of development, rather than requiring a set number of square feet of open space per thousand residents. The space provided by developers is intended to be privately accessible open space. The open space that qualifies in high-rise development can include balconies, courtyards and rooftop gardens. If a developer is not able to provide this personal open space (important space but not the same as a public park even for the new residents), they can pay fees for an off-site open space or they can provide street amenities such as street trees and landscaped passageways. Amazingly, the loft developments of the '90's were exempted completely from all open space requirements. And today, there is still no requirement for **public** open space in new neighborhoods.

These loopholes do not produce public parks for the new neighborhoods being created in San Francisco such as those currently being developed in the downtown area and South of Market (see Table 7 for a list of residential developments planned in these areas).

Standards based on population averaging (e.g. acres of park per thousand people) may not be sufficient when considering neighborhood needs. Large parks may make *per capita* open space availability seem adequate; we will refer to this as 'breathing room' open space, borrowing this nomenclature from the city of Seattle. Often an equally important metric is 'usable' open space -- within a 10-minute walk, relatively flat, and accessible. And certainly, "open space" from a neighborhood perspective must be public as opposed to the essentially private benefits provided by balconies and rooftop gardens.

## **A TALE OF TWO CITIES: SEATTLE AND SAN FRANCISCO**

### **SEATTLE**

Seattle's open space acquisition program has two overall goals: green space preservation and development of neighborhood parks and open space. They have both 'ideal' standards and 'acceptable' standards for neighborhood parks and open space acquisitions. Furthermore, they are very clear that usable open space is the goal that counts in neighborhoods.

To meet acquisition standards in even the most densely populated neighborhoods, individual parcels must be at least 10,000 square feet, or approximately one-fourth of an acre. Smaller spaces are desirable, but they are not included in the Seattle standard for each neighborhood. These are a part of the citywide total 'breathing room' open space. Seattle has developed an "open space gap analysis" with maps to help guide this planning.<sup>3</sup>

It is informative to examine how Seattle raised and spent funds to implement its open space standards as rapid development forced the city to take action to save existing open spaces held privately. In 1989, Seattle helped to promote a large countywide bond, the King County Open Space and Trails Bond, which was approved by the voters. The Seattle portion of the bond was primarily aimed at preserving green space in the city. Seattle was able to leverage the \$35.2 million open space acquisition funding from the bond so that a total of about \$92 million was spent for acquisition. While recognizing that even the forested hillsides in Seattle are platted and zoned for urban development, Seattle was able to preserve more than 500 acres through property acquisitions, transfers and donations.

Seattle went directly to the city's voters in 2000, asking them to pass a \$198 million Pro Parks Levy to be expended over an 8-year period within the city boundaries. This Levy, provides both capital (for park acquisition and development) and operating funds, (for enhanced maintenance, environmental stewardship and recreation programs). The Levy specifies three plans to secure open space:

- The \$16 million Neighborhood Parks Acquisition category earmarks funds to acquire property for more than 18 new neighborhood parks;
- The \$10 million Green Spaces category which funds property acquisition in designated green spaces to preserve habitat, forests and watersheds;
- The \$10 million Opportunity Fund that provides neighborhoods that are targeted to receive increased density with the opportunity to compete for grants for park acquisition or development. (In the first funding cycle, \$5 million was targeted for acquisition and \$1 million for park development projects.)

To date, the Levy has leveraged more than \$11.4 million in additional funding for acquisition. These leveraged funds include a significant grant from the recently-

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<sup>3</sup> See [http://www.cityofseattle.net/parks/open\\_spaces/gap\\_analysis\\_report.htm](http://www.cityofseattle.net/parks/open_spaces/gap_analysis_report.htm)

established Seattle Parks Foundation (the foundation is also conducting a public process regarding a potential property donation to the City.) In combination with the \$31 million for acquisition in the Levy, the leveraged funding brings the amount currently available for acquisition to \$42.5 million. A major focus of the Pro Parks Levy is implementing citizen-developed neighborhood plans, and acquisition is primarily aimed at securing properties for new parks in under-served densely developed neighborhoods. Because property already zoned for intense development is quite expensive, the acreage acquired through the Levy will likely be only a fraction of that preserved through the 1989 bond, which focused on broad swath of forested hillsides.

Together the voter-approved 1989 bond and 2000 levy, and the matching grants leveraged through these measures, will permit Seattle to add nearly 700 acres of green space and parkland in dozens of neighborhoods throughout their city at an estimated cost of \$134.5 million.<sup>4</sup>

### **SAN FRANCISCO**

San Francisco's efforts to save existing open space and create new parks in those neighborhoods without them goes back 30-years with the establishment of the Open Space Fund. While other opportunities have produced parks through the development process (e.g. Redevelopment Agency), through one-time circumstances (e.g. decommissioning of military bases), or through private development (e.g. Levi Plaza), the official city mechanism to actively acquire public open space for parks and recreation facilities has been through the Open Space Fund.

