



Balboa Park | Cover Story

What's Wrong with Balboa Park?

By [Geoff Bouvier](#) | Published Wednesday, July 30, 2008

If the Pacific Ocean is San Diego's swimming pool, Balboa Park is our backyard. When we want to get out of the house, Balboa Park is where we go, 11 million times per year.

And we don't just go because it's there. Balboa Park is a unique assembly of 85 public and private institutions clustered on 1200 acres of dedicated landscape. You can visit the park to shoot arrows, play chess or golf, see an Apollo 9 command module, join a drum circle, look at Picassos, run your dog, feed some ducks, feel cool spray from a fountain, catch an IMAX film, and experience the opulence of roses, the austerity of cactuses, menageries of animals, and the stately grandeur of a pipe organ.

Balboa Park is owned by the city and operated by the city's Department of Parks and Recreation. Two official bodies contribute advisory input: the San Diego Park and Recreation Board and the Balboa Park Committee. A number of individual philanthropic organizations provide support, including the Friends of Balboa Park, the Committee of 100, and various foundations.

On top of this, dozens of nonprofit park lessees provide services and recreational activities, a few for-profit restaurateurs and food vendors pay rent, and many more special festivals and events are scheduled throughout the year within the boundaries of the park.

But is this becoming a case of too many cooks spoiling the broth? Should Balboa Park become a more unified entity?

One reason why it might be time to address this question is because Balboa Park needs hundreds of millions of dollars of attention. Everything from seismic retrofitting of buildings to renovating an old landfill.

And according to a recent study, the time to address this question is now, before it becomes an urgent one.

The Study

The 187-page study, *The Soul of San Diego: Keeping Balboa Park Magnificent in Its Second Century*, was financed by local civic philanthropic organizations and produced by the Center for City Park Excellence of the Trust for Public Land. Supporting documentation was provided by the Keston Institute for Public Finance and Infrastructure Policy at the University of Southern California and by the Morey Group.

The first 18 pages — an introduction, background, summary of studies, questions raised, and a conclusion — are followed by three appendices of varying lengths: the Morey Report on Balboa Park usage, examples of capital and maintenance needs, and then the Keston Report on Management and Funding Options.

The study is full of colorful graphs, hard facts, and beautiful sentences.

“Balboa Park is in many ways the physical and psychological soul of the city and even the region — an economic, ecological and spiritual engine that continuously pumps life into the metropolis,” the introduction states. “Other than the Pacific Ocean itself, there is probably no more universally beloved feature in San Diego.”

The study goes on to tell a relatively complete tale of Balboa Park’s history — from its birth in 1848, thanks to Alonzo Horton, through the 1915 Panama-California Exposition, which contributed most of the Spanish architecture, through the creation of the zoo and museums and the unfulfilled planning efforts of the ’80s and ’90s and the past few years.

Finally, the study states: “Most San Diegans believe that it is important to assure that Balboa Park does not go through the kind of collapse that at one time or another befell New York’s Central Park and many other great urban gathering places.... The purpose of these studies and this study is to provide the factual basis that is necessary to have an informed and robust public discussion about the future of the park.”

The study is careful to state then that its purpose is not to make recommendations but only to provide information in three specific areas: usage, examples of capital and deferred maintenance needs, and “analysis of current management and planning issues...including governance alternatives and funding options that could be considered for the future.”

Councilmember Toni Atkins had this to say about the document: “The information provided in the study gives us a basis to begin. It’s a reflection of the reality of our overall financial ability to maintain a world-class park for San Diegans and visitors to enjoy.”

In an email, Atkins was careful to add the following important point: “What may be hard for people to garner from the study who aren’t intimately familiar with the park is how well the park is actually maintained by staff given the lack of adequate resources available.”

Balboa Park is currently looked after by thousands of volunteers who spend their days pruning rose bushes, guiding tours, manning desks, and cleaning up. In 2003, the cultural institutions alone had 7000 volunteers working for them. It's apparent that without these unpaid assistants donating their time, the park would either fall into quicker disrepair or be considerably more expensive to maintain.

