

LNU and Parks and Open Space: Making Room for Parks in an Urban Setting

July 9, 2004

Augustus F. Hawkins Natural Park, Los Angeles

After TLUC's Executive Director Katherine A. Perez welcomed the audience and described the day's purpose, she introduced two guest speakers to open the program before an overflow crowd in the community room of Hawkins Natural Park in South Los Angeles.

Los Angeles City Councilmember Ed Reyes

Chair of the City Council Planning Committee and the Ad Hoc Los Angeles River Committee, Councilmember Reyes discussed the emergence of the urban, inner-city park movement in Southern California in recent years. The recognition that the most densely-populated, heavily impacted communities also were the most park-poor communities coincided with the rise to prominence of a number of local Latino elected officials interested in, and capable of, working to address the imbalance. This has led to local and statewide ballot measures with an increased emphasis on funding urban parks, the focus on greening the Los Angeles, San Gabriel and Rio Hondo Rivers, and interest in innovative approaches such as "green rooftops" (rooftop gardens and recreational spaces). Key challenges are siting, acquiring, designing, staffing and maintaining new parks, and the LNU concepts of using public and open space for socializing and stimulating community activity should play a role. He noted that Hawkins Park provides an example of bringing a park to a neighborhood that desperately needed one, but also asks the question of how it fits into that neighborhood. The Councilmember closed by reminding everyone that more of the kinds of people who live in that neighborhood need to be involved in events such as this LNU dialogue.

Los Angeles City Controller Laura Newman Chick

City Controller and former City Councilmember Laura Chick described experiences she'd had while representing the West San Fernando Valley relative to creating parks. She recalled how one neighborhood was reluctant to accept a new park and didn't want it identified with an official name lest it become known to the wider public and draw visitors from outside the immediate area. She said it was named anyway. The Controller went on to discuss the need for local jurisdictions, especially Los Angeles, to better manage their real estate assets as part of an effort to create more parks. She noted that Hawkins Park was once a City storage yard and described a similar piece of property in the East Hollywood area covering two square blocks. Chick also described some notable juxtapositions of interests in the park movement: urban vs. rural, rich vs. poor and adults vs. kids. She went on to describe her own role as Controller as one of making sure scarce public funds are used appropriately, and said she had audited the City's Proposition K park bond program and found mismanagement of projects and contracting procedures. She called for an audit of the Recreation and Parks Department and more involvement by

elected officials to improve the City's performance. She added that her audits could be found at her official City of Los Angeles website (at www.lacity.org).

PANEL 1 – Policy and Research Overview

Carrie Ann Sutkin, PhD – Senior Planning Deputy to L.A. County Supervisor Gloria Molina

Ms. Sutkin brought her experience in planning parks and managing capital projects to bear in her introductory presentation. She described different kinds of open space: public spaces, publicly-owned space and privately-owned space. She talked about efforts being made to augment property owned for one purpose (L.A. River; L.A. County East L.A. government complex) so that it could be used by the public for recreation. She noted that the Environmental Justice movement is playing a key role in motivating advocacy for important park projects in the urban area. Sutkin numbered environmental degradation, lack of information on resources and policies, and the need for more cooperation as challenges in many Latino communities. She added that economically-disadvantaged communities had not gotten their fair share of the proceeds from the two County park district measures approved in the '90s.

Belinda Faustinos – Executive Director, Lower Los Angeles and San Gabriel Rivers and Mountains Conservancy

Ms. Faustino lauded the creation of partnerships represented by the Dialogue and described her young agency as part of a trend in California whereby planning and programming red tape could be reduced and facilities brought on line more quickly. Her conservancy, working with the 68 cities within its territory and its 13-member board (largely made up of local officials), has identified some 300 potential projects. The Rivers and Mountains Conservancy, she said, wants to use partnerships and cooperation to move forward on projects to avoid having to pay even higher prices for properties ten years hence. The focus is on river parkways, bikeways and active recreational spaces.