This fund provides an annual set-aside of property taxes of 2.5 cents of every \$100 of assessed value. The Fund has earned \$334 million during the past 30 years. (See Table 2) Its original disposition required that 40% be spent on open space acquisition and development. By the turn of the millennium, only an average of \$400,000 annually was actually being spent on acquisitions – as opposed to development (and excluding the 60% required for maintenance). Proposition C, approved by the voters in 2000, raised the acquisition bar to 5% of the total fund, or about \$1 million per annum (property taxes vary from year to year).

Numerous budget crises since the Fund was established have forced more and more operating costs into the Fund to the point that more than two thirds of it is now used for regular maintenance of parks and operation of various programs. After three decades, the total spent for acquisition amounts to only \$24 million, less than 10% of the total funds generated. This limited funding enabled the City to purchase just 87 acres of land.<sup>5</sup> The Open Space Fund was renewed by the voters in 2000 for another 30 years. Proposition C (2000) mandates a minimum be spent on land acquisition of 5% of total revenues generated each year. This will provide a little more than \$1 million for land acquisition in 2003.

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<sup>4</sup> Seattle information provided by Catherine Anstett, Public Information Officer, Parks Department, City of Seattle

<sup>5</sup> A list of properties acquired, sorted by Supervisor District and including cost and type of property acquired or developed, is found in Table 3.

The City also established a Downtown Park Fund (1986) in order to secure parks in the dense downtown districts at no cost to the taxpayers. To date this fund has purchased **no** property for parks; \$2.8 million is now available and unused. On a more positive note: managers of this fund did oversee the transfer of 3.3 acre Rincon Park from the Redevelopment Agency to the Recreation and Park Department.<sup>6</sup>

A third source of funding for open space acquisition in San Francisco was created with the passage of Proposition A in 2000, a \$110 million general obligation bond dedicated for neighborhood parks. Bond funds can be used either for the purchase of property or development of new facilities. However, even though the bond measure included a capital plan, with most existing parks listed, there is no money earmarked for development of new parks.

In summary, funds available for acquisition of open space in San Francisco have not been used as the voters originally intended nor did they provide the benefits that fee payers (in the downtown areas) had been promised. There is no strategy of targeted acquisitions intended to serve those neighborhoods currently without parks. There is no stated goal, or standard, for either 'breathing space' or 'usable' open space in San Francisco. And there is no comprehensive plan for open space acquisitions that coordinates the efforts of various parties developing parks under a broad vision of achieving equity in the distribution of open space in our city. The Recreation and Open Space Element of the General Plan is the appropriate planning vehicle to provide that broad vision, but it was last updated in the mid 1980's. Finally, there are no specific criteria established for acquisitions to guide the Parks, Recreation and Open Space Advisory Committee, including whether "high need" is purely demographic need by income and age group or whether certain deficiencies in facilities such as playgrounds might also qualify as high need. Clearly, a new round of planning is in order.

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<sup>6</sup> See Table 4 for details on the Downtown Park Fund.

## PART II: OPEN SPACE DISTRIBUTION – A GAP ANALYSIS

### OPEN SPACE DISTRIBUTION

#### OPEN SPACE DISTRIBUTION – A GAP ANALYSIS

- There are 5.5 acres of open space per 1,000 residents – about one-half the national standard of 10 acres per 1,000 inhabitants
- There are more than 4,000 acres of public open space owned by local, state and federal authorities within the City's boundaries; however, the preponderance of this open space is located in the western half of the City

The distribution of accessible open space that provides a nature experience is a special interest of the Neighborhood Parks Council. To determine how “green” San Francisco is, we separated parks into those that are primarily landscapes vs. those designated as athletic fields or other recreation facilities. These green spaces provide mental relief from asphalt and built structures of a city, provide recreation space and places to connect with nature, and also serve an essential function in a sustainable urban ecosystem. Larger expanses of vegetation and street tree corridors help to clean the air, significantly increase rainwater percolation into the aquifer, an economic as well as environmental benefit, and provide important habitat for birds and other wildlife.

The Neighborhood Parks Council also has a well-established program supporting neighborhood playgrounds. We have consequently carried out a specific category analysis of playgrounds in San Francisco, both those under the jurisdiction of the Recreation and Park Department and those managed by the School District.

Both the ‘greenscape’ and playground analyses are preliminary; additional fieldwork needs to be conducted to verify the size and function of each park and facility. Most important, community input is required in order to identify needs for open space as well as the types of recreation facilities that are desired in each neighborhood. Despite this need for additional research, NPC hopes that the work presented here serves as an impetus to move the City toward the development of a plan that corrects the inequitable distribution of this asset so critical to our quality of life.

### GEOGRAPHIC EQUITY

A glance at the Green Map<sup>7</sup> of San Francisco shows some very large areas of open space; there are more than 4,000 acres of public open space owned by local, state and federal authorities within the City’s boundaries. There are 5.5 acres of open space per 1,000 residents – about one-half the national standard of 10 acres per 1,000 inhabitants and close to San Francisco’s goal set in the Sustainability Plan.<sup>8</sup> This is still an

<sup>7</sup> See Map 3 Open Space Acquired by Rec & Park Department in San Francisco

<sup>8</sup> The national standard is set by the National Recreation and Park Association; S.F.’s Sustainability Plan is on the city website. See <http://sfgov.org/sfenvironment/aboutus/policy/sustain>.

impressive figure in light of the fact that San Francisco's population density is second only to New York City among American cities.

