

Natividad Creek Park Revitalization Recommendations

A report from the November 15, 2015
workshop on revitalizing Natividad Creek Park



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Local Government Commission
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Views and opinions presented in this report do not necessarily represent the views or opinions of The California Endowment or the City of Salinas.

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Salinas Mayor Joe Gunter and local leaders listen to Dan Veyna talk about best practices for park revitalization.

Natividad Creek Park Revitalization Recommendations

On November 15, 2015, the Local Government Commission (LGC) partnered with the City of Salinas Public Works Department and the East Salinas Building Healthy Communities site to hold an interactive community workshop at Natividad Creek Park and Virginia Rocca Barton School. The goal of the workshop was to develop a community vision for how the park could be improved, and to identify next steps and priorities that the community can focus on for the future. The LGC facilitated a half day of discussion, and the landscape architecture firm Sierra Designs, Inc. provided design expertise. Funding from The California Endowment made the event possible. This report documents the event activities and shares the conceptual vision developed at the workshop.

The Workshop

Outreach for the workshop was conducted by local leaders from the Building Healthy Communities site and City staff who distributed flyers in English and Spanish at neighborhood events and electronically for several weeks leading up to the event. Unfortunately, heavy rain and cold weather on the morning of the event, in all likelihood, deterred some participants. However, in spite of the stormy weather, the workshop drew 18 diverse participants (see attendance list in Appendix B), which included local residents, as well as City of Salinas staff.

Workshop participants gathered under the gazebo at Natividad Creek Park for a welcome and some words of encouragement from City of Salinas Mayor Joe Gunter, who talked about the importance of working together as a community. This was followed by a presentation by Dan Veyna, from Sierra Designs, Inc. on park revitalization. Dan shared ideas on storyboards of potential improvements,

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including examples of playing fields, outdoor spaces, lighting and structures from other similar parks.

Participants then spent over an hour walking through the park and sharing their ideas with facilitators. They were asked to talk about what was and was not working and to share observations, concerns and ideas.

The participants then moved to Virginia Rocca Barton Elementary School to work in small groups at 4 tables to share ideas and record them on large maps of the park. Each table then presented their ideas for improvements to the larger group. Facilitators compiled the ideas in a list and participants were then given 6 sticky dots to vote for their priority issues. Common themes included:

- Bathrooms needed at skate park and by tennis courts
- A community garden in the park (site identified by community members)
- Additional lighting for security
- Add a soccer field in the big grassy area along with a running track around the field

The complete results of the dot voting are shown on the next page.

In the months that followed, the consultant team worked to translate the community's maps and priorities into a draft plan that can be used by the community for future planning efforts.



Prioritized improvements from workshop participant-drawn maps

All of the elements below were reported as changes that 15 participating workshop attendees would like to see. Following is the participant's prioritized list followed by the number of votes each item received.

Add Community Garden; add staircase going down hill	13
Bathrooms at skatepark and by tennis courts	9
Fix up Amphitheatre, cut down trees hiding pillars and add art	8
More lighting for security and seating	6
Enlarge skate park	6
Add running track around soccer field (add soccer field in big grassy area)	6
Add more walking trails on the east side of the park	5
Bridge between skate park and the rest of the park	4
Bathrooms, lighting, seating at skate park	4
"Right-size Freedom Parkway" (2 lanes - one going each direction) and improve crosswalks	4
Soccer on tennis court	3
Meditation garden at end of path/road or on the east side of the park (include native plants, sculpture garden, and a yoga space)	3
Change unused Volleyball court to gathering area	2
Fence the planned dog park and add artwork on the fence	2
Recreational center with pool	2
Add trash cans and lighting on creek trail	1
Signage/wayfinding, including directional sign for bike trails	1
Intersection at parking lot near tennis courts	1
Discontinue children's garden and turn into a native garden/maze, thin plants for visibility	1
Formalize trails	1
More trees	1

Park Improvements

A conceptual illustration of how the community's comments and recommendations were incorporated by the landscape architect into a long term vision is shown on page 10. The proposed short-and-long term improvements follow.

Short-term Park Improvements

The park has tremendous opportunities for additional visual, educational and interactive art. Currently the most recognizable art piece is the Puma sculpture. The sculpture is in disrepair, but it is an excellent example of the potential for additional artwork within the park. Incorporating professionally designed murals throughout the park — particularly around the skateboard park, amphitheater, and bathrooms — will encourage more residents to visit.