"I'm here about once a week," said one member of the Rose Garden Corps, who wished to remain anonymous. "It's therapeutic, being out here in a beautiful garden like this." The Corps is a group of 50 or so volunteers who attend regular horticulture classes and help care for the park's 2000 rose plants.

"Volunteers are the backbone of the park," said David Kinney, director of the House of Hospitality Association within the park. "From the Balboa Park Committee to the thousands of volunteers at the cultural institutions and volunteer groups like the Friends of Balboa Park and the Committee of 100. And that's just the tip of the iceberg. There's so many volunteers that keep this park going, I think that whatever governance structure is created for the future needs to incorporate volunteers."

Added Councilmember Atkins, "Clearly the issue of financing is key — but the direction we take to try and secure the resources to preserve and maintain Balboa Park is what leads us to the broader discussion of governance. I want the stakeholders and the citizens who care about Balboa Park to work with the City to determine how we proceed."

Data for a Sample of Projects

In the Balboa Park study, 21 maintenance and upkeep projects are singled out for attention.

On March 8, at the first of a series of public forums held on the subject of Balboa Park's future, Dr. Glen Sparrow said, "I want to emphasize these projects were chosen somewhat randomly. This is not a complete listing. This is a sample of some of the projects that need to be done, need to be maintained, and need capital funding for improvement."

Dr. Sparrow is professor emeritus at the School of Public Administration and Urban Studies at San Diego State. He was also the project manager chosen to oversee the Balboa Park study.

And just how much are these 21 projects supposed to cost?

Two hundred thirty-nine million.

But Dr. Sparrow, and indeed the study itself, is careful to qualify this figure.

Dr. Sparrow said, "This is not a figure that should be used to say, 'This is what needs to be done with the park.' We don't know what needs to be done with the park. That needs

to be found out. After the governing and the financing process is completed, we need to do a master plan and a capital-improvements budget for the park. So that still lies ahead. The massive, big picture. What we have here is an incomplete listing. So it's a start. But what we wanted to do was indicate what's out there and emphasize the importance of these issues. Because, while the park is not falling apart in front of us, there are things underground and behind the scenes that need to be addressed.

“We sampled some of the institutions — some of the museums and theaters in the park — and we got their listing of their deferred maintenance and what they thought needed to be done to their buildings, which they lease from the city but in many instances have been spending their own money on to maintain.”

The following sample represents about a quarter of the 21 projects detailing necessary maintenance and upkeep in Balboa Park and is quoted directly from the Balboa Park study.

Arizona Landfill Reclamation

- *Project description:* Approximately 77 acres on East Mesa that were formerly City landfill, proposal is to reestablish area as active parkland.
- *Funding:* Cost estimate 2000: \$61,600,000, cost estimate 2007: \$86,700,000.

Centralize Park Irrigation

- *Project description:* Replace and automate Park central control irrigation system.
- *Funding:* Cost estimate 2005: \$10,000,000; cost estimate 2007: \$11,000,000.

Historical/Cultural Structures Central Mesa

The City of San Diego owns most of the buildings in the Central Mesa Area of the Park. Repair and maintenance of these buildings is the obligation of the City; however, the tenants themselves, including those listed below, have spent millions of dollars of their own money to maintain and improve these City structures. The following are some of the outstanding projects.

San Diego Air and Space Museum:

- Exterior building painting/repairs, \$150,000 to \$200,000
- Weather damage to wooden materials, \$20,000 to \$100,000
- Roadway around building is failing, \$30,000 to \$50,000
- Tree root is pushing concrete slab up, \$500 to \$ 5,000

- Lighting on front of building doesn't work, \$25,000 to \$50,000
- Slope of parking lot directs rain run-off into museum's front door, \$10,000 to \$20,000
- Insufficient drainage at front entrance, \$7,500 to \$15,000

San Diego Museum of Art:

Necessary maintenance and repairs, details available by request:

