EDITORIALS

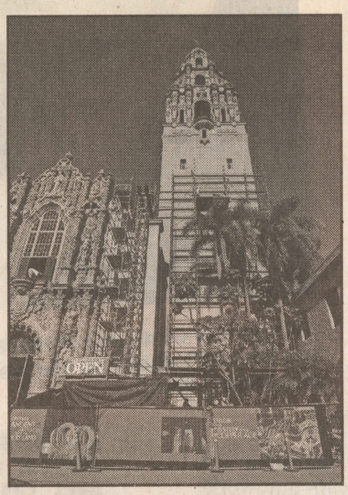
Saving a gem

Restoring Balboa Park's luster must begin

For more than a century, Balboa Park has been a cultural and recreational treasure, a cherished urban sanctuary unmatched anywhere else. San Diego's visionary captains of the late 19th century — Alonso Horton, Kate Sessions, George Marston — bequeathed an enduring gift to future generations. It is the obligation of today's civic leaders to preserve this gift and perpetuate it for those yet to come.

Today, though, Balboa Park is facing steady deterioration. The reason for this is not only San Diego's financial squeeze caused by the pension fund crisis, but also a pernicious benign neglect by successive mayors and city councils.

It took a group of concerned citizens to come forward with creative ideas to save the park from inexorable decline. Three private entities — the Legler Benbough Foundation, the Parker Foundation and the San Diego Foundation — deserve enormous credit for funding a landmark study of Balboa Parks' needs and potential ways to meet them. Mayor Jerry Sanders and Councilwoman Toni Atkins have shown leadership by endorsing the study and starting the process of acting on its recommendations.



Balboa Park in need of repairs. *U-T*

The price tag for restoring the park's luster is $238 million, mostly in deferred maintenance, according to the study. This figure is high enough to make any mayor shudder. But it does not take into account the costs of really improving the park by, for example, recovering acres and acres of asphalt parking lots for green space. This would require building parking structures on the park's perimeter and establishing a tram or other transportation system to provide mobility for the 10 million visitors who use the park each year.

The overriding challenge, of course, is to find the very substantial amounts of money needed to improve the park. Granted, the voracious costs of city employees' pensions have drained the vitality out of the general fund, which pays for parks and most other city services. So, other funding sources must be explored.

Encouragingly, the Benbough study offers three innovative alternatives.

The first, and possibly most promising, idea is to establish a nonprofit conservancy to manage Balboa Park in lieu of the overlapping city departments that currently are responsible for various aspects of park maintenance. This model has worked successfully in other cities. It offers the opportunity for private benefactors to contribute significant resources toward the park's improvement. The question is, would enough philanthropy be generated to make the conservancy concept work here?

The second alternative is to form a joint powers authority encompassing the city, the county and other municipalities in the San Diego region. The premise is that Balboa Park is a regional asset, which it certainly is, so other governmental entities should contribute resources to sustain it.

The third proposal is to establish a park district with authority to impose a special levy to support the park. This concept would require approval by two-thirds of the city's voters — a steep but not impossible threshold to meet.

Each of these approaches has advantages and drawbacks. The important thing is for Mayor Sanders and the City Council to recognize the status quo is unacceptable and assert the leadership necessary to adopt a model that will ensure Balboa Park's future for another hundred years.

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