However, our Green Map of San Francisco shows that the preponderance of this open space is located in the western half of the City. In addition to the Presidio, Lincoln Park, Ocean Beach, Golden Gate Park, Stern Grove, Fort Funston and Lake Merced are 2,123 acres of open space, all west of Arguello Avenue. This tremendous resource is vitally important to our City's environment and economy, and for the residents who frequent these spaces. It is also true, however, that many people from the eastern half of San Francisco find it difficult to get to these parks, and many never do.

## **EASTERN SAN FRANCISCO**

The eastern side of the City, especially along the waterfront corridor from North Beach to the city border, is generally identified as a high-need area.<sup>9</sup> The urgent need to better serve this half of the City was emphasized in the Recreation and Open Space Element of the General Plan approved in 1986. Much of the eastern bayshore was industrially zoned with little area zoned for residential or commercial land uses which did not traditionally have much park land. As these areas are redeveloped with residential and commercial uses, adequate parkland and public open space should be reserved for public use and enjoyment. The South Eastern corridor is a part of San Francisco that already has considerable public land owned by various public agencies from the federal and state government to the Public Utilities Commission, and this ownership represents a tremendous opportunity.

As indicated previously, San Francisco has benefited from other open space acquisition means involving the exchange of public land for new parks in our city as well as from exactions for park and from private developments. The need for open space along the Eastern Corridor is still so great that we should concentrate on these other means, on partnerships, and on specific assignation of sites in future bond or levies put before the voters to ensure that we meet specific needs in a targeted and cost-effective manner.

Eastern San Francisco does enjoy several large breathing room open spaces, including McLaren Park, Glen Canyon Park and Bayview Hills. Excluding these larger spaces leaves just 245 acres of green space in the entire eastern waterfront corridor of San Francisco in Districts 3, 6 and 10. While McLaren Park and Bayview Hill serve as neighborhood parks for nearby residents, many residents find access to these parks difficult, and express concerns about public safety. In addition, because they are not well served by public transportation and are surrounded by relatively low-density neighborhoods, many parks in this side of the city do not often develop a critical mass of park users necessary to keep them vibrant and safe public gathering spaces.

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<sup>9</sup> See Map 9 of San Francisco General Plan, Recreation and Open Space Element

Districts 3 and 6 are the only districts in San Francisco with no large breathing room space within their borders. Just a little more than half an acre of open space has been added to District 3 through the Open Space Fund, with another 0.8 acre provided in 2000 when Ferry Park was transferred to the Recreation and Park Department from the Department of Public Works. The waterfront area of District 3 has benefited from private development of parks such as the 1.77-acre Levi Plaza and 1.66 acre Sidney Walton Park. However, in using either a *per capita* or usable space analysis, District 3 is still in great need for more parks, and holds the title of most deficient district in open space on a *per capita* basis in San Francisco.

South of Market/Tenderloin (District 6) is a runner up for open space shortage, even though more than five acres of open space have been added in this district through the Open Space Fund, and 42.77 acres as the result of Redevelopment Agency projects. These additions bring the total open space to 91.74 acres, with another 48 acres to be added when the Mission Bay project is completed. Nonetheless, a glance at the open space map for the district shows that there are no green spaces in many neighborhoods, and no playgrounds in the eastern section (north Mission), other than the brand new Hoff Street Park, an area where many families with children reside.

Treasure Island is a poor stepchild of District 6 and the city as a whole from a park planning perspective. Residents are in dire need of new facilities and improved parks. A Master Plan for the island is in the process of development and it includes considerable open space; it behooves all of us to ensure that this plan protects the natural resources found on Yerba Buena, provides for the needs of soon-to-be-developed neighborhoods of the future, and also offers something of value to Californians, since that is the legal covenant.

The Bayshore District (S.D.#10), another area where many families reside, is almost as poor in usable green spaces and playgrounds. The Bayshore District added the largest amount of open space (40.69 acres) of all the districts through the Open Space Fund, and; more park development is planned at Hunters Point. However, the largest addition to the district's open space, Bayview Hill, qualifies only as breathing room space due to lack of accessibility. The City should provide improved access to environmentally-rich Bayview Hill, along with environmental education programs and camping opportunities for school groups.

The Marina (S.D.#2), Western Addition (S.D.#5), and the Castro/Noe Valley (S.D.#8) all have usable open space shortages, even though each has access to regional, breathing room open spaces such as the Golden Gate National Recreation Area, Buena Vista Park and Glen Canyon. The southern part of District 8 has been a real winner in Open Space Fund allocations, with more than 17.58 acres of parkland resulting from 11 transactions – the largest number of projects in any district (see Map 3). The Marina received no open space funding despite the lack of playgrounds in the northern and eastern sections of this district. Similar gaps in both playgrounds and usable open space are found in both the Western Addition and the Castro/ Noe Valley districts.