- Museum fluorescent lighting, \$50,000
- West wing foyer (galleries 14 & 15) ceilings, \$75,000
- Refinish Metalwork, \$25,000
- Skylights, \$500,000
- Illumination of main building ornamental façade (up-lighting), \$15,000
- Library toilets, \$7,500
- Water pressure regulators, \$10,000
- East wing galleries suspended ceiling system, \$50,000
- HVAC, \$300,000
- Asbestos removal, \$500,000
- Brace unsafe walls, \$250,000
- Library fire suppression, \$100,000
- Brace unsafe plaster ceilings, \$75,000
- Fire exit, \$250,000
- Fire alarm system replacement, \$400,000
- Auditorium door closers, \$7,500
- Main building ADA restrooms, \$150,000
- Exterior walls, \$10,000

- Front steps, \$5,000
- Cast iron storm drain, \$10,000

Timken Museum of Art

Replace lighting system, dimming switches, and replace ceilings. Estimated cost, \$275,000 to \$300,000.

Land Use Circulation and Parking

- *Project description:* Parking space, tram, and parking structures recommended to improve accessibility to park and circulation of vehicles in the park.
- *Funding:* Estimates have been made as high as \$500,000,000.

Seismic Retrofit of Buildings in the National Landmark District

- *Project description:* Seismic retrofit of existing structures within the National Landmark District, which is primarily the Central Mesa.
- *Funding:* Cost estimate 2005: \$46,500,000; cost estimate 2007: \$51,266,250.

Saturday in the Park...

Joan, 83, from Imperial Beach, is a small, curly haired woman. She's in robust health and attributes this to her love of walking.

"I come to the park only every other month or so," Joan says. "And when I come here, I just walk around. Maybe I'll go to a museum. I'm a member of the Natural History Museum."

Joan rates the park a perfect ten, saying, "If it weren't here, where would we go?"

She's never noticed any problems with the park and hasn't ever thought about the park having problems. She even thinks the cost of parking is reasonable.

"You may have to walk a little further sometimes, but then, I'm a walkabout person, so I don't really care."

Tracy, 51, from East County, has come to the park today with her three kids. The kids are still in the science museum, and Tracy's sitting in the sun by the main fountain, waiting for them.

“I come to the park about eight to ten times per year,” Tracy says. She visits the museums, goes to the zoo, and usually has lunch at the Prado. Her average stay is three to four hours.

Tracy thinks the quality of the parking varies. “If you come in the summer, it’s a little more difficult,” she says, “but it’s always feasible. It’s always doable.”

One thing Tracy doesn’t like is the idea of a parking garage.

“This is a beautiful park,” she says. “Where are they going to put it? It’s going to look like garbage.”

What about parking meters?

“If they wanted to have parking meters,” Tracy says, crinkling her face behind her sunglasses, “and it was only a couple bucks to park, then I wouldn’t mind. But if they’re going to charge us like downtown, where it’s, like, ten bucks, then forget it.”

Tracy rates the park an “A-plus,” saying, “I feel safe here. It’s clean. It’s beautiful. I can’t think of a problem. I can’t think of anything that I see when I come here that makes me think, ‘Oh, that’s an eyesore’ or ‘Oh, that sticks out to me.’ There’s nothing like that.”

Another Tracy, who is 18 years old and lives in North Park, is sitting on a bench near the botanical garden with her dog Bob on her lap. She’s rubbing Bob’s sides vigorously, and his white fur flies off onto Tracy’s clothes and into the sun.

“I come to the park about once a week,” Tracy says. She does her schoolwork here, brings Bob for walks, and also goes to the museums.

Tracy says firmly that she has no problems with the park.

But then she thinks a moment, continuing to pet Bob, albeit less enthusiastically. “Actually, I’ve been here at night before,” she says, “and there’s a lot of homeless people that, they’re not all necessarily dangerous, but... Once, there was a man near the fountain who was cursing to himself, and he kind of scared my friend and me, but nothing really happened. I guess I feel safe. You just have to be on your guard.”

Paul Strahm, 47, of La Jolla, is a member of the San Diego Art Institute, which is located on the park grounds. Today, he’s painting. So far, he’s blocked in some of the Spanish buildings along the Prado and outlined the lily pond in front of the botanical garden.