Michael Mendez – Legislative Aide to Assemblymember Cindy Monta_ ez (D-San Fernando)

Mr. Mendez, author of the MIT Master's Thesis that inspired the LNU project, noted that the City of San Fernando is an example of what Councilmember Ed Reyes described – a densely-populated, economically-challenged community striving to address urban impacts. He called Environmental Justice a catalyst for motivating the effort to provide park resources in the cities, including new park development, brownfield management and watershed management. Conventional planning policies are not adequate and communities should not rely solely on laissez faire approaches to providing park and open space resources. He noted Assemblymember Monta_ ez' efforts to create multiple approaches through her legislation, such as AB 2446, a bill concerning joint use of school facilities.

Marybeth Vergara – Program Coordinator, Trust for Public Land

Ms. Vergara talked about TPL's effort to look at the park needs of urban areas in a comprehensive manner. First and foremost is its "Parks for People" effort, in which TPL has been identifying park creation opportunities, including the northeast San Fernando Valley, southeast Los Angeles, the Central City and the area west of downtown Los Angeles, all notably park-poor communities. Additionally, the organization has identified specific projects such as the L.A. River Greenway, beginning with a park in Elysian Valley, and a complex project in Maywood. The latter, Ms. Vergara said, has benefited from a lot of intra-jurisdictional cooperation but is held back by difficult negotiations with a privately-held railroad that owns key property in the project area. She also talked about the need to focus on comprehensive financing of parks in the future, including fund raising and another round of ballot measures. She concluded by describing the organization's "greenprinting" project to provide a park within a quarter mile of every resident. In working for several years to match population density to park siting opportunities, TPL has found that a major impediment is finding stewards, an entity to help plan the park take responsibility for its management and maintenance.

Question and answer session:

Park advocate James Rojas cited examples of how communities can help with maintenance of facilities, such as the Evergreen Cemetary jogging path in Boyle Heights and the South Central Community Garden. Mr. Mendez noted that government entities are looking for collaborative and multiple use opportunities, such as using watershed management techniques that can also generate facilities. Mark Mariscal of L.A. City Recreation and Parks noted that statutory requirements to pay prevailing wage on most public sector construction and maintenance inadvertently makes involving community volunteers almost impossible. Brenda Faustinos added that future bond measures and funding plans need to incorporate funds for operation and maintenance. She also encouraged establishing partnerships between unions and local nonprofits to address the issues Mariscal mentioned. Carrie Sutkin noted that the complex interfacing of jurisdictions sometimes make it difficult to create maintenance partnerships. County Parks Director Russ Guiney reiterated those comments but noted a new county-wide effort to address operating issues called the "Park Summit."

Other comments included an admonition to avoid privatization of parks and to create a balance between passive and active space. Support for a new local park district measure was expressed. Tsilah Burman of the Los Angeles Neighborhood Land Trust mentioned that entity's interest in partnering with local groups to build the capacity to participate, and Mott Smith of Civic Enterprise Associates described some operating fund problems he'd encountered while working with the Los Angeles Unified School District. Paul Herzog of the Ballona Wetlands Land Trust cautioned against pitting equity issues against looking at the regional "big picture" and mentioned a Ventura County sales tax measure intended to raise money for open space preservation.

PANEL 2 – Projects in Action

Katherine Perez, moderator, introduced the second panel offering examples of park activism in Southern California.

Robert Garcia – Executive Director, Center for Law in the Public Interest

Mr. Garcia identified three major needs in urban areas: parks and open space, schools and playing fields, and the obesity epidemic amongst urban youth. He mentioned the '30s-era Olmstead Plan, which laid out policies to create greenbelts throughout Los Angeles, as an inspiration for CLIP's current efforts along the Los Angeles River and in inner-city communities. Citing the effort to prevent a warehouse project and create a park at the Chinatown Yard (Cornfield) north of downtown Los Angeles, Garcia described the tools needed to pursue this agenda: Have a vision, build coalitions, do the research and demographic analysis, know the history, work with the media, get outside help and be open to using litigation as a tool. He noted that the Cornfield park project has been moving too slowly, bogged down by state bureaucratic processes. He went on to talk about how the statewide park and water bond measures of the last few years have received a higher percentage of support in Latino communities than from most other voting blocs, disproving the notion that parks and funding are the province of wealthy communities. If the traditional environmental movement had been sufficiently successful, he noted, there'd be no need for Environmental Justice.