The Mission District (S.D. #9) has relatively good coverage in its mid section, but very poor coverage in the north and southern sections. The District has three large facilities and open spaces (St Mary's Recreation Center, Bernal Hill, and Holly Park) but almost all of the remaining spaces are less than 1/2 acre and many are under 1/4 acre. The newest addition, Parque Niños Unidos, is just over 1/2 an acre and was the result of a 10-year effort led by the community to create a park in the poorly-served northern section of the Mission.

## **WESTERN SAN FRANCISCO**

The problem with calculating open space on a *per capita* basis is that an inequitable distribution of usable open space may not be apparent. Many sections of our City, even in the park-rich western half, provide no usable green space within a 10-minute walk from one's residence. The Gap Map<sup>10</sup> illustrates where the City needs to increase the amount of usable open space in order to provide an equitable distribution of parks and recreation facilities.

The Sunset (Supervisor.District #4) and Richmond (S.D.#1) districts provide an illustration of the effect of using two different lenses to examine open space availability. These districts, located in the park-rich western half of the City, are both bordered by large parks, but with few smaller parks within their borders. Planners in the 1920s and 30s assumed that these large parks, and the backyards of district residents, provided sufficient area to meet open space needs. Residents who lived in the center of these districts were expected to walk the mile and a half to the nearest regional facility.

Assumptions made 50 years ago about mobility and the use of back-yard open space are outdated today. Yet many of us still believe that these two districts are adequately served by parks. However, examination of the Green Map<sup>11</sup> shows them to be among the least well served with usable parks in all San Francisco.

Despite this fact, no acreage was added to the Sunset district through the Open Space Fund in 30 years, and only .83 (<1acre) of an acre was added in the Richmond district in this time period. The Richmond district did, however, get a brand new recreation center that occupies land leased from the San Francisco School District.

The southwest section of the City (S.D.#7) has large breathing room spaces with Lake Merced at its southern border and Golden Gate Park close to its northern border. However, there are major gaps in usable green spaces to the east of 19<sup>th</sup> Ave, and significant shortages in playgrounds throughout the district. While 12.45 acres of parkland has been added to the district in the past 30 years using Open Space funds, all of these projects have provided natural, and not necessarily accessible, open spaces. These properties meet breathing room standards, but there is still a major need in the district for recreation facilities and usable neighborhood parks.

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<sup>10</sup> See Map 2- Gap Map

<sup>11</sup> See Map 4 – Green Map

The South-central district (S.D.#11) including the Excelsior, Ingleside and Outer Mission neighborhoods is also lacking in open spaces in many neighborhoods. Numerous areas of the district need playgrounds given the high concentration of families with children. Green spaces for picnics and the simple enjoyment of nature are lacking. The Open Space Fund has provided just 1.12 new acres of open space in this district since 1975. Huge McLaren Park (333 acres) is on the eastern border, providing substantial breathing room space to residents. This park could provide much more 'usable' open space if its Master Plan were implemented. The park should be developed with recreational facilities and features desired by both the neighborhood and citywide residents.

## **FACILITY EQUITY**

Evaluating facility equity is a long overdue exercise, but one that NPC does not have the resources to complete at this time. We did plot the different types of open space (see Map 4) and have begun to evaluate the different categories of neighborhood parks from a "green and usable" perspective. Factors such as topography, climate, public transit, socioeconomic profiles, and public policy (e.g. dog policy) all have major impact on the usability of various facilities or the need for additional ones in certain neighborhoods.

A service-area analysis identifies inequalities in the regional distribution of open space. It does not, however, illustrate the availability of various categories of open space, distinguishing, for example, between soccer fields and neighborhood parks.

City Planning provides standard service area radii for all Recreation and Park facilities. NPC has used these distances in preparing our gap analysis. However, as neighborhood park advocates we know that no single area designation is appropriate for all facilities. Swimming pools draw users from a much larger service area than a neighborhood park or a clubhouse, and soccer fields and baseball diamonds attract people even from other cities. Topography and accessibility also play an important role.

While we have not completed this evaluation of facility equity, NPC has plotted the distribution of most playgrounds around the City. We selected this category of recreation facility for initial analysis both as a result of our experience with playground programs through our Playground Campaign, and because of the critical importance of these facilities to the quality of life in San Francisco.

## **PLAYGROUNDS**

Children playing in parks are an obvious hallmark of a flourishing green space and perhaps even a city. According to Gordon Price, former City Councilor for the city of Vancouver, their City Planning Department views children as the 'indicator species' for

successful planning projects. If the projects are well done, with plenty of usable green space, families with children will move in. Vancouver has the results to prove it.

NPC plotted existing City playgrounds<sup>12</sup>, including those managed by the Recreation and Park Department and the Redevelopment Agency. Playgrounds operated by the Unified School District were also added, although these playgrounds are not generally available to the public after school hours. We have included demographic data from the 2000 census in order to see how facilities match up with children-dense neighborhoods.

It is apparent that many neighborhoods are lacking playgrounds even when all agency sites are open and available. However, were the School District's playgrounds available for public use after school hours, the gaps in some neighborhoods would be reduced significantly. Clearly, a joint use agreement with the School District that combines resources is essential. This cooperative agreement and shared use of facilities was called for in the Open Space Element Policy 4.2. and yet somehow no one has managed to forge this vital partnership.

