

GUEST COLUMN Should San Diego Privatize Governance of Balboa Park?

Mike Stepner, FAIA

Balboa Park is our crown jewel. This is the opinion that is reinforced every time questions are asked about what are the region's best features. And, there is no question that the city is strapped for funds and that parks, along with libraries and other quality-of-life municipal functions are given low priority for funding—The reasons why that is our public attitudes about the public services required for our community is the topic for another day's discussion.

But quoting Chicago's Mayor Daley: "Parks are the essential building blocks of strong neighborhoods. Cities are vibrant and exciting but they also can be overwhelming and intimidating. Trees, flowers, a small park, even a sidewalk bench can soften the rough edges of a city."

In November, Richard Louv wrote in his *San Diego Union-Tribune* article, a city's dedication to public space: "What . . . is the measure of a great city or urban region? Its education systems? Its arts? Its business inventiveness? All of the above. But the most overlooked measure is a city's dedication to the public space." Rich goes on to say, "But in recent years, we have seen a trend toward a shrinking commitment to public space."

There are current proposals that discuss what needs to be done and can be done—the policies of the SANDAG RCP, the draft city of San Diego General Plan, and the Canyonlands initia-

-tive are but a few examples. Nevertheless, the city has fallen further and further behind in its provision of funds for parks and public space (and the city does not have a structure to take advantage of opportunities—the Navy Broadway Complex comes to mind).

One might even say that in the pursuit of efficiency we have a one-size-fits-all approach—and we should never use the word 'efficient' without preceding it with 'effective' when talking about things like this. The large resource-based parks are lumped together administratively with the neighborhood parks. That may not be the best way to manage the parks, which brings us to our current discussion about what should/could be the governance structure for Balboa Park.

The park has a reported one-hundred-million-dollar-plus repair shortfall. Because there is a lack of neighborhood parks in the communities adjacent to the park, portions of Balboa Park are being considered to fulfill the job of satisfying that need (in areas of increasing population). And, we have portions of the park that should be redeveloped for park purposes—the 20th and B service yard, the Arizona landfill, and even, some would say, part of the golf course.

So, the question is: Is there a better model for managing and governing the operations of the park? How can we maintain and improve the park? How can we avoid Band-Aid approaches in favor of real improvements?

That discussion is critical. The Legler-Benbough Study describes five different models of governance. All have come about because the municipality

could not/did not maintain those parks. A key factor that each city had to confront: How to avoid the perceived or actual privatization of the park and how to keep it as that city's most important public place?

Questions that need to be discussed are: If private funding is introduced, how do you also maintain the public level of funding? There is a tendency to think that, as a community, we no longer need to pay for this public facility. How do you avoid the tendency to do things cheaper even though not necessarily better? The Legler-Benbough study states, "The city needs to consider changes in its park governance, park planning, and financial reporting so that there is an effective, informed, and empowered group within the city focusing on Balboa Park with whom the private entities that are developed can relate and evolve."

We need to undertake the discussion because, clearly, the current situation is not working for us. People dedicated to the park are doing their best with Band-Aids and duct-tape; but, we need to go into the discussion with a framework—a framework that says we are trying to find a way to be more effective, to increase the revenue to maintain and improve the park, not to do it cheaper and not to find a way to pass off the public responsibilities to someone else; and not to sell naming rights just to provide funds.

The forum must be the beginning of a true public discourse on the future of the park. And, it must be a true public discourse, not a public hearing that is neither.

(continued on page 6)

C3 VIEWS - A JOURNAL OF REGIONAL PLANNING ISSUES FOR SAN DIEGO COUNTY

(continued from page 5)

“This 1,172.86 acres is vast but not limitless. Choices will have to be made in the years ahead as to what belongs in the park and what does not. Who makes those choices and what they decide will determine the fate of Balboa Park in the new millennium.”

“The park needed a ‘czar’, wrote San Diego Magazine architecture critic James Britton. The park superintendent and his design staff have valuable experience on which to draw, but they do not have the authority or even the inclination to ride herd on all of the people who contribute parts of the Balboa Park future. So the fact remains that no one is in a position to assure that the whole will be greater than the sum of the parts—i.e., a masterpiece of design. Yet, obviously, the finest park must have the finest guidance or sink”. Roger Showley,

“Every precious square inch of Balboa Park has somebody ready and anxious to take it over for a worthy purpose. But who decides disputes? How do we balance cultures, recreation, and just hanging around outdoors? And, what is the will of the people who own every one of those square inches?” Welton Jones.

BALBOA PARK GOVERNANCE STUDY

C3 Parks & Open Space Committee Report

Since inception in 1961, a key issue for Citizens Coordinate for Century 3 has been regional parks, canyons and open space preserves, beginning with Tourmaline & San Clemente Canyons. C-3 has taken an active interest in Balboa

Park since the early 1960s, saving the Cabrillo Freeway from expansion to 6 lanes (twice, successfully), working in coalition in the 1970s to re-direct the new Navy Hospital to a site outside of Balboa Park (unsuccessfully), spending much of a decade in the 1980s to help develop the Master Plan for Balboa Park and Precise Plan for the Central Mesa, and more recently, participating in development of the report by Jones & Jones for land use, circulation and parking and in the public discussions of proposed Zoo expansion plans.

