

## LETTER TO THE OPEN SPACE TASK FORCE FROM ISABEL WADE

To: *Members of the San Francisco Open Space Task Force*

cc: *Mayor Gavin Newsom*

*Congratulations! This Task Force, comprised of key city and community stakeholders in the realm of open space, is being launched at a critical time in San Francisco's development. There has never been a more urgent need to address issues of preservation and development of public open space and the need for maintenance of new and old parks. Thousands of new residential units are in the pipeline and the skyline is dotted with construction cranes throughout the eastern neighborhoods yet the city still lacks an Open Space Plan and our Open Space policies are 20 years old.*

*We must act now to ensure that our new neighborhoods feature the kind of green spaces that inspire, provide respite, promote diversity and build community. This is especially important to the quality of life for those living in affordable housing as well as older neighborhoods that continue to lack their fair share of open space that makes living in a dense city acceptable and even a reason to stay. It is also a challenge to devise maintenance as well as acquisition strategies since unkempt parks, new or old, are not going to provide what city residents need.*

*Nearly four years ago, in December 2003, Neighborhood Parks Council published the first edition of our report, **Green Envy, Achieving Equity in Open Space**. In that report we began the process of identifying community needs for open space, neighborhood by neighborhood, and evaluating the extent to which those needs are being met. Clearly, there exists broad disparity in the delivery of recreation and park facilities. NPC believes strongly that these inequities not only impact our environment and health, but also do not reflect the fundamental values of our city and its residents that favor outdoor experiences, access to nature, and opportunities for diverse recreation and exercise.*

*A copy of our new report is available either from NPC (\$10 donation requested), or on our web site, [www.sfnpc.org/greenenvy](http://www.sfnpc.org/greenenvy). We are also pleased to provide each of you with this Executive Summary. Many of the tables, figures, charts and graphs have been removed. However, the central message remains intact: much needs to be done to preserve, develop, and maintain public open space in our City.*

*Thank you for undertaking this most important assignment.*

*Sincerely,*



*Isabel Wade, Ph.D.*

*Executive Director, Neighborhood Parks Council (NPC)*

## INTRODUCTION

Any city dweller will tell you that parks and green spaces provide an essential contribution to the quality of life 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. Regardless of one's orientation to parks, new studies indicate that the opportunity to experience nature in our lives is a necessary requirement for human beings to function effectively. In addition, a recent survey of 20 American cities found that excellent parks and recreation opportunities are in the top 5 priorities for what is important to residents.

San Francisco's unique topography and current density make open space acquisition a particular challenge. With 739,426 people living on a peninsula of 47 square miles, characterized by hilly terrain, the "City by the Bay" is second only to New York City among American cities in population density. Because of these limitations, city planners in San Francisco face even greater challenges to preserve open space.

For this reason, San Francisco is long overdue to develop an Open Space Plan and more stringent policies to provide parks and recreation facilities linked to new development. We also need an acquisition implementation strategy that makes specific recommendations for open space needs—identifying gaps does nothing to remedy deficiencies in existing neighborhoods. At the same time, city residents are cautious about expanding our open space system until we devise a funding strategy to maintain and carryout the needed repairs for the facilities and parks we already have.

Caution stems from the less-than-satisfactory condition of most parks and the just-published estimate of the \$1.7 billion of capital improvement needs to renovate our existing landscapes and recreation centers (not even including tree work!). Residents want to be assured that very limited maintenance resources will not be further stretched if we add more parks. They would also like to see capital resources go to upgrade existing facilities such as playgrounds. It's hard to be seen as a 'family friendly' city when two dozen playgrounds are considered 'failed' due to old age and safety concerns.

While the City has had an Open Space Fund for more than 30 years that was originally planned to allow for things like new playgrounds and preserving open space as well as maintenance of new facilities, its original intent has been subverted over the years so that more park sites could qualify for maintenance funding. Most city residents are unaware that the Open Space Fund rarely has enough money in it to purchase open space, even though it now brings in about \$30 million a year!

These challenges to acquiring open space are paralleled by similar challenges to meeting other city needs that require land such as housing and transit. And yet most advocates for these needs realize that parks are an essential element of establishing the kind of quality of life that we want in San Francisco. We need to become as proactive in accommodating these 3 essential needs as are the cities of Chicago and New York.