Such agreements are standard practice in cities such as Chicago that have made huge strides in converting concrete schoolyards to green spaces for general public use as neighborhood parks and playgrounds for general public use.<sup>13</sup> San Francisco would do well to develop such a plan to fill in the gaps in playgrounds, especially in children-dense neighborhoods.

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<sup>12</sup> See Map 5 Areas Served by RPD & School District Playgrounds

<sup>13</sup> See <http://www.cityofchicago.org/PlanAndDevelop/Programs/SchoolParkProg.html>.

## PART III: PARKS FOR THE 21<sup>ST</sup> CENTURY

### BACK TO THE FUTURE: CONCLUSION AND RECOMMENDATIONS

As we have seen, there are major gaps in our open space system and our facility equity in San Francisco despite 30 years of purchases through the Open Space Fund and additions through other mechanisms, transfers, or gifts. Shortages in usable neighborhood green spaces may prove to be even larger than our initial “Gap Map” when a more thorough field analysis of each site is conducted. The critical metric will, as measured in Seattle, be a minimum of 1/4 acre of green per park or open space.

It was a surprise to NPC to learn in the course of this study that the majority of new parkland added in San Francisco in the last 30 years has been created through private property development organized through the Redevelopment Agency and zoning requirements for real estate developers, rather than by purchase of private property for parks. One new mega-project, Mission Bay, is scheduled to add 48 acres of green space upon completion – more than half the total parkland acquired over 30 years of effort purchasing bits and pieces of land with the Open Space Fund. (See Table 3)

The Redevelopment Agency and the City (Board of Supervisors) have the broad powers to acquire property for public use, including public open space use. A large property in single ownership, such as Mission Bay (300+acres) provides a unique opportunity for the city to require a developer to create open space. However, open space can also be provided by small project developers and these spaces will be essential to creating livable neighborhoods in the eastern corridor.

Current planning for new open space in the City is completely inadequate. Development plans for the eastern corridor, the region of San Francisco identified by City Planning with the greatest need for additional open space, are proceeding rapidly. Proposed new neighborhoods are being created at Rincon Hill and the Trans-Bay Terminal, but the Recreation and Park Department is not consulted early enough in the process to impact the project design or to provide a neighborhood/district overview of what is needed in terms of open space and recreation facilities that provide adequate and high quality parks in these areas. The Recreation and Park Department needs to be given an ongoing and leading role in decision making regarding development in San Francisco in order to get the public benefits that are good for the city and good for the new residents – once they move into a neighborhood.

The press described the open space possibilities for the Rincon neighborhood of such amenities being added as widened sidewalks with greenery and seating areas “that could become a sort of neighborhood commons.”<sup>14</sup> This is a far cry from truly usable open space where a family could picnic. The Board of Supervisors has prioritized affordable housing for any available public land, a laudable goal; but no one wants to live in a neighborhood without parks – affordable or not.

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<sup>14</sup> San Francisco Chronicle, July 23, 2003

The City Planning Department held neighborhood plan meetings throughout 2001-2003 in three areas of the City notably lacking in open space in their “Better Neighborhood Process.” However, when challenged by participants to include parks in their planning, the agency’s response was that “the Recreation and Park Department handles open space.” As we’ve seen, however, Rec and Park does not “handle” many pieces of open space planning and acquisition. Where is the coordination going to take place that will ensure we do deal with open space effectively based on a plan, criteria, and a vision that truly enhances on a grand scale our city landscape? Better coordination between the Planning Department, Recreation and Park Department and other relevant departments would help to strategically plan and implement open space improvements.

A new era of coordination and collective planning among all the agencies that have an impact on open space is needed. An Open Space Council, under the direction of the Mayor, could coordinate planning for open space and implementation of the resulting Plan. This would integrate planning for open space at agencies such as the Department of Public Works, the Real Estate Department (which probably needs a new mission), the Public Utilities Commission, the Redevelopment Agency, the Housing Authority, the Port Authority, and the Unified School District with the Recreation and Park Department by bringing all parties to the same table. It would provide a regularly-scheduled coordinating process for all these agencies to share information, create a common vision, and work together. Those agencies that control funding that can be used for acquisitions and property development, such as the Mayor’s Offices of Economic Development, Community Development and Children Youth and Families, also need to sit at this table so that funding strategies are integrated into the planning process.

Ironically, one of the main reasons that San Francisco lags behind other cities in the acquisition, development and maintenance of parks is the creation, and subsequent misuse, of our Open Space Fund. To this day most San Franciscans believe that the fund is intended for acquiring open space. While the name of the fund was changed in 2000 to Park, Recreation and Open Space Fund to convey the broader purposes of these ear-marked tax dollars, the emphasis now is even less on open space acquisition than at any time in the last 30 years—even though the fund has more earmarked dollars (5% annually, or about \$1 million in 2000) for acquisition than ever before. It is clear that a Task Force should be appointed to consider the best ways to manage this fund for open space acquisition, prepare a proposal, then submit their recommendations to the voters.

Another job for this Task Force should be to redraft portions of the General Plan and the Recreation and Open Space Element that are now more than 15 years old. The General Plan is biased against open space. San Francisco considers open space as a less desirable land use than many others, and our City Planning Department considers it not at all: ‘real’ land uses are commercial, residential, and industrial.