In late 2006, Mayor Jerry Sanders suggested “privatizing” Balboa Park as a means to better manage problems in the Park arising the park’s long-term budgeting deficits, deferred maintenance needs and capital improvements long called out in the Balboa Park Master Plan but never implemented. A brief study of 5 urban parks in the U.S. which have instituted a conservancy or other form of non-profit governance (e.g. Central Park Conservancy) was followed by a Balboa Park-specific report issued in late January, 2008.

“*The Soul of San Diego: Keeping Balboa Park Magnificent in its Second Century*” is posted online at <http://www.sdfoundation.org/>.

The Study looks at the state of Balboa Park today and concludes with several possible governance scenarios including some form of non-profit or not-for-profit agency or organization to undertake fundraising and, possibly, management of Balboa Park, either from the beginning or in the future. In any case, C-3 and other organizations will maintain the firm position that land-use planning decisions must remain with the City and citizen advisors.

Several surveys were undertaken to establish baseline data about park users & park uses, estimates of deferred maintenance costs for buildings, landscaping & open space, and updated costs for capital improvement projects never realized. These reports brought forth a number of interesting statistics. Both person to person & telephone surveys were done across several days in August and in September, 2006.

- Between 9.5 and 12 million visitors a year visit Balboa Park, many on repeat visits, and about 25% come specifically to visit the SD Zoo.
- More than 75% of the non-City of San Diego residents interviewed came to San Diego specifically to visit Balboa Park.
- About 45% of Park visitors live in San Diego County, outside of the City.
- Smaller but still substantial percentages of visitors were from outside of San Diego County, and almost 20% of these were visitors from other states or countries.
- In August, 65% were in the Park for the first time; in September, 41% were first time visitors.
- In both personal & telephone interviews, 40-50% of those responding stated that the issue of parking “negatively impacts their decision to visit Balboa Park”.
- 95% of County residents rated Balboa Park experience as “excellent” or “good”.
- 98% of County residents rated Balboa Park landscaping as “excellent” or “good”.
- 82% of County residents rated their perception of personal safety as “excellent” or “good”.

(continued on page 7)

C3 VIEWS - A JOURNAL OF REGIONAL PLANNING ISSUES FOR SAN DIEGO COUNTY

(continued from page 6)

Notwithstanding the apparent opinion that Balboa Park appears to be in good shape, there are many areas where the Park is showing her age. As we approach the half-way point of the Park's second century and only a few years short of the Centennial of the Panama-California Exposition, the Study, and the public process which will help to determine the future health & welfare of Balboa Park --- are our first steps towards ensuring that Balboa Park remains a pre-eminent symbol of San Diego and continues to serve the millions of people from near and far who enjoy the Park's innumerable amenities.

by Judy Swink

REGIONAL WATER ISSUES UPDATE

C3 Water & Energy Committee

In an earlier newsletter, we updated C-3 members on the growing threats to our region's water supplies. In December, the federal court ordered the state Department of Water Resources (DWR) to reduce supplies of water from the Sacramento Delta pumps to Southern California by 30% for much of this year. Due to threats to other delta fish species, that pumping reduction might be increased further in the future.

Water Conservation Efforts

Since last Spring, the County Water Authority (CWA) and its member local water agencies have encouraged regional water customers to cut their water use by 20 gallons a day through an advertising/public relations campaign. Despite that effort, the authority re-

cently reported that local customer water consumption reached a record high in 2007. On March 27 CWA announced that it plans to spend another \$1.8 million to expand its advertising and marketing campaign efforts.

In March, the Metropolitan Water District board adopted a 14% increase in rates for water it sells to member agencies, including CWA. The increase will begin January 1, 2009. Member agencies will probably add their own cost increases to the MWD increase and pass them along to their customers next year. So it looks like current plans to encourage customers to use less will be an ongoing combination of advertising and substantial rate increases.

In addition to CWA's traditional water conservation advertising and limited incentive programs that provide customer rebates for installing high efficiency washer/dryers, toilets and other efficiency measures, some member agencies have begun to provide customers with limited rebates for removing their lawns and replacing them with artificial turf. CWA and some of its member agencies have also begun providing customers assistance in converting from traditional lawns to low water use landscaping.

Mayor Sanders has continued to urge city residents to cut back on their water use in a series of press conferences, but continues to oppose moving toward any kind of mandatory water reduction directives by the city. Other California cities and water agencies have adopted mandatory water conservation rules.

Wastewater Purification and Reuse Planning Efforts

The city council voted to direct staff to update earlier studies on wastewater purification and storage in San Vicente Reservoir for at least a year before introducing it back into the region's water distribution system. City water department staff, who report to the mayor, recently failed to meet a council deadline for providing an updated plan for the pilot project. The mayor continues to oppose any form of wastewater purification and reuse to address our region's growing water supply problems.

Seawater Desalination Efforts

The California Coastal Commission recently approved plans by Poseidon, Inc. to build a new seawater desalination plant next to the existing Encina powerplant, but will require the project sponsor to come back with more detailed environmental mitigation plans and detail how it intends to operate its plants in a manner that will not produce any additional greenhouse gases.

The company promoting the "Bajaqua" scheme for treatment and disposal of Tijuana wastewater has recently proposed building a new desalination plant in Baja, perhaps near the Juarez powerplant near Rosarito Beach just below the border. The proposal would entail Mexico, in return for getting the treated water from the plant, agreeing to a reduction of its water supply from the U.S. and funding from one of the water agencies to currently obtain their water supplies from the Colorado River. The proposal is just a concept at this time, and the organiza-

(continued on page 8)