Green Envy aims to provide detailed research to support the Open Space Task Force. Inside the full report, available on NPC's website or for a donation of \$10, you will find:

- *A discussion about the importance of parks in an urban setting*
- *The history of San Francisco's early open space acquisition and development (Prepared by Jeanne Alexander).*
- *An assessment of the importance of parks and open space in an urban environment.*
- *A gap analysis of the existing park and recreation facility system using geographic information system (G.I.S.) technology and comparative category analysis*
- *An examination of acquisition programs in other cities to glean best practices.*

## THE IMPORTANCE OF PARKS

Few in San Francisco would argue that parks and open space are an indispensable part of a healthy and sustainable urban mosaic. Numerous polls, ballot measures, and surveys have shown that residents and visitors place a high value on San Francisco's parks and open space. This is because in a city as dense as San Francisco, the benefits of urban parks are obvious: in addition to providing respite from city life and access to recreation, they supply many environmental, economic, social, and health benefits.

### ENVIRONMENTAL BENEFITS

The environmental benefits that green spaces bring to cities are commonly recognized. Now termed 'environmental services' with economic valuations attached, city landscapes are seen as far more than visual amenities or places to recreate. Trees produce oxygen while absorbing carbon dioxide, reducing urban contribution to global warming given the strong 'urban heat island' effect of cities. Park flora provides shade, reduces wind, absorbs rain and curbs runoff, cleans the air, and reduces soil erosion. Urban parks also provide much-needed shelter for hundreds of species of insects, birds and animals — many of which provide their own economic services to humans such as pollinators (i.e. bees).

### SOCIAL BENEFITS

Parks and green spaces serve as important areas for social interaction in urban communities. Researchers in Chicago have shown that people who live in public housing developments that include green spaces tend to build stronger social relationships with neighbors than people surrounded primarily by concrete. Neighbors visit their local parks and recreational facilities to attend social activities such as sporting competitions, music performances, and art classes. Residents in greener neighborhoods reported that they felt safer, and were more likely to participate in neighborhood activities. In these ways residents have a chance to connect with new people as well as old friends.

Recreational facilities and structured athletic activities within parks provide young people with opportunities for social networking and establishing positive relationships with adults. These opportunities help young people develop important social skills and can keep them away from negative activities. The cost of supporting city parks and recreational centers is minimal when compared to the potential long-term cost of incarceration.

A 2003 study of community gardens in St. Louis found that neighborhoods with community gardens had a more stable population. While the city of St. Louis lost thirteen percent of its residents between 1990 and 2000, the neighborhoods with community gardens lost just six percent.<sup>1</sup> Advocates for community gardens nationwide report that these spaces reduce crime, encourage neighbors to become responsible custodians, and foster interaction between people from diverse backgrounds.

Access to safe, clean, and green public spaces can keep San Francisco a healthy, vibrant city, by helping retain the middle class family. A series of articles in the SF Chronicle cite open space and safe streets as key incentives to keep families in San Francisco. This need is further established when the article investigates best practices in other cities and concludes that “the success of any city in keeping these families will depend on how well it keeps its end of the bargain in providing vibrant, walkable, mixed-use neighborhoods and good, green open spaces”<sup>2</sup>

## HEALTH BENEFITS

It is well known that people who engage in regular exercise gain dramatic physical and emotional benefits. The former benefit is increasingly important as a low-cost strategy to combat the trend to obesity in America. Exercise has been shown to reduce the risk of diabetes and heart disease by encouraging weight loss, improving respiration and circulation, and lowering blood pressure.<sup>3</sup> Clearly, investing in parks is an excellent preventive medicine when compared to long-term health care costs for inactive people.

A 1996 study by the National Center for Disease Control revealed what park advocates had known all along: people who have access to parks exercise more. The study found that the percentage of people who exercised at least three days a week increased by more than 25% after a new exercise space was created, or if access to those spaces was enhanced.<sup>4</sup>

Urban green spaces act as therapeutic oases to which people can escape to connect with nature. Spending time in parks makes people feel more relaxed, alert, and peaceful, less fearful and angry. Even an indirect connection to nature, such as the ability to look out a window at a green space, has been proven to have dramatic physical effects.

A study at a Pennsylvania hospital reported that patients with views of trees from their hospital room needed fewer painkillers, and had shorter hospital stays than patients whose rooms faced a brick wall.<sup>5</sup>

A study in the Netherlands in 2001 found that people with access to green spaces reported feeling healthier, both physically and mentally. In fact, when access to any type of green space, such as a park, farm, or forest, was increased by only a small amount, healthy complaints were reduced significantly.<sup>6</sup>

## ECONOMIC BENEFITS

A city’s park system not only provides environmental benefits, a sense of community, health and social benefits, and a higher quality of life; it is also good for the bottom line. Parks can significantly increase property values, attract and retain businesses and a talented workforce, revitalize cities and communities, boost the tourism industry, create jobs, and increase tax revenues.