“I come to the park about once a month,” Strahm says, continuing to mix colors on his palette. “Usually I’m dropping off or picking up paintings. And I’ll also go to the museums.”

Strahm’s one issue with his park visits is the parking.

“I think the parking’s terrible,” he says. “I had a lady threaten me in the parking lot a couple weeks ago. When it’s really bad, I don’t even bother coming here. But I wouldn’t want them to start charging for it.”

Lou, 60, from Spokane, Washington, and his wife Sue are visiting San Diego for the first time. They’ve come to Balboa Park twice, for about three hours each trip.

“We came back hoping to catch the botanical garden,” Lou says, “but they’re closed again today.”

Sue’s in the gift shop, browsing, while Lou waits for her in the courtyard of the House of Hospitality.

The two have gone to three or four of the museums and toured the park grounds.

“We came down here to meet up with our grandkids,” Lou says, “and to go to SeaWorld. Balboa Park is really the one place that my wife and I wanted to see.”

Lou shakes his head slowly when asked what he thinks of the park.

“It’s wonderful,” he says, “just wonderful. I can’t think of much they could do differently. It’s pretty much perfect. It’s so large, with so much to do, and yet it’s so user-friendly and so well maintained. And everyone’s really courteous and helpful.”

Charlie’s wearing the official beige uniform of a House of Hospitality maintenance worker and touching up the paint around a window near the Prado Restaurant.

“If you can get employment in the park,” Charlie says, “it’s such a beautiful place to work. Such a relaxing place to work. We don’t really have the same turnover ratio like other businesses do.”

Charlie spends his days fixing light fixtures and windows and overseeing setup for functions and weddings. He says one of the perks of his job is getting to meet people from all over the world.

“In my three years of working here,” Charlie says, raising his eyebrows, “I like it a lot. I can’t complain.”

More than Meets the Eye

It’s hard to believe, from walking through Balboa Park, that the place needs money or help of any kind. It all looks so idyllic. But it’s like that famous frog experiment: If you put a frog in boiling water, it will jump out and save itself, but if you put it in cool water and heat things up slowly, the frog might die before it realizes the water is too hot.

Balboa Park is heating up gradually, but why wait until the problems boil over? San Diego doesn't want a situation on its hands like the one with the Interstate 35W bridge that collapsed in Minneapolis last year.

"We have to recognize what might be on the horizon and deal with it before anything actually goes wrong," said Peter Harnik at the public forum on March 8. Harnik runs the Center for City Park Excellence, a division of the Trust for Public Land in Washington, D.C.

Harnik is also the principal author of the Balboa Park study.

"Many cities have great parks," Harnik said in front of an auditorium full of about 100 park-concerned citizens. "And what you're facing here in San Diego is not a unique situation. New York City has Central Park and Prospect Park; Atlanta has Piedmont Park; Houston has Hermann Park; St. Louis has Forest Park; Chicago has Grant Park and Millennium Park; Boston has the Boston Common; and the list goes on and on. And, frankly, many of those parks have gone through periods of decline and been resuscitated by people putting in long hours and deep thought and sometimes also deep pockets."

Without directly mentioning Balboa Park — which has its own problem with homeless residents — Harnik, during his opening statement, told a story to illustrate the importance of dealing with urban issues, of not being so ambivalent that we "let a great park go down the tubes."

"There was a tremendous homeless problem in Golden Gate Park for many years," Harnik said, "and people had mixed feelings about coming down hard on the homeless. They tried various things but sort of halfheartedly. And then one night, one of the homeless people, either accidentally or purposefully, set a fire which became basically a forest fire inside Golden Gate Park...and at that point, the next morning, surveying that wreckage, people said, 'Okay, we've got to do something.' "

Harnik then indicated that the study, its related studies, and public meetings were all designed to head off anything like that for Balboa Park.

As page 9 of the study states: "The sink hole that opened up in the middle of the Prado recently is just one reminder of the devastation that disrepair can bring. Underground utilities, for instance, are underground and out of mind — until they begin to leak. The golf course irrigation system is given little thought — until the turf dies. Cracked steps or inaccessible buildings seem like minor problems — until someone files a negligence or discrimination lawsuit against the city. Seismic retrofits seem like a waste of money — until the next earthquake hits. A horticultural survey seems unnecessary — until the quality of the landscaping declines so far that residents prefer to stay in their own back yards rather than visiting the park."