In contrast, cities such as Vancouver, British Columbia have managed to place both affordable housing and great parks even in very densely-populated downtown

neighborhoods through effective land-use planning. They are also very aggressive in requirements (double rows of street trees, parks, low-rise town houses) for single projects, recognizing the cumulative impact of multiple high-density projects in a neighborhood. San Francisco is creating new neighborhoods now with no public amenities like parks, libraries and schools. We need to push our City Planning Department for public benefit zoning, and work together with housing advocates to ensure that our policies do not prohibit the most essential quality-of-life feature for those most in need.

### **ACTION PLAN AND CONCLUSION**

San Francisco must recognize the urgent need for a new vision and a new plan to address our Open Space issues. Like Los Angeles, we need to immediately determine the effect of the inclusionary housing ordinance on land value. One goal of this study would be to determine the potential effects of assessing a fee on housing development for open space acquisition and development. If this study indicates that it is possible to assess a fee and still develop housing, the planning code should be amended. If not, the city must find and dedicate a new source of funding for open space acquisition and development – or reclaim the funds that have been perpetually ‘borrowed’ from the existing Open Space Fund. Proposition C now requires that a minimum of 5% of the Fund be spent on acquisition, but the Mayor could allocate a higher percentage of fund to acquisition – and provide more general fund dollars (or perhaps hotel tax dollars) to cover Recreation and Park’s Operating Expenses.

The following recommendations are intended to provide an impetus to launch a process that will create a long-term, multi-agency, comprehensive Open Space Plan. This plan will strengthen and improve San Francisco’s process of acquisition, planning and coordination of parks, open space and recreation facilities, and suggest the means to maintain them as well.

The Action Steps below will ideally be funded privately, and supported publicly through collaboration with relevant city agencies that lend their staff time and expertise to jointly planning and developing strategies with private stakeholders, the necessary components of an Open Space Plan and a Park Maintenance Funding Strategy.

#### **I: Hold an Open Space Summit**

An Open Space Summit should be convened to lay the foundation for a longer-term Task Force to tackle both the problems of open space acquisition and maintenance. The program should include invited speakers from other cities and representatives from all of the San Francisco public and private agencies involved in land use decisions, real estate acquisition, park and recreation planning and services. The outcome will be ideas for a vision and agenda items for a task force to study in the preparation of an Open Space Plan.

## II: Create an Open Space Task Force

An Open Space Task Force, resulting from the Open Space Conference, should be convened in early 2004 in order to develop an Open Space Plan for the 21<sup>st</sup> Century. The plan will create a framework, policies, criteria and priorities for open space acquisition, and a strategy to fund green space maintenance including parks, squares, street trees and center islands, and public off sets. This Task Force should complete its work within a 12- to 18-month period. Some of the work to be undertaken by the task force includes:

1. **Update the General Plan:** The Recreation and Open Space Element of the City's General Plan should be updated. Changes should be made in the General Plan itself to include Open Space Zoning and to revise language that is fundamentally biased against open space as a preferred land use. New regulations are required that developments at certain densities provide for or pay fees to establish *parks* in the immediate neighborhood. The Task Force can prepare recommendations to be presented to the Planning Department/Commission for review and adoption.
2. **Conduct a Survey:** Proposition C(2000) requires that a professional, extensive survey be conducted to assess current and future preferences for facilities, recreation programs, and open space. The Task Force should assess the adequacy of the surveys/assessments currently being conducted by RPD and help to secure funding from the Mayor's Office of the Board of Supervisors if these products need to be expanded to meet the intent of the legislation and to best serve the public.
3. **Analyze public property for open space and recreation potential.** A coordinated study is needed to utilize or expand the DTIS(Information Services) GIS maps of public land to:
  - Include ownership information for of all public land and buildings, and current uses, if any. (Coordinator: Real Estate Agency)
  - A matrix matching public lands or buildings and their current uses with possible complementary uses such as recreation centers, schools, easements, rights of way, etc. Develop public benefit agreements between agencies.
  - A study of possible locations for linear parks in park-poor neighborhoods using public right of ways, center islands, and wider, landscaped sidewalks as an immediate mechanism to 'green' neighborhoods while searching to find open space sites.

## III: Create a Public Property Office in the City Administrator's Office to:

- Appoint a public property coordinator to acquire or modify for public benefit any under-used properties.
- Establish a professional property-bequest program and market it aggressively to senior citizens.
- Create a voluntary property-sales program with tax benefits to encourage owners to sell to the City in targeted neighborhoods.

**IV:** The Board of Supervisors should develop a policy and procedural guidelines for the use of Eminent Domain when the need of the public for amenities outweighs the need for more residential or commercial development.