### *Property Values*

Recent research demonstrates that residential properties located near green spaces have a higher market value than those further away. This in turn leads to an increase in property taxes paid by the homeowners. This observation, which Dr. John Crompton, the leading expert in the economics of parks and recreation<sup>7</sup>, calls “The Proximity Principle,” is supported by over thirty modern studies. A meta-analysis of these studies shows that *well-maintained* parks enhance surrounding property values. The study found a positive impact of 20% on property values abutting or fronting a passive park area. While the impact of the park was somewhat lower moving away from a park, there was still a positive effect on property values two to three blocks away.<sup>8</sup>

An earlier study examining the impact of greenbelts on property values in Boulder, Colorado found that the value of homes bordering a new greenbelt decreased \$10.20 for every foot away from the open space.<sup>9</sup> In addition, a 2001 survey for the National Association of Realtors found that fifty percent of respondents stated that they would be willing to pay 10% more for a property located close to a park or open space.

San Francisco benefits handsomely from our own city parks. Two local studies exemplify the impact San Francisco’s parks have on property values. A 1993 study of properties adjacent to Golden Gate Park found that the park is responsible for \$500 million to \$1 billion of the market value of real estate within walking distance of the park. This value generates \$5 to \$10 million per year in property tax revenue for the city.<sup>10</sup> A subsequent study conducted by the Neighborhood Parks Council found that, city-wide, residential properties within 3 blocks of a park saw a 15.7% premium in their property values compared to properties further away.<sup>11</sup>

### *Economic Revitalization*

Commercial properties near new and well-maintained parks often see an increase in property values as well. The restoration of Bryant Park in New York City provides a good example. After a twelve-year renovation, this park was reopened in 1992. No longer a haven for drug addicts, the park was reborn as a vital midtown oasis where employees gather for weekday lunches in outdoor cafes, and friends assemble on summer evenings for open-air movies.

A study by Ernst and Young reported that rents in office buildings surrounding the park increased 115 to 225 percent in the years 1990 to 2000. The same survey also studied property values near 36 other neighborhood parks across New York City and found that “commercial asking rents, residential sale prices, and assessed values for properties near a well-improved park generally exceeded rents in surrounding submarkets.”<sup>12</sup>

### *Attracting and Retaining Businesses*

In addition to increasing property values, cities with an excellent parks system find it easier to attract and retain businesses, because companies in the high-tech and research and development industries are less tied to a specific place to run their businesses or set up their corporate headquarters, and therefore have more control over where to locate or relocate. A major factor in where these workers choose to live

is the area's quality of life. In 1998, a survey of 1200 high-tech workers found that the quality of life of a community increased the attractiveness of a job by 33%.<sup>13</sup> *Because of this trend, cities now have a greater responsibility to create cities with a high quality of life.*

A study conducted by Dr. Crompton in Colorado was able to separate the value of parks from the quality of life issues in attracting businesses. Crompton et al surveyed 174 businesses that had been started, relocated, and expanded in the state from 1992 to 1997. In addition to citing quality of life as the single most important attribute they considered, more than 80% of the respondents included some dimension of parks, open space, or ambience as critically important to the decision-making process.<sup>14</sup>

### *Tourism*

Parks are also a popular attraction for tourists. New York's Central Park attracts more tourists each year than all of Washington, D.C. Riverwalk Park has become the most popular tourist attraction in San Antonio, surpassing the Alamo.<sup>15</sup> In San Francisco, Golden Gate Park is among the favorite destinations of tourists visiting the city. On an average weekend, 75,000 people visit Golden Gate Park<sup>16</sup> and forty percent of all tourists in San Francisco reported visiting Golden Gate Park.<sup>17</sup> In addition, over 1.5 million people visit Alcatraz every year.<sup>18</sup> While admission is free to most urban public parks, tourists spend big bucks in cafes and souvenir kiosks within parks, on programs, performances and festivals held in parks, and at nearby hotels, restaurants and retail shops. The city of Flagstaff, Arizona supports acquisition of open space with taxes from such tourist activities, while the state of Texas and Florida partially fund their state parks with a sales tax on sporting goods.

## A HISTORY OF OPEN SPACE IN SAN FRANCISCO

**EDITOR'S NOTE: THIS SECTION IS EXCERPTED FROM A REPORT BY JEANNE ALEXANDER**

Parks were no part of city planning in the early days of building San Francisco. 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 (inch) of the site to an available building lot."*

### THE FIRST PARKS

The rudimentary build-up of San Francisco, in the 1860s, ended near Divisadero Street. The Gold Rush era paid little attention to the finer details of city building such as parks. 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."* Those hoping for city features such as grand parks and playgrounds began to pay attention to the undeveloped lands in the West of the City. All the area beyond Divisadero was known as the Outside Lands. They consisted mostly of sand dunes and covered some 14,000 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 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 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 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

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. 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.