Hard Facts

“The park is highly rated,” John Morey said at the March 8 forum. Morey is owner of the Morey Group, a 23-year-old company that does national market research and consulting for the cultural attraction industry. “People are really happy with it. It isn’t broken. At least not on the outside.”

Morey estimates that Balboa Park enjoys 10–11 million visits (not visitors) per year.

Morey responded to one forum speaker by saying, “[Balboa Park is] the Smithsonian of the west. There’s no greater place that I’m aware of that has as much richness and diversity in just actual numbers of attractions in such a confined area, other than the Smithsonian and the National Mall.”

The Legler Benbough Foundation hired Morey’s company to determine some of the baseline facts and figures about the use of Balboa Park.

As Peter Harnik said, before introducing Morey at the forum, “My mantra is to collect data. There’s so much idle chatter, speculation, wild theories, and personal anecdotes and feelings about parks. And that’s important; one of the reasons why people love parks so much is that they have this personal connection to them. But we can’t make public policy based on how individual people feel about things. We have to actually know what’s going on in the park.”

To this end, the bulk of the Balboa Park study is made up of colorful graphs based on data that the Morey Group provided by surveying nearly 2000 parkgoers over two data-collection periods.

According to the Morey Groups’ report, over half the park’s visitors drive there in their cars.

Nearly all (96 percent) San Diego County residents drive to the park. Forty percent park in an internal lot, 20 percent park at the Zoo, 15 percent park on or around Sixth Avenue, 11 percent park on Park Boulevard, and 12 percent park elsewhere.

“The biggest issue is probably parking,” Morey said. “But on average, it isn’t horrible. Forty percent of county residents said that parking negatively impacts their decision to visit the park. So what are our potential solutions? The data suggests that a parking garage would be a solution: it’s more centralized, and it has a lower footprint [than a parking lot].”

Some other interesting highlights from the research conducted by the Morey Group:

Seventy-five percent of non-city residents cite the park as a major reason for visiting San Diego. And these visitors will stay in the city for three to four nights in connection with their park visit.

This illustrates how Balboa Park is a major economic resource for San Diego. It lures countless tourists and raises the values of nearby properties. It also offers hundreds of free public activities that might cost money in the private market.

There were also indications in Morey's report of the incredible variety of attractions at the park. Sixty-nine percent of visitors come to the park because of a museum, a theater, or the zoo. Fourteen percent visit because of a public event or festival. Seventeen percent are there for leisure and 20 percent for recreation.

The Public Voice

Councilmember Atkins was pleased with the first public meeting about the future of the park on March 8. She called it "the first step to engage the public in a dialogue about the study and the future stewardship of the park." She then went on to say, "This is not going to be an easy process, but it is my hope that all San Diegans will get an opportunity to weigh in on these important issues within the park, and about the park, as we move forward through the process."

Councilmember Atkins said, "The Balboa Park Committee is tasked to host these public discussions. I have great faith in the Committee to understand the broad range of stakeholders and users of the Park — they work to represent and bring balance to these important user interests every single day. It's not an easy task, but I know they take the responsibility seriously."

At the forum, Balboa Park Committee chairperson Vicki Granowitz echoed the sentiment that it's important for the public to stay involved in the future of the park. "We will go to the Natural Resources Committee of the City Council," Granowitz said, "and that will be a public hearing. And my desire is not to lose control of the park but to figure out how we can all do it together. We've got a lot of people we have to keep involved in the process as we move forward."

One would think that without robust public input there is a very real chance that lots of people could get left behind in the process of switching governance and financing in the park. What about the archers and the lawn bowlers and the dog people and the joggers?

In response to this concern, Councilmember Atkins again stressed the importance of the public voice.

"We need to approach this through a cautious, thoughtful, and thorough process and open dialogue with many stakeholders and institutions, not only in the park and city, but also in the region," Atkins said. "This is critical, so that no one gets left out of the process."