Interpretive and wayfinding signage would help direct and orient visitors to the park. Inclusion of these signs should be located in the areas listed below, while other locations should be considered.

- kiosks at entryways to the park,
- parking lots,
- major activity areas (e.g. Children's Discovery Garden),
- pedestrian trails,
- hydrology of Natividad Creek,
- restrooms,
- identification of native trees and plants, and
- Freedom Parkway Underpass.

Improvements to lighting around the park could help encourage more evening use and would help promote a safer environment for visitors. The repair of existing lighting is necessary to achieve this goal, along with adding safety call stations.





A community garden has already been discussed and a draft community-driven plan prepared. The plan proposes that a community garden be located in the flat area west of the horseshoe pits. In the short-term, this plan recommends moving forward with setting up the community garden in the proposed area with the understanding that parking may become a barrier for some park visitors who would like to use the community garden more frequently. (See long-term park improvements for an alternative recommendation.)

A meditation garden/space was requested by several community members. The location proposed in the design is on the eastern end of the park, which currently consumes less activity and distractions. It is a long distance from the roads and is tucked in at the end of the proposed meadow area.



A portion of the available large open space (near the existing gazebo) could be converted into a youth soccer/football field for practice and adult sporting events. Distinguishable markings and goals would need to be included and properly maintained.

Exercise stations should be located around the proposed new soccer/football field. This would allow for a focused exercise loop with relatively little conflict with other park user groups.



Additional play features are proposed that can act as informal play elements. These can easily be incorporated adjacent to park paths, and can be as simple as boulders placed next to the paths and interactive art pieces and play/sound making pieces. This will allow a shorter walk and more interesting stroll for families and parents with young children. These incentives will encourage longer walks and exploration of the park, as well as greater positive user groups with eyes on the park.

There is a need for additional benches located throughout the park, in particular, near facilities and heavy traffic areas.

Long-Term Park Improvements

There is community support for a Dog Park at Natividad Creek Park. During the workshop, some participants proposed locating it immediately south of the dirt parking lot. However this plan recommends a different location on the eastern section of the park, across Freedom Parkway, where more parking is available and where there would be less of a noise and odor impact on nearby residents. The proposed dog park would be approximately one acre and provide both small and large dog compounds, varied topography, pavilions for pet owners and multiple exit/entry gates. Another advantage to this location are rear exit/entries that have a very close proximity to the trail along the creek, which will allow pet owners to walk and jog their pets with much less interruption by other active park users.

Dog Park

Placing the dog park in the eastern section of the park would also make the space south of the dirt parking lot available for an active sports field while the area to the north of the lot could be used for a Learning Center/Community building.

Community Garden

As noted above, a site was identified for a community garden in the park through previous planning work by a group of community members. Along with the community garden there was interest in including fruit bearing trees and shrubs. The community's proposed plan has identified utilizing the meadow area west of the horseshoe pits (See short-term park improvements). This area is large and flat enough to accommodate this use and should work well in the short term. However, in the longer term this location is a long way from parking and would require a long trek to and from vehicles. This trek may discourage some potential users (e.g. senior citizens and those with disabilities) from using this amenity resulting in minimal use by all interested residents. As a potential alternative, this plan suggests a more

central and easily accessible location for users of all ages and abilities.

The ideal scenario would be to repurpose the space currently occupied by the City maintenance yard into a community garden and relocating the maintenance yard to a more appropriate industrial site. This location has a flat surface as well as the potential for some terraced garden beds against the existing slope. Contained gardens of various sizes could be constructed either above grade, or the soil could be over-excavated, amended or replaced to provide on-grade planting beds. Additionally this location would have universal access via two sloping walkways and would be conveniently located near parking (immediately abutting the proposed garden) making it easier to unload tools and materials, along with loading up produce. The garden would have storage for some tools and a composting facility. Also, convenient access would encourage additional user groups to use the garden at different times of the day and throughout the week. Ultimately, the garden would provide a more interesting and visually appealing entry to the park, especially if the outward facing beds were dedicated to cut flowers, fruit producing vines and perennial beds.

Learning