The Recreation and the Park Commissions were merged in 1950, becoming the Recreation and Park Department, managed by a single 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.

#### FROM FEAST TO FAMINE

From its inception in 1974, until its third renewal in 2000, the Open Space Fund was responsible for adding just over 100 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 lion's share of Open Space funding has, over the years, become earmarked for operating costs and program administration due to a loophole in the original language. It is a sad commentary on our civic commitment to parks and the lack of awareness of elected officials (and probably our effectiveness as park advocates) regarding the health and economic importance of green spaces, that what was intended by the voters to be 'added value' to create new parks and maintain them, instead became simply a pot of funds to raid during each successive budget crisis after 1974.

In addition to earmarking a vast 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, the Urban Forestry Program, and the Children's Fund, 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, by the late 1990's more than eighty percent of the Open Space Fund was directed toward general operating costs as opposed to capital costs for park renovations or to purchase vacant land for parks. The feast had turned to a famine in terms of adding new parks to San Francisco by the turn of the new century.

## STATUS OF PARKS & RECREATION FACILITIES IN SAN FRANCISCO

### DISTRIBUTION OF OPEN SPACE

A glance at the Green Map of San Francisco (see *Map 1*) shows some very large areas of parkland and open space; there are more than 5,700 acres of open space owned by local, state and federal authorities within the City's boundaries. This translates into a ratio of 7.8 acres of open space per 1,000 residents – still less than the national standard of 10 acres per 1,000 inhabitants set by the National Recreation and Park Association, but respectable for a very dense peninsula.

Yet the preponderance of the city's open space is located in the western half of the City. In addition to the Presidio, the combined acreage of Lincoln Park, Ocean Beach, Golden Gate Park, Stern Grove, Fort Funston and Lake Merced is more than 2,100 acres of open space, all west of Arguello Avenue. Many people from the eastern half of San Francisco find it difficult to get to these parks, and many never do. Despite the lovely expanses of green forest in the Presidio and elsewhere in the western portion of the city, there is a serious inequality in accessibility, type and distribution of open spaces across the city, and this is most apparent in the lower-income neighborhoods in the eastern sector.

The Districts in the eastern part of San Francisco are the most lacking in open space, and they are also the neighborhoods that need these spaces most (see *Map 2*); on this Open Space Gap Map, the gaps in service area are apparent where shades of brown indicate underserved population. The residents in these neighborhoods rely more on parks for recreation and open space, as they often do not have funds to join private clubs for exercise, or do not own a car to escape into green spaces outside of the city.

This is an unfortunate development pattern in San Francisco that is repeated across the country — The Trust for Public Land has reported that poorer urban communities with large minority populations and large child populations often have fewer parks and inferior access to existing parks.<sup>19</sup> Often parks in lower-income neighborhoods also have safety issues that discourage the community from visiting them. This lack of local parks can be linked with a lower rate of exercise, resulting in health problems such as obesity and asthma. San Francisco must do all it can to acquire more open space to serve a growing population and to compensate for the unequal distribution of parks throughout the city.

Note: The San Francisco Open Space Gap Map is included in this binder.

### NEED FOR NEIGHBORHOOD PARKS

The availability of recreational facilities (or lack thereof) in a park has a great effect on how people use that park, and which activities they perform while there. For example, an isolated and undeveloped natural area located on top of a hill will be used by different people in different ways than a level green space which features both active and passive features such as a playground, pleasant landscaping and picnic tables.

In order to evaluate whether existing open spaces were tailored to meet the public need, Neighborhood Parks Council (NPC) conducted surveys of park users in 2006 at more than a dozen parks to find out the public's opinions about what they believe the essential features of a neighborhood park should be, and reviewed definitions of neighborhood parks from park departments across the country. We then consulted the Recreation and Parks Department (RPD) and jointly agreed to the following list of **5 key elements that define a neighborhood park in San Francisco**:

1. Serves as a social and recreational focal point for the neighborhood and is the basic unit of the San Francisco park system.
2. Provides green space where residents can go to escape the urban environment.
3. Offers both passive and active (programmed and unprogrammed) recreation in response to demographic and cultural characteristics of surrounding neighborhoods, with opportunities for interaction with nature.
4. Is a destination largely accessible by foot, bicycle, or public transit within at least a quarter-mile radius from neighborhood residences.
5. Provides ease of access for young and senior users, while serving users of all ages.