Sam Pedroza – Member of Amigos de los Rios

Mr. Pedroza, a founding member of the Amigos, a group working on opportunities connected with the San Gabriel River and Rio Hondo, also is an environmental planner for the Sanitation Districts of Los Angeles County. He opened by noting that a Latino former L.A. City Councilmember once told him that Latinos aren't environmentalists. "Then what am I," Pedroza said. He noted that research he'd done taught him that the path Los Angeles and Southern California are now on had been predicted as long ago as the '70s, heading toward a more urban pattern. Pedroza said he's been focused on the San Gabriel Valley for some time, noting the high use of parks by Latinos and a strong identification by Latinos with the environment. He advocated a multi-agency, cooperative approach and described some of the Amigos' efforts. They are looking at the Rio Hondo watershed area to create Rio Vista Park. Another project is Gibson's Park, intended as a family-oriented facility. The Amigos advocate involving families in advocacy efforts so that kids can grow up knowing they can be part of something bigger than just their own neighborhood.

Tricia Ward – Artistic Director of ARTScorpsLA

Ms. Ward, founder of a group that has created a couple of unique arts-oriented recreational spaces in urban neighborhoods, cited her New York background as a spur for her activities. She was used to small, intimate spaces where youth could gather for artistic experiences and found few if any of them in Los Angeles. She was also surprised that people didn't spend more time outside in the relatively good weather. Her first project was La Culebra in Highland Park, a privately-owned space for which she recruited neighbors in an effort to secure it as a community space. She went door-to-door

to recruit participants for a collective that went on to construct and operate La Culebra. She later replicated the pattern for a facility in the Temple-Beaudry neighborhood near downtown L.A. Responding to a comment from the first panel Q&A session, she noted that creating these spaces on a private basis allowed the collectives to get them done more quickly and without being hampered by many of the rules and regulations that plague public projects. The ARTScorpsLA programs include homework clubs for students, job training, arts training and scholarships. Ms. Ward cited civic engagement as being her most valuable tool, lauding the value of volunteerism. However, she added, why is it that the communities most in need have to rely so much on volunteers while more affluent communities rarely have to. She commented that Environmental Justice, while important, seems too often to be a reactive rather than a pro-active movement. She expressed a concern that the prominence of parks as a cause has generated more competition for resources instead of fostering a sharing attitude. She advocated the pulling together of social capital to overcome the fracturing.

Question and answer session:

A Silver Lake-area activist supported the notion that not everyone was looking for more soccer and playing fields. She felt that the field shortage was more due to poor management than a dearth of facilities. She noted that a recently created baseball park in Elysian Park was only used for baseball and thus underutilized most of the time. Others replied that the demand for playing fields is simply so high that management can't solve the entire problem. Robert Garcia commented that many Latino children live in homes without yards and, though there's a worldwide tradition of kids playing soccer and other sports in the streets and on dirt lots, we can't afford to discourage physical activity by relying on that in a crowded, built-up urban area. He asserted that creating activity space for children reflects the values of a community.

A staffer from L.A. County Recreation and Parks mentioned the potential utility of all-weather fields but cautioned against being too specific about designating uses in parks. He noted that neighborhoods have evolved dramatically over decades and what might be desirable in one era could be completely inappropriate in another, depending on who lived in the vicinity. After some more comments about funding issues, Michael Mendez noted that the Planning and Conservation League was auditing the spending enabled by Propositions 12 and 40 to determine whether the funds were spent as intended and whether there were discernible inequities.