### **V: Review Funding Options**

The Task Force needs to consider the best funding options for both open space acquisition and maintenance of parks. With this mandate, the task force should:

- Review the use of the Open Space Fund for operating costs and either reestablish the fund as a capital and land acquisitions fund for the Recreation and Park Department or return to the voters and secure funding for extra maintenance using such techniques as landscape assessment districts or parcel taxes.
- Consider the use of Community Development Block Grant funding for the acquisition and development of park and recreation facilities, as in other cities.
- Maximize the use of the Downtown Park Fund to establish new parks in neighborhoods downtown.
- Require developers to contribute to a Neighborhood Open Space Fund when they cannot immediately meet open space guidelines at their development that acquires property within the immediate neighborhood, ideally filling an open space gap.
- Establish guidelines for the use of available State and Federal urban park funds to fill the gaps in high need areas as a first priority. Consider a restriction that no more than one-third of these funds that can be used for acquisition should be allocated to maintenance or renovation.
- Create a Joint Use Agreement between the Unified School District and the Recreation and Park Department that creates a Campus Park program, providing shared use of resources and facilities to create new open space at minimal cost.
- Establish a Neighbor Space Program, to provide resources for neighbors, including non-profit organizations, willing to assume maintenance responsibilities in small neighborhood parks.
- Consider novel maintenance arrangements that will lower the City's maintenance burden, including the maintenance by other public agencies and community partners.
- Hire a consultant to prepare a study of all relevant funding options from other cities such as airport tax, dog license fee, user program fees, etc., as well as state and federal opportunities

### **VI: Improve Accountability**

1. The Recreation and Park Commission should provide an annual written report to the public of all capital program expenditures beginning in FY 2003-2004, including in the first report an accounting of FY2000-2001, 2001-2002, 2002-2003, issued through the Controller's Office.

2. The City Controller's Office should conduct an immediate audit of fees collected in lieu of open space development that have been deposited in the Downtown Park Fund, the Chinatown Open Space Fund, and the Open Space Fund. This office should provide a full report of their findings together with their recommendations for improvement in the management of these funds.

## APPENDICES

### Appendix 1: A History of Open Space in San Francisco

#### THE PAST AS PROLOGUE

By Jeanne Alexander\*

Open space has been prized and pursued in the city for over 150 years. In 1854, a writer in the *Annals of San Francisco*, lamented that in the projected plan for the city, *“There seems no provision made for a public park—the true ‘lungs’ of a large city. Portsmouth Square, and other two or three diminutive squares (Union Square, Washington Square) seem the only breathing holes intended for the future population of hundreds of thousands. This is a strange mistake and can only be attributed to the jealous avarice of the city projectors in turning every square vara (32-43 inches-ed.) of the site to an available building lot.”*

Parks were no part of city planning in the early days of building San Francisco. In 1868 “an editorial in the *San Francisco Daily Bulletin* declared, *“As the few vacant lots fill up, and wood buildings are replaced with lofty bricks, the want of clear sky space will become more than ever felt.”*

#### THE FIRST PARKS

The rudimentary build-up of San Francisco, in the 1860s, ended near Divisadero Street. All the area beyond was known as the Outside Lands. They consisted mostly of sand dunes and covered some 14 acres, populated by fiercely dug-in and protective homesteaders. In response to the growing demand for a large public park, in 1868 the Board of Supervisors established the Outside Lands Committee to settle disputes with the settlers and free the land for city use. Committee members C.H. Stanyan, A.J. Schrader, R. Beverly Cole, Monroe Ashbury and Charles Clayton negotiated compromises that, in addition to land for such city facilities as a hospital, library, and jail, included setting aside 1013 acres for Golden Gate Park, 36 acres for Buena Vista Park, 20 acres for Mountain Lake Park, 200 acres for a cemetery, later to become Lincoln Park and Fort Miley, and 15 1/2 acres for public squares. For their services the Outside Lands Committee presented the supervisors a bill for \$50,000 which was discounted in court to \$10,500, awarding each claimant \$2,100 instead of the \$10,000 sought. And as compensation for the damage to pocketbook and pride, each of the eminent gentlemen had a street named after him. A more lasting reward than the money.

In April 1870, the California State Legislature passed an act “To Provide for the Improvement of Public Parks in San Francisco.” It was the final step in the long fight to gain a large park for San Francisco and the first official mention of the name Golden

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\* Jeanne Alexander is the historical columnist for NPC’s newsletter; she was previously the Executive Editor of KQED’s program guide *Focus*

Gate Park. The act also authorized Governor Henry Haight to establish a Park Commission and appoint three unpaid commissioners, whose selection of John McLaren as Superintendent of Parks in 1887, jump-started the development of open space in the city. McLaren expanded Golden Gate Park, connected it to the Presidio and Mountain Lake by the Park-Presidio Boulevard Parkway, developed the drive and park on Telegraph Hill, created municipal golf courses and parkway drives at Lincoln Park and Harding Park, zoological gardens and the children's area and swimming pool at Fleishhacker, and established the Excelsior/ Visitacion Valley park which bears his name.

A new "home rule" charter in 1900 increased the Park Commission to five members, appointed by the mayor and put all the city's small parks and squares under Commission jurisdiction. Between 1900 and 1940 the park system expanded greatly. Balboa and Mission Park were added; 150 acres of the old City Cemetery were acquired and renamed Lincoln Park and Bayview Park was dedicated in 1915. Land was acquired for Aquatic Park, smaller parks were landscaped and planted as neighborhood open spaces; and McCoppin Square was landscaped and tennis courts and a children's playground were installed. Many of San Francisco's neighborhood parks are, in fact, the result of the city removing all cemeteries in 1914 except for that at Mission Dolores.