Through our research, NPC found that great disparities exist within San Francisco with regard to access to neighborhood parks, and that, as is the case with most urban regions, it is the low-income residents that are least served by unequal park and open space distribution. Looking at the city-wide neighborhood park gap map (*see Map 16*)— areas covered in yellow indicate the residents with access to open space within a ¼ mile of their homes. As is evident, many of the densest neighborhoods (indicated by dark brown underlay) are those with gaps in neighborhood parks meeting the criteria listed above. The hope is that a major outcome of the Open Space Task Force will be a strategy to assure that all of our City's residents have equal access to the numerous benefits of neighborhood parks, regardless of their income level, racial or ethnic origin, age, or residential location.

Note: The San Francisco Neighborhood Park Gap Map is included in this binder.

### NEED FOR PLAYGROUNDS

A 2004 survey of RPD's recreational facilities by a national consultant found that the number of existing playgrounds is insufficient to meet the current need. When asked to choose their facility needs from a list of nineteen types of recreational facilities (multiple choices were permitted), thirty-two percent of respondents reported a need for children's playgrounds. *Of that group, thirty eight percent replied that zero percent of their needs were presently being met with the current inventory of playgrounds. This is the lowest percentage of needs met out of the nineteen types of recreational facilities.*

*Map 14* indicates the gaps in playgrounds throughout the City. District 4 has the largest percentage of children that are not currently served by playgrounds (64%.) Children in

Districts 1 and 7 are also nearly 50 percent unserved by playgrounds (46.87% and 47.10% respectively.) These districts fare worse than District 10, where, although it has the highest population of children in the city, nearly 76% of its children are served by playgrounds. Playground gaps in some neighborhoods would be significantly reduced if the School Districts playgrounds were made available for public use after school hours (see *Map 15*).

It is widely known that San Francisco has the smallest population of children of any major U.S. city.<sup>20</sup> According to Gordon Price, former City Councilor for the City of Vancouver, Canada, children playing in parks are an obvious hallmark of a flourishing green space and a vibrant city. Vancouver's 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, and Vancouver has results to prove it. How can San Francisco attract and retain more working families if the City is unable to provide sufficient recreational amenities for children, such as a nearby, safe playground?

Note: The RPD Playgrounds Gap Map and the RPD & School District Playgrounds Gap Map are included in this binder.

## **BEST PRACTICES: ACQUISITION, STEWARDSHIP AND FUNDING METHODS IN OTHER CITIES**

Before undertaking an effort to revitalize the open space program in San Francisco, it will be informative to review “best practices” as developed in other cities. Here are just a few examples of how some cities that have prioritized park acquisition are meeting the challenges of finding, developing, and maintaining new green spaces.

### **SEATTLE**

Rapid development forced this city to take action to save existing open spaces held privately. In 1989, Seattle promoted a countywide bond, the King County Open Space and Trails Bond, which was approved by the voters. The Seattle portion of the bond was aimed primarily 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. Seattle was able to preserve more than 500 acres of open space through property acquisitions, transfers and donations.

In 2000, Seattle again went to the voters, this time asking them to pass a \$198 million Pro Parks Levy<sup>21</sup> 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). To date, the Levy has leveraged \$21 million in additional funding for acquisition. These leveraged funds include a significant grant from the Seattle Parks Foundation (the Foundation is also conducting a public process regarding a potential property donation to the City.) In combination with the \$31.7 million for acquisition in the Levy, the leveraged funding brings the amount currently available for acquisition to \$52.7 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. 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 \$145 million.<sup>22</sup>

### **PORTLAND, OREGON**

For the second time in a decade, Portland, Oregon metropolitan area voters approved a general obligation bond in November 2006, for acquiring natural areas (the first bond for \$135.6 million was approved in 1995). The \$227.4 million bond was sponsored by Metro (the elected regional planning and policy making government which works to preserve the environmental quality of life); it aims specifically to increase and enhance water quality and natural areas on public lands. Portland’s Forest Park<sup>23</sup>, the nation’s 3<sup>rd</sup> largest urban park, and the largest urban forest reserve in the country, is set to receive a 50-acre addition as a result of the bond.

The Portland Park and Recreation Department (PP&R)’s acquisition program is funded primarily through the collection of Park System Development Charges (SDC). New residential developers are required to pay a fee (the SDC) of \$3,053 per single-family

unit, which in turn generates about \$1.5 million annually for capital improvements in parks. The law requires that parkland acquisitions must be made only in neighborhoods facing new development and population growth. Outer East Portland, an area with a growing population, has benefited greatly from these fees, gaining several major acquisitions in recent years. The City of Portland is considering extending SDCs to include commercial developments.

