



SDHS/BALBOA PARK CONNECTIONS  
WORKING GROUP  
STATUS REPORT  
SPRING 2023

*"The people of San Diego will do well if they recognize today that the two great central recreation features of the city, now and always, are the City Park of 1,400 acres and the Bay Front, and that the value of both will be increased many-fold if a suitable connecting link, parkway or boulevard, can be developed, bringing them into direct and pleasant relation." — John Nolen, 1908*

**PURPOSE**

An interim report to the City Council in response to its approval of a new 99-year lease to allow San Diego High School to remain within the park, as it has been since 1882.

Over the past 15 months, the SDHS/Balboa Park Connections Working Group has aimed to identify near- and long- term actions by public and private entities to complement improvements that have begun at the school campus. This interim status report summarizes the work to date, next steps, and the potential for further City Council actions.

## EXECUTIVE SUMMARY

As part of City Council deliberations, Councilmember Joe LaCava asked that a group of stakeholders be formed to look at the opportunities to grow the park and assist improvements in East Village presented by the lease. As a 2016 commentary in the Voice of San Diego put it, "Rather than framing the issue as a high school that's occupying public park land, why not think of it as a school that has the potential to grow the park for the public?" The City Council charged city Parks and Recreation Director Andrew Field to gather stakeholders to consider various proposals for the area and how the modernization of the San Diego High School campus could accelerate and connect other nearby projects and programs now existing and proposed for the future.

The Working Group with representatives from the San Diego Unified School District, San Diego Community College District and city departments and various stakeholders has been meeting since 2022.

Two immediate steps could include beautifying Russ Boulevard and the SDHS frontage on Park Boulevard and adding a ceremonial name to Park Boulevard in recognition of the role early 20th century planner John Nolen played in linking San Diego Bay and Balboa Park.

Prior to issuing a final report later this year, the Working Group intends to meet with other stakeholders and the general public to collect their feedback.

## BACKGROUND



San Diego High School began as Russ School in 1882 in what was then called "City Park." It was rebuilt in 1907 and again in 1973. It now being built a fourth time with new and refurbished buildings under the San Diego Unified School District's Whole School Modernization project. Meanwhile, the San Diego Community College District, just south of the park's boundaries, continues to expand and improve City College.

Many plans have been put forth over the years to better connect Balboa Park to its neighbors. The first came in John Nolen's *San Diego: A Comprehensive Plan for Its Improvement* of 1908. He called the park and bay San Diego's "two great recreation features," and proposed a "paseo" between Date and Elm streets and from the waterfront to Balboa Park, "bringing them into direct and pleasant relationship." He further developed this idea in his 1926 followup city plan. In the 1940s, city Planning Director Glenn Rick recast this idea as "Cedar Street Mall," starting at the County Administration Center, with a series of public buildings fronting a Washington, D.C.-like landscaped mall. Voters failed to approve the plan and those buildings were scattered all over downtown and beyond.

Responding to the impact of Interstate 5's "S-Curve" routing through Balboa Park in the 1960s, the latest downtown community plan calls for reconnecting the park and downtown by one or more "lids" over the freeway at various intersections. The plan's series of landscaping gateway streets, such as 14th Street, would serve as another way to "grow" the park and connect it to surrounding neighborhoods.



The Working Group heard from representatives from the San Diego Unified School District and San Diego Community College District; the city's Parks & Recreation Department and Development Services Department; the mayor's office and council offices; various stakeholders – the Balboa Park Committee, Balboa Park Committee of 100, Forever Balboa Park, Downtown San Diego Partnership, Downtown Community Planning

Committee, Urban Interventions; and consultants working with the high school and the community college.

The Working Group began with a review of planned improvements at the two educational institutions and discussed ways to leverage these upgrades to improve those connections. The Development Services' Urban Division is working on an integrated overview or "story map" of current development initiatives within the public realm in the area. The map will provide a visual representation of existing parks, public spaces, and cultural resources, as well as public improvement projects currently in the pipeline, and visionary concepts that have been discussed through the Working Group. The purpose of the story map is to capture the synergy between existing, future and visionary components of the public realm which provide connections between neighboring communities and promote an active and healthy urban environment. This will serve as a tool to convey the importance of vibrant public spaces, which is critical to the future development and growth of the city's urban core.

The next steps include seeking input from the public and producing a roadmap for the future that could be used as a guide to help frame future improvements, physical and programmatic.

This effort is taking place as San Diego and Tijuana prepare to serve as the World Design Capital in 2024. The Working Group's report could represent one of the legacy projects to come out of the year-long effort to elevate the binational region's design aspirations.



WDC2024 also coincides with the 50th anniversary of the "Temporary Paradise?" This city-commissioned document looked into the future and explored ways for San Diego County to grow in an environmentally responsible manner with improved connections across the Mexican border.

