

With City Low on Green, Balboa's Control Mulled

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Monday, Nov. 20, 2006 | Encouraged by several local foundations, Mayor Jerry Sanders' office is currently pondering a proposal that would turn over major responsibility for the funding, and perhaps even maintenance, of Balboa Park to a private organization.

The plan, which city officials and other prominent local leaders emphasize is still only in the discussion stages, would centralize control of the 1,200-acre icon in a nongovernmental entity with authority to plan out the long-term future of the park, though most final decisions would still likely have to go through City Hall for approval.

Earlier this year, a report commissioned by the Legler Benbough Foundation, which provides funding to many of the cultural institutions in the park, called on the city to consider major changes in the way the park is governed and financed. The report concluded that "Balboa Park already has the makings of a private-sector support structure" and recommended that the city incorporate all of the interests that use and support the park into a more formal decision-making organ.

The body, as envisioned by its supporters, would be responsible for raising private funds for the park, head the planning for major capital projects and could even take over much of the day-to-day operational oversight currently performed by the city.

For example, the Benbough-funded report featured five alternative governing models, including the Central Park Conservancy that runs New York's Central Park. Since its creation in 1980, the private organization has raised more than \$300 million in private dollars and provides nearly 85 percent of Central Park's annual operating budget.

"We felt that because of the well-publicized financial condition of the city, it was important for us to take a look at the financial underpinnings of the park as part of us taking a look at the future of what we want to fund," said Peter Ellsworth, the president of the Benbough Foundation.

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The foundation presented the report and its recommendations to Sanders, who Ellsworth said was supportive of discussing the future of the park.

Though it attracts about 13 million visitors each year, and is generally considered one of the most popular urban parks in the country, Balboa Park faces many of the same problems that plague the rest of San Diego. The Benbough report, prepared by the Trust for Public Lands, estimated maintenance needs that exceeds \$250 million, only a fraction of which would likely be met through an infrastructure bond expected to go before voters once the city is again allowed to borrow from the financial markets.

At the same time, though officially operated by the Department of Park and Recreation, the park is governed by a hodgepodge of city agencies and outside organizations. For example, the city's Department of Environmental Services monitors an old 50-acre landfill located on park grounds, while the Navy occupies a 90-acre hospital center and the Zoological Society of San Diego runs the 120-acre zoo.

"There hasn't been an entity that looks out for the park," said Paul Meyer, who chairs the Balboa Park Endowment Advisory at the San Diego Foundation. "We have organizations that look out for various checkerboard squares of the park, but there is no entity that looks out for the park as a whole, and there isn't such an entity in the city."

Despite its grandeur, the park attracts less than a million dollars of private funding each year an amount that is dwarfed by the support received by other major urban parks in the country, according to the Benbough report. Supporters of transferring partial control of Balboa Park from the city through a private-public partnership hope that an independent entity, capable of managing the park more efficiently and transparently, could attract more philanthropic dollars.

"We think if there were such an entity, our donors would follow," Meyer said.

Fred Sainz, a spokesman for the mayor, said Sanders is "urging and supportive" of a conversation that would study all of the options for the future of the park.

"We believe that such a discussion is appropriate, and should take place," Sainz said. "It's going to have to be a structured conversation, because it's going to have to include a number of stakeholder groups. And it's also going to have to be a substantive conversation."

One of city's primary interests in pursuing a private partnership to run the park would be to relieve taxpayers of some of the financial responsibilities for the operation, said Mauro Garcia, Park and Recreation's deputy director for developed regional parks. And the private foundations that currently support the park's operations say it would only be fair if other park users -- including those living outside of the city -- decided to chip in,

something that could be accomplished by getting other charities to join to the new organization.

"We do not view what the city is saying as an abdication of the city's responsibility," Meyer said. "There are some trends that I consider unavoidable truths about large urban parks. One of those trends is that as cities grow, and regions grow, those especially large urban parks in the U.S. become used very extensively by people throughout the region. And I think just by sheer numbers, it's not realistic to think that a single city can financially support these parks by themselves."

As the first step toward moving to a new model for operations, Harnick has recommended that the group create a panel of leading citizens to organize and plan for the 2015 celebration at Balboa Park, the centennial of the Panama-California Exposition that was hosted there.

Initially, the Benbough Foundation had offered to pay for the first year of a blue-ribbon commission to study a public-private partnership for Balboa. All it needed was a grant request, though Ellsworth said the city was too busy with other priorities to submit one to his organization this year. He thinks a funding request might come next spring.

"It's my understanding that the opportunity has passed, and that the city may not have taken advantage of that opportunity when it was presented," Sainz said, explaining that he does not know why the city didn't apply for the funds. He added that the city does not have any of its own money to pay for the commission.

However, if they ever come to fruition, the efforts to create a public-private partnership would sit squarely within the mayor's vision of limiting the focus of tax dollars to the city's core mission.

Though no one promises the same level of success as Central Park for any future institution here, and supporters of consolidating and outsourcing control of the park warn that the New York model may not be appropriate for San Diego, they say securing more private support will be a key component of any plan to address the dearth of public funding.

"This isn't moving the chairs around on the Titanic," San Diego Foundation's Meyer said. "This is really an opportunity."

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