## **CHICAGO**

Chicago's public parks are managed by the Chicago Park District (CPD), which is an independent agency with taxing authority. The Mayor of Chicago appoints the General Superintendent of the Park District, but it has its own Board of Commissioners. The Chicago Park District is primarily responsible for the development, design, and maintenance of parks. Both the City of Chicago and the Chicago Park District have eminent domain authority and work with land conservancy trusts to acquire property. Funding for park acquisition and development comes from Park District tax levies, state and federal grants, open space impact fees that the Department of Planning and Development collects for new residential developments, City tax exempt bonds, and tax increment financing.

The Park District and the Department of Planning and Development assess open space needs based on the 77 community areas within the city. The short-term goal of the CitySpace Plan (City of Chicago's Open Space Plan) is to attain a minimum of 2 acres of open space per 1,000 people for each of the 77 community areas, with a longer-term goal of 5 acres per 1000. As demographics and populations shift within community areas, new parks are added to accommodate new residents and to reach the minimum open space goal. Presently, the primary concern of Chicago planners is to achieve equity in park access across the city, and so they aim to create neighborhood parks of at least 1 to 2 acres in size for communities that are lacking parks. Chicago planners also take into account the proximity to public schools when seeking land for new parks. It is their goal to place parks near schools that are lacking open space so that students can utilize outdoor space for recreation and assignments. Through the Campus Park Program, the exteriors of more than 100 Chicago Public Schools were renovated, replacing outdated asphalt parking lots with park and recreational amenities such as playgrounds and playfields.

## GENERAL ACQUISITION STRATEGIES

Given the high cost of urban land, it is useful to examine the effectiveness of the different types of open space acquisition methods (and results) used in San Francisco over the past three decades in order to develop a highly-targeted approach to acquisition for the next century. 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 (SF Recreation 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, Hunter's Point and 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 have utilized:

- **Converting tax delinquency foreclosures to land or property for open space** (Philadelphia)
- **Specifying "Open Space Zone" requirements** (Portland, OR and some smaller CA and CO towns)
- **Purchasing land through local levy of special taxes** (Portland, OR, Chicago, IL, Seattle, WA)
- **Establishing park improvement districts** (New York City)
- **Establishing public benefit zoning districts or public improvement districts**
- **Establishing landscape assessment districts** (Many CA and WA towns, including Oakland, CA)
- **Requiring developers to acquire, develop, and maintain public parks** (New York City)
- **Open Space Tax** (Boulder, Colorado)
- **Sales Taxes on Sporting Goods** (states of Texas and Florida)

In looking at mechanisms other than one-time transfer of military land, or the development and/or transfer of park land by other public agencies, RPD has added just over 100 acres to its open space inventory in 30 years through direct purchase of private property or the sale/transfer of public property to RPD's jurisdiction (see *Table 3: Public Space Acquired By RPD In San Francisco*). This represents a mere three percent growth in City-managed parkland (as opposed to federal and state). In comparison, Portland, Oregon's parkland has grown 20 percent in this same period, and Seattle has achieved a 48 percent increase. Chicago, a high-density city like San Francisco with serious land constraints, has achieved a growth in parkland of 17 percent.<sup>24</sup>



## CONCLUSION

Parks and recreational facilities that are well-maintained, well-located and well-funded are among the most valuable public amenities for urban areas, and San Francisco already boasts some of the most memorable open spaces in the country. Yet the current inequalities across the city with regards to access to green spaces and availability of some types of recreational facilities are further challenged by the incredible pace and density of new development. The huge influx of residents in areas surrounding Mission Bay, Rincon Hill, Hunters Point Shipyard, and other former industrial areas along the eastern shoreline and SOMA. These neighborhoods require the most thoughtful and timely addition of parks and recreational facilities that will save future generations and define a quality of life.

The city will see a radical transformation of the skyline and population within twenty years. Considering this, time is of the essence to create new strategies and standards for open space acquisition to correct past disparities in the park system and to plan for future demographic shifts. Strong governmental leadership and cooperative planning between stakeholders is essential to the success and endurance of this initiative.