The Working Group's final report, including additional ideas from the public, will examine in detail what actions can be taken now and how others could be implemented in coming years.

**In short, this is a moment in time to implement high-level concepts that have been considered for more than a century and leave a legacy for future generations.**

– Michael Stegner, chair; René A. Smith, secretary; Roger Showley, editor

## APPENDIX: 10 POSSIBLE INITIATIVES SO FAR

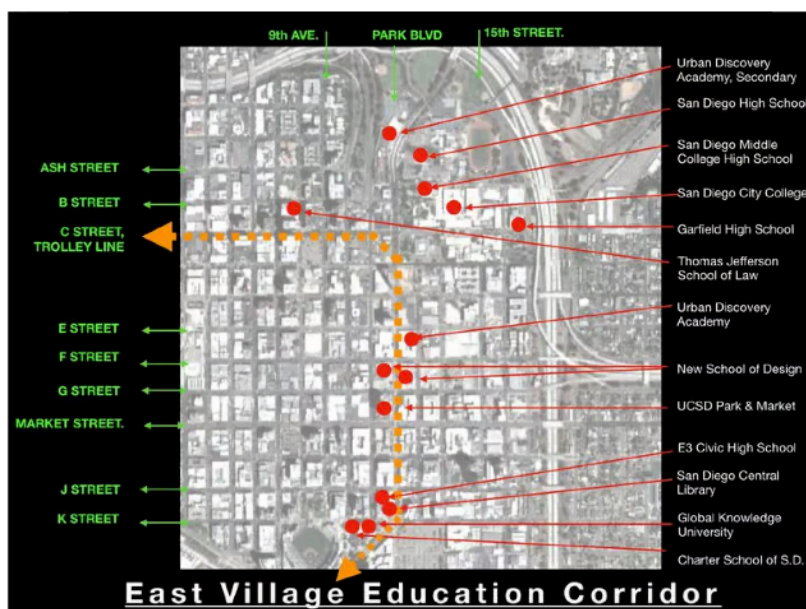
- EDUCATIONAL ARMATURE
- SAN DIEGO HIGH SCHOOL
- RUSS GREEN
- FREEWAY BRIDGES
- CITY COLLEGE
- EDUCATIONAL ARMATURE
- IDEA+ DISTRICT
- BAY TO PARK PASEO
- JOHN NOLEN PARKWAY/PASEO
- SAN DIEGO COMMONS

### • EDUCATIONAL ARMATURE

Park Boulevard is not only a major bay-park link, but also an educational corridor or "armature" for more than a dozen public and private institutions, from the preschool to post-graduate level.

They start at Roosevelt Middle School at Park and Upas Street in the north and terminate at a Charter School of San Diego campus at 1095 K St.

Besides traditional schools, the corridor passes by the cultural institutions in Balboa Park, the UCSD Park & Market building where meetings and events bring together business and education leaders, and the Central Library with its vast research resources and programs for children, teenagers, people looking for work and the homeless trying to get back on their feet.



Also located along this corridor are the main cultural institutions within Balboa Park, many of which operate educational programs for visiting students and classes. They all rely on volunteers to greet and guide visitors. Then there are hundreds of businesses within walking distance of Park Boulevard where fulltime and parttime students, as well as faculty and staff, can shop, work and volunteer.

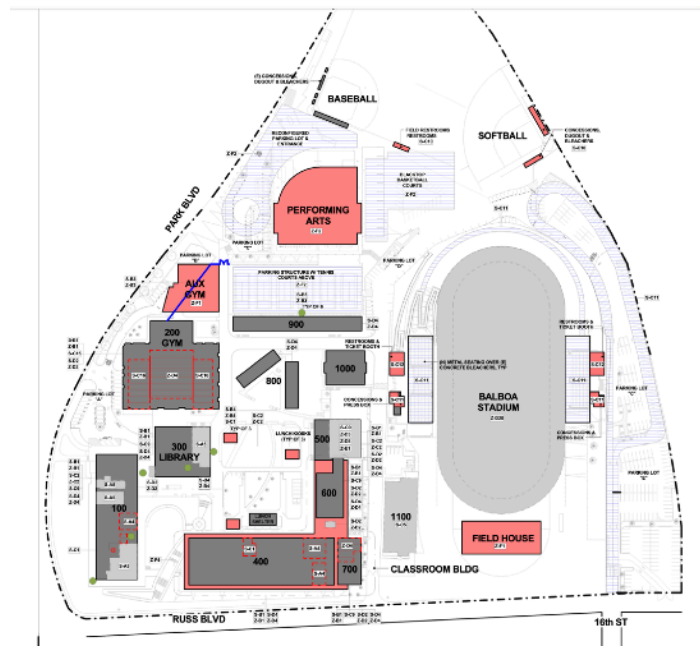
The proximity of so many players presents an endless opportunity for collaboration, employment, mentorship, internship, volunteerism and startups. As Forever Balboa Park President and CEO Elizabeth Brennan told the *San Diego Sun* online newspaper, "I find it unique. I don't see a lot of other cities touting an educational corridor." All it takes is to match people, young and old, to endless possibilities within the park and the greater downtown area.