A second public meeting, which wasn't specific to the study, took place on May 1 in the Santa Fe Room at the Balboa Park Club. For a schedule of future meetings, check the Balboa Park website: balboapark.org.

The Problem of Financing

According to the conclusion drawn by the study, the City of San Diego no longer has the financial ability to maintain Balboa Park as the “world-class urban amenity and tourist attraction” it has become.

In the recently released fiscal budget for the upcoming year, the city intends to cut spending yet again for its developed regional parks, from \$378.63 million in 2007 to \$334.65 million in 2008, down to \$318.8 million in 2009.

So how to raise enough money for capital improvements to the park and for what Dr. Sparrow calls “the massive, big picture” of the future of Balboa Park?

In an appendix to the 187-page study, entitled “Options and Opportunities: New Management Paradigms for Balboa Park,” a table on page 10 lists “Possible Options to Fund a Balboa Park Capital Improvements Program.”

According to the table, “revenue sources amenable to continued city administration” are sales taxes and transient occupancy taxes, development exactions, and general obligation bonds.

Sales taxes and transient occupancy taxes could each bring in up to \$8 million a year, and collection mechanisms are already in place. However, this step would require voter approval and would have to overcome resistance to tax increases.

Development exactions could produce “in-kind” as opposed to “cash” contributions and would engage selected private development, but park improvements would compete with other needed improvements.

General obligation bonds have the potential to produce enough capital to cover all costs, but they require voter approval, and in any case, the city’s debt rating is “poor.”

The Capital Improvements chart also lists funding solutions under the heading “revenue sources amenable to other public administration.” These potential solutions would be revenue bonds and user fees, and special assessments.

Revenue bonds and user fees could directly engage park users in upkeep and repair and increase accountability and flexibility, but then there would exist the dangers of misused funds and corruption.

Special assessments might spread the costs of improvements over a broad base of beneficiaries, but this step requires a two-thirds voter approval.

A third heading, “revenue sources amenable to private sector administration,” is also listed. These solutions include grants and donations and public-private partnerships.

Grants and donations don't impact city finances and encourage a shift to nonprofit administration or partnership, but the current park-management structure discourages such a resource.

Public-private partnerships could move certain functions off City books, but then a private-sector entity would have to charge fees for full cost recovery and return on investments.

"We're trying to figure out how to pay for things that many people think are free," said Richard Little at the March 8 meeting. Little is director of the Keston Institute for Public Finance and Infrastructure Policy at the University of Southern California. "But nothing's free. You might not be paying for things at the time of use, but you're not really getting them for free. So there is a movement afoot to better align services and how they get paid for. And one of the things that that leads to is some new ideas about how might the park be governed."

The Problem of Governance

"Balboa Park seems like a unified facility," Peter Harnik said at the March 8 public forum, "but it's really more like a bundle of twigs held together by twine. Because, for whatever reason, over the last 100 years, every time the municipal government didn't step up to the plate on a particular aspect of the park and sort of exert command and control and authority, some enterprising person or institution took control instead and said, 'Let's create this museum, let's create this garden, let's create this sports facility, let's create this club.' And through the force of their personalities and ability to raise the money, they did that. So there's a tremendous amount of vitality and wonderful subcomponents within this park, all of which work together very nicely for the average user. But it's a risky structure right now, with so many different players making decisions that sometimes fit together really well and sometimes don't."

No one can deny that the park runs well right now. And there's a palpable worry that the study is an attempt to politicize the park and to take it away from the public.

"I want to stress too that our committee's mandate is to look at a way to create an efficient and transparent governance structure that involves all the stakeholders to create a sustainable future for Balboa Park," said the House of Hospitality's David Kinney by telephone. "If you think about it, the best way to get any project done is to first create a governance structure that can support them and get them done. That's the first step."

But isn't the park run rather efficiently right now? At least it seems so.

"The City of San Diego has gone through some significant changes recently," Dr. Sparrow said at the first public forum. "The government has changed its structure. And with that change, from a council-manager form of government to a mayor-council, Mayor Sanders has reorganized the city. So the city has gone through what was called 'business

process reengineering,' which was a major change. That has complicated the process of trying to figure out how to help the park."