As the preceding discussion has made apparent, resolving the many issues related to the acquisition and development of open space in the City is both important and urgent. Clearly a comprehensive Open Space Plan is needed for San Francisco. This Plan must address three basic questions: 1) What is the need for open space in San Francisco by neighborhood and in proposed new development areas? and 2) How will that need be met and 3) How will the city coordinate these efforts with multiple agencies involved? We hope that a key outcome of the Mayor's Open Space Task Force will be a consensus opinion and emergent coalition to find the funds in the city's next Budget Cycle to contract with an experienced firm to create a long-needed Open Space Plan to guide the city's efforts in the next decade. Surely we can attain this objective when even Wichita, Kansas has seen the light (and the need)!

### DETERMINING OPEN SPACE NEEDS

A community's need for open space, and how that space will be used, largely depends upon the characteristics and interests of that community. Some will emphasize quiet space to escape the urban turmoil, some the protection of natural areas, others playgrounds for younger children, and so forth. These needs, when determined, need then to be matched against available open space resources, not just in terms of acreage, but also in terms of the extent to which the use of that open space matches community interests. This will provide an overall "gap analysis", neighborhood by neighborhood, and function by function. Finally, performance standards need to be determined so that priorities for open space acquisition can be developed. Reviewing the experience of other cities can provide valuable input to this process.

### MEETING THOSE NEEDS

Obviously, the difficult questions arise when developing the actual open space acquisition plan. Is there publicly-owned open space that might be converted to the

desired use? Is there privately owned land of relatively low value use, e.g., parking lots, warehouses, that might be acquired? Are there development plans for an area that might incorporate a segment of that parcel for public open space? Are the funding vehicles and development extractions in place sufficient, and if not, which are the best strategies for our community?

#### GETTING UNDERWAY

Clearly, in order to address these broad issues effectively, the multi-agency, multi-disciplinary, public/NGO/private coalition that this Task Force comprises is absolutely essential. It is important that the Task Force organize itself into a cohesive operational unit, and then retain its collective bargaining power to push through its recommendations and the needed creation of an Open Space Plan.

## PARKS BY THE NUMBER

- ***There are 7.8 acres of parkland per 1,000 residents in San Francisco.***
  - 3rd highest in U.S. among high-density cities (population: 739,426; total park acres: 5,773)
- ***19.3 percent of total land area in San Francisco is parkland.***
  - 3rd highest percentage among high-density cities in U.S. (total land area of S.F is 29,884 acres; 5,773 acres is parkland)
- ***San Francisco ranks third in total park-related spending per resident, by major city agency***
  - \$147 per resident / \$108,521,592 total park expenditure in FY2004.
  - Total expenditure includes both operating and capital expenditure, but excludes stadiums, zoos, museums and aquariums.
  - New York City spends \$92 per resident.
  - Seattle spends \$266 per resident.
- ***San Francisco ranks second in park-related total expenditure per resident, by city***
  - \$252 per resident / \$186,484,899 total park expenditure in FY2005
- ***San Francisco Recreation and Park Department employs 849 full time employees (or 1.15 FT employees for every 1,000 residents).***
  - San Francisco ranked 11<sup>th</sup> in the nation in FY2006, with more employees per capita than Los Angeles, New York, Chicago, Boston or Philadelphia.
- ***Golden Gate Park is the third most visited park in U.S.*** (13,000,000 visitors per year)
- ***San Francisco provides 144 playgrounds.***
  - 1.9 playgrounds per 10,000 residents in FY2005, ranking 30<sup>th</sup> in the nation.
- ***San Francisco provides 27 dog play areas.***
  - 3.6 dog play areas per 100,000 residents in FY2005, ranking 2<sup>nd</sup> highest in the U.S.
- ***San Francisco provides 32 Recreation Centers.***
  - 0.9 Centers per 20,000 residents in FY2006, ranking 23rd in the U.S.
- ***San Francisco Park Capital Expenditures are \$51,223,474***
  - \$69 per resident in FY2005, ranking 2nd highest in the U.S.
  - Capital expenditure does not include operating expenditure.
- ***San Francisco Park Operating Expenditures are \$135,261,425***
  - \$183 per resident in FY2005 and ranking *highest* in the U.S.
  - Operating expenditure does not include capital expenditure.
- ***Parks are the most popular component of the Recreation and Parks Department.***
  - In a 2004 survey, sixty-eight percent of respondents reported that they or someone in their household had visited an RPD facility in the last year.
  - The three RPD facilities visited most often are all parks or open space areas (Golden Gate Park, Crissy Field, and Mission Dolores Park.)
- ***Many neighborhoods still lack parks and playgrounds***
  - 36.34 percent of the city's adult population is presently not being served by a neighborhood park within ¼ mile of their home, and 36.03 percent of children across the city are not being served by neighborhood parks. In addition, 32.83 percent of children across the city are not being served by playgrounds.
- ***Only Office Buildings in C3 areas require new parks or payment to a park Fund***
  - The Downtown Park Fund was established to provide new parks for the office workers inhabiting the new office buildings in C3 areas.
  - The only open space required of individual residential development is "private usable open space", which can take the form of decks, balconies, porches and roofs.