Citizens swarmed into their new open spaces, prompting the Commission to issue an ordinance in 1918 establishing rules of outdoor behavior that, among other things, prohibited "letting loose of cattle, goats or swine; bathing in ponds; or appearing in attire exposing legs, arms or trunk, except at athletic grounds."

## **THE FIRST PLAYGROUNDS**

Those athletic grounds--read playgrounds--got off to a later start. In 1898, the first playground was created by the California Club, a women's organization, on school property at Bush and Hyde Streets. Its success moved the Board of Supervisors to appropriate funds to the Board of Education to lease land and equip a playground at Seventh and Harrison Streets and in 1904 a \$740,000 bond issue was passed for Father Crowley and North Beach Playgrounds. In 1907 a charter amendment established the Playground Commission giving it jurisdiction over properties controlled by other departments or purchased by the Board of Supervisors.

In 1926, Josephine Randall was appointed first Superintendent of Recreation and a member of the Commission, which, two years later, was renamed the Recreation Commission. During her 25 year tenure, Randall expanded her department's facilities from 22 playgrounds to over 100 recreation units, including Camp Mather in the High Sierra. In 1928 a proposed bond issue of \$3,100,000 to finance a system of recreation areas was defeated. Randall continued to lobby for funding, formulating and campaigned relentlessly for a \$12,000,000 Recreation Bond that was finally put on the ballot more than 20 years later in 1949. This time it passed.

Because both the Recreation Commission and the Park Commission dealt with the same services, the two were merged in 1950, becoming the Recreation and Park Department, managed by the Recreation and Park Commission.

### **RENOVATION FUND AND OPEN SPACE ADVISORY COMMITTEE**

It took a quarter of a century for citizens to become concerned again about expanding parks and recreation facilities in those neighborhoods still lacking open space. The Board of Supervisors, at the initiation of open space advocates, put a charter amendment on the ballot in 1974 to create a fund to support acquisition and development of new parkland. The Open Space Fund set aside a portion of the revenue from city property tax to purchase open space (2.5 cents per \$100 of assessed value), to acquire property for recreation facilities, and to develop and maintain the new parks.

The Charter Amendment also established what would become the first of three successive Citizens Advisory Committees. The Prop J Open Space Advisory Committee (OSAC), formed as an advisory group to the General Manager of the Recreation and Park Department, and consisted of 23 members- two named by each supervisor (one was to come from a list of organizations involved in environmental preservation); one member was appointed by the mayor. A second version of the Open Space Fund was approved by the voters in 1988. This time, a portion of the Fund was diverted for children's after-school programs, other recreational programs and program administration.

The original OSAC members chose one of three committee they wanted to work on: High Needs-- neighborhoods without adequate facilities—the Tenderloin, Western Addition, Chinatown, the Mission, Hunters Point, South of Market; WHO—waterfront, hilltop, other sites; Renovation- making up for years of neglect of both facilities and landscapes. Along with Rec and Park staff serving the Committee, they heard proposals and funding requests from citizens (some of them friends), selected and made field trips to the sites, discussed their findings and distributed start-up awards. Groups could pool their committed funds, and many returned year after year trying to secure the full amount needed for their project. This process of “banking” made acquisition and development of many sites a time consuming, drawn out affair stretching as long as 20 years. In addition, the process served the “squeaky wheels” best, generally better educated, middle class residents who knew how to work the system.

### **FROM FEAST TO FAMINE**

From its inception in 1974, until its third renewal in 2000, the Open Space Fund was responsible for adding over 80 acres of park and properties for recreation facilities to the

park system. During this time period, the fund provided more than \$300 million to the Recreation and Park Department, a veritable pot of gold for any city department. Of this total, voters may be surprised to learn that only \$24 million was actually spent on acquisition of property. Another \$47 million was spent on facility development and renovation. The lions share of Open Space funding has, over the years, become earmarked for operating costs and program administration.

The original language of the charter amendment did, to be sure, authorize a percentage of the fund to be applied toward maintenance of the new parks and properties acquired. However, periodic budget crises over the years inspired a new interpretation of the charter language: any Rec and Park facility where OSF funds had been spent for capital improvements also became eligible for ongoing maintenance paid for by the Fund. In addition to the shift of a greater portion of the Open Space Fund to cover standard maintenance, other programs and operating costs were absorbed by the fund, reducing further the amount available for acquisition and development of new property. This included a Volunteer Program, the Natural Areas Program, and the Urban Forestry Program, as well as the salaries for many of the “maintenance yard” staff that provided necessary plumbing, carpentry, and custodial services. As necessary or valuable as all of these programs and services have been to the department, by the late 1990’s, more than 60% of the Open Space Fund was directed toward general operating costs (gardeners and recreation directors) as opposed to capital costs (bricks and mortar, vacant land). The feast had turned to a famine by the turn of the century as far as the city’s capacity to develop new parks or replace dilapidated facilities.

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