Even if the city is, in fact, doing a fine job with the park, perhaps an aggregate of 85 institutions on 1200 acres of land is more than any city government should have on its plate.

Keston Institute director Richard Little thinks this is the case.

"Running a city," Little said at the forum, "really isn't for sissies. We talk a lot about looking for business models. Well, most corporations in this country, and even global corporations, usually move to a model where they focus more on a few core business lines, things they can really do well and make money at. And that's where they spend their time. Well, if only cities had it so simple. But they have to deal with education, and homeless issues, and health care, and so many things...oh, I guess we can put parks in there too. And it's very hard to be an expert in everything. And, of course, citizens expect their governments to be experts in doing what they do. That's very difficult. I guess one of the models we're seeing municipal governments look at is maybe focusing on those things they can do really well and perhaps handing off some of the things that become problematic."

Little did commend the city's job up to this point, even though he eventually qualified the endorsement.

"San Diego is very blessed with having a Parks and Recreation Department that does a wonderful job," Little said. "You've got wonderful, dedicated people who go the extra mile and put in the time. And they keep the operation going because they care about it. That's a blessing. But at the same time, it's also a curse. Because they're kind of in the back room, doing all these machinations, and buying their own baling wire and chewing gum, and they're keeping things running, and people come by and say, 'Well, gee, that's nice. I don't know why the park needs any more money. Look how nice it is. Everything looks fine.' So that's a problem. Because we often get into situations where it takes a bridge falling down for people to start paying attention to bridges. That's kind of the way we are."

On top of any other concerns, San Diego taxpayers may well be skeptical about what the city ultimately does with their tax dollars.

Little addressed this issue at the forum, stating, "I don't think that people are going to run out and cheer for any solution until there is a governing structure in place where people feel comfortable that the money that's dedicated to the park is in fact going to stay in the park. And that should be addressed before we get into other issues, because if there isn't a dependable mechanism to raise and spend money, then this effort isn't going to go terribly far. But if this tension continues to exist between 'Well, if we put money into the city, we're not sure it goes to the park,' then I don't think that kind of uncertainty is conducive to long-range solutions."

Little's particular job, in terms of the Balboa Park study, was to consider possible future mechanisms for park governance. His expertise on the subject has led him to narrow the future park governance choices to three models: a joint powers agreement, a public-private partnership (often called a conservancy), or the creation of a new government entity to run the park.

"One of the popular things in California is a joint powers authority," Little said. "You already have that at San Dieguito River Park, actually. Several governments have come together and taken on the responsibility of a single function, and they manage and operate the park. And when you get into how to pay for the things that are needed, there are some advantages to that model. Because a joint powers authority, in essence, becomes an enterprise, and from the standpoint of public finance, that gives them certain benefits because the funds they control — whether they come from participating governments or whether they raise money on their own — they are dedicated to a particular purpose. And in the case of the park, I don't think it's going to be funded on a kind of pay-as-you-go-type thing. We need some borrowing to pay this off. And borrowing can be problematic. So JPAs, if they can establish revenue streams, can issue revenue bonds that are dedicated for certain purposes, and that money has a fence around it. It's not money that can disappear in other ways."

As for the conservancy model, although the city would lose some control over the park, the Keston Institute's portion of the study indicates that conservancies are usually quite successful. As page 15 of the study states, "One of the great benefits of partnering with a nonprofit or a conservancy is that the relationship can be prescribed in a contract or memorandum of understanding rather than in legislation."

And as regards a new governmental entity, the Keston Report notes many places across the country where this has worked wonders for parks. The major drawback is that taxes to fund such an entity would require the approval of two-thirds of affected property owners.

In the end, Little tried to be clear that he wasn't endorsing any one solution. He said, "There isn't some model you can take off the shelf and say, 'This will work.' But I think there is a solution for San Diego that will enable you to do the things you need to do so that, 50 or 100 years from now, we don't have to have this discussion. You will have put the things in place that will make sure the park goes on in perpetuity." — *Geoff Bouvier*