Statistics: Trust for Public Land, Center for Park Excellence; Neighborhood Parks Council (2006-2007)

## Neighborhood Parks Council Fact Sheet

Neighborhood Parks Council (NPC), [www.sfnpc.org](http://www.sfnpc.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 through coalition meetings and 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 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 member meetings and special seminars, 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 ten 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.org**, NPC helps achieve standards of park maintenance generated by the city controller's office 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 through community initiative that leverages city funds for playgrounds. With the help of the community and corporate sponsors, the campaign is creating safe, fun, cost-effective, destination playgrounds. NPC has also launched the Blue Greenway Trail project to create a 13-mile path for land and water recreation and enjoyment of nature along the southeastern waterfront.

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

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**ENDNOTES**

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- <sup>1</sup> Sherer, Paul M. The Benefits of Parks: Why America Needs More City Parks and Open Space. The Trust for Public Land, 2006: page 22 (reprint of Parks For People White Paper)
- <sup>2</sup> Holt, Tim. "How San Francisco Can Keep its Families from Moving Out". SF Chronicle. April 8, 2007
- <sup>3</sup> Scherer, page 14.
- <sup>4</sup> Sherer, page 14.
- <sup>5</sup> Sherer, page 14.
- <sup>6</sup> Sherer, page 15.
- <sup>7</sup> Dr. Crompton is a Distinguished Professor of Recreation, Parks, and Tourism Sciences at Texas A&M University
- <sup>8</sup> Crompton, John. The Proximity Principle (CITATION)
- <sup>9</sup> Correll, Lillydahl and Singell. (1978). "The Effects of Greenbelts on Residential Property Values: Some Findings on the Political Economy of Open Space". *Land Economics*, 54:2 207-217
- <sup>10</sup> Spickard, Steven. (18 May 1993). "The Value of Parks". Testimony before the California Assembly Committee on Water, Parks, and Wildlife.
- <sup>11</sup> Edwards, Karin. (2007). "Do Parks Make Cents? An Analysis of the Economic Value of Parks in San Francisco". Goldman School of Public Policy
- <sup>12</sup> NY4P and Ernst and Young (2003). "How Smart Park Investment Pays Its Way",
- <sup>13</sup> The Perryman Group. (December 2006). "Sunshine, Soccer, and Success: An Assessment of the Impacts of Municipal Parks and Recreation Facilities and Programs on Business Activity in Texas". Waco, Texas
- <sup>14</sup> Crompton, John. (2007). "Competitiveness: Parks and Open Space as Factors Shaping a Location's Success in Attracting Companies, Labor Supplies, and Retirees".
- <sup>15</sup> "The Economic Benefits of Parks and Open Space", Trust for Public Land, 2006, page 26.
- <sup>16</sup> SFGate.Com "Golden Gate Park"
- <sup>17</sup> San Francisco Partnership for Parks (1998). "Golden Gate Park, the DeYoung Museum, and the California Academy of Sciences: Some Facts and Conclusions" p.17
- <sup>18</sup> Golden Gate National Parks Conservancy: Alcatraz. Website: <http://parksconservancy.org/visit/alcatraz/tours.asp>
- <sup>19</sup> In its comparative analysis of park access, No Place to Play, TPL noted that in major cities, parks are least likely to be located in areas with high concentrations of young children. Los Angeles is a case in point.
- <sup>20</sup> 14.5 percent of the city population is under the age of 18, according to a May 24, 2005 article in the San Francisco Chronicle: "Child Population Dwindles in San Francisco", by Lisa Leff.
- <sup>21</sup> Bond: a certificate of ownership of a specified portion of a debt due to be paid by a government or corporation to an individual holder and usually bearing a fixed rate of interest. Levy: an imposing or collecting, as of a tax, by a government, authority or force.
- <sup>22</sup> Seattle information provided by Catherine Anstett, Public Information Officer, Parks Department, City of Seattle
- <sup>23</sup> Interestingly, Forest Park was created in 1948 as the result of 50 years of citizen advocacy for the City to buy tax-foreclosed properties. Source: Wikipedia, [http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Forest\\_Park\\_\(Portland\)](http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Forest_Park_(Portland))
- <sup>24</sup> All city data from Peter Harnik, Inside City Parks, Urban Land Institute, 2000