### - San Diego High School

Opened as Russ School in 1882, San Diego High School was rebuilt in 1908 and 1973. Under the new 99-year lease, work has begun remodeling Building 100, the administration center. Other near-term improvements will improve existing open spaces and experience for students, faculty, staff and visitors.

Future phases contemplate a new theater, gymnasium, aquatic center and Balboa Stadium field house, along with upgrades to existing buildings, parking and circulation.

School plans also anticipate additional landscaping along Park Boulevard that could be complemented by right-of-way improvements, such as widened sidewalks and additional plantings and signage.



### - Russ Green

One of the first concrete projects explored by the Working Group could be an enhanced landscaping treatment of Russ Boulevard, located between the high school and college. This upgrade would create a significantly safer student-pedestrian connection between institutions and activate an otherwise dead zone.



Meanwhile, the school district is considering alternate access to its campus for bus, car and service vehicles to reduce congestion and conflicts with pedestrians and cyclists along Park Boulevard.

### - Freeway Bridges

Beyond the high school's athletic fields is the Park Boulevard bridge over the freeway. The unadorned bridge offers a less-than compelling experience for motorists, pedestrians and cyclists as they near the park's Central Mesa cultural center and recreational sites. An early and easy improvement would place boxed trees on the bridge and later, wider, landscaped sidewalks adorned with public art.



An additional, existing freeway crossover is the pedestrian bridge from Balboa Stadium to Inspiration Point. The link is vital for students and others to access parking in the park as well as attractions there. Walking over the bridge is akin to transiting a cage, given the fencing enclosure. It could be beautified in the short term and replaced with something more beautiful and compelling in the long term as way to inspire visitors as they near the park.

### - City College

The college continues to expand beyond its historic footprint into East Village with new buildings and programs.

The possibility exists for college-related housing to be built on and near college properties, just as the privately developed IDEA1 mixed-use apartment and commercial building at Park and F Street was facilitated by a long-term lease with the college district.



Another opportunity is to open up the college parking garage to public use on weekends and holidays for visitors going to major events in the Balboa Park — thus reducing the need for additional parking lots on parkland.

The college also is considering beautifying the 14<sup>th</sup> Street Promenade, just as it has successfully landscaped its frontage on Park Boulevard.



A replacement for Saville Theater is included in the college master plan. Together with the proposed performing arts center at SDHS, these two venues would add to existing performance and meeting spaces in the park and downtown. They would be all the more needed if the proposed redevelopment of the city's Community Concourse results in the demolition of the Civic Theater.



- **IDEA+ DISTRICT**

A decade ago the concept of the IDEA District was unveiled to attract companies and institutions engaged in innovation, design, education and the arts to the upper East Village area. Makers Quarter also was launched as a thematic approach to bring new job opportunities in the northern edge of the district. Adding a plus sign to IDEA name denotes that this part of San Diego includes Balboa Park and the business and residential communities on the district's borders.



IDEA1 mixed-use building at Park and F.

Balboa Park faces ever-growing pressures to accommodate more visitors and activities. Since its boundaries aren't likely to change, other means can be taken to "grow" the park and reach out to communities, such as Golden Hill, Sherman Heights, Barrio Logan and Southeastern San Diego, that have not been as engaged with the park and the central business district as they could be. And so the "+" sign signals that they are part of this larger, unified area of the city

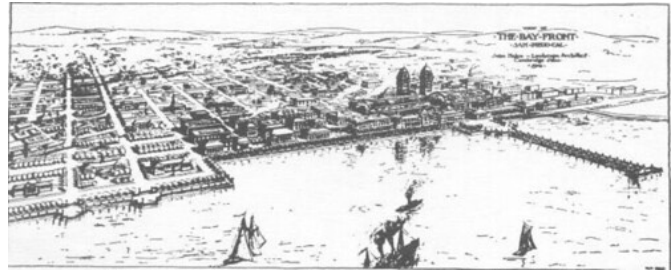


Park-like landscaping and urban design improvements could accentuate these connections and signal to visitors that they are entering a special place, an effort already demonstrated in the first phase of 14th Street Promenade. To maintain and manage this thematic enhancement, the Downtown San Diego Partnership has pointed to its Clean & Safe program operated within its business improvement district as a model and one that could be expanded into the park and the rest of IDEA+.

- **NOLEN PASEO**

In his 1908 city plan, John Nolen spoke about a "paseo" or promenade that could link San Diego's "two great central recreational features," Balboa Park and San Diego Bay, "bringing them into direct and pleasant relation."

Nolen located his paseo between Date and Fir streets and from Fifth Avenue to the waterfront. Nolen developed the paseo concept further in his followup 1926 plan and, in the 1940s, city Planning Director Glenn Rick proposed "Cedar Street Mall." It would have located public buildings flanking a landscaped green space east of the 1938 Civic Center (today's County Administration Center) on Pacific Highway.

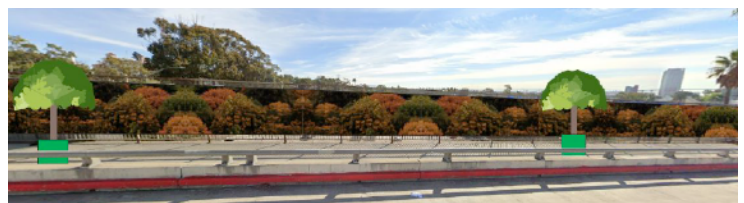


Neither the paseo nor the mall ever came about, but it has never been forgotten. The 1990s ballpark district included the beautification of Park Boulevard (renamed from 12th Avenue), a diagonal realignment at K Street to the rail crossing and a new pedestrian bridge over Harbor Drive.

The county's Waterfront Park, opened in 2016, demonstrates how asphalt parking lots at the county headquarters could be replaced with play space on top of an underground garage.

### - Bay to Park Paseo

Urban Interventions, a local nonprofit that specializes in "tactical urbanism," and co-producer E. Chloe Lauer have gathered 14 design teams and organizations to install temporary art pieces, from the Hilton Bayfront Hotel to the Park Boulevard freeway bridge. The concept is to quickly and at low cost install improvements that spark imagination and lead to permanent improvements. If successful, the nonprofit says, this "Bay to Park Paseo" could inaugurate a series of biannual installations all over the region. Planners and artists in Tijuana are already inspired by this idea and are considering a paseo there.



The nonprofit is working on the first such installation, a temporary vinyl

screen on the Park Boulevard bridge over I-5 with images of parklike greenery – something that could become permanent with the widening of the sidewalk and installation of boxed trees.

### - John Nolen Parkway

Another low-cost but meaningful change would be the simple addition of an honorary name to Park Boulevard – "John Nolen Parkway" or "paseo." The city considered a version of this idea in 1937,



when Nolen died. The Planning Commission voted to name Harbor Drive after this national pioneer of city planning in the early years of the 20th century all over America. No further action was taken.



The idea, if taken to its logical conclusion, could grow into a scenic parkway that continues along Harbor Drive to Laurel Street and eastward to the western entrance to the park and linking to Park Boulevard again at El Prado.

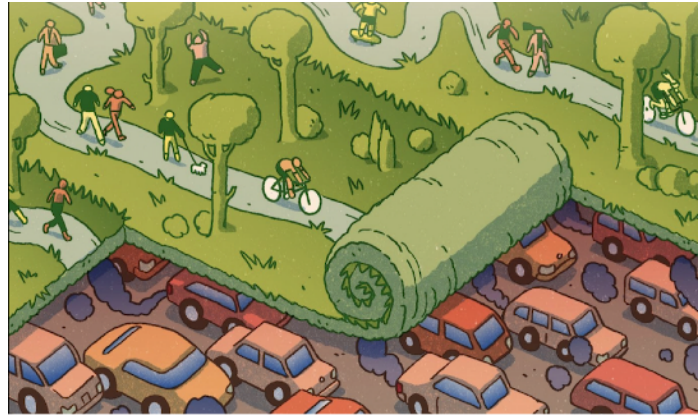
### • SAN DIEGO COMMONS

The construction of Interstate 5 in the 1950s and '60s split numerous neighborhoods, as well as Balboa Park, in the pursuit of rapid transportation by car, transit and truck.

Some cities healed this "gash" in their communities by constructing lids over the freeways and creating new parkland and building sites, while reducing pollution to the adjacent properties and increasing their value to residents and investors. San Diego installed two such lids when Interstate 15 was extended south of I-8 in the 1990s.



The San Diego Commons nonprofit proposes to install lids over I-5 at Sixth Avenue, Park Boulevard, G Street/SR94 and Island Avenue. The Biden administration has adopted this concept in its "connecting communities" program and California lawmakers aim to encourage Caltrans and localities to do the same.



For Balboa Park, two of these lids would reconnect the park back to downtown, as called for in the Downtown Community Plan. The growing downtown residential population, lacking sufficient park space, could then access the park more directly on foot or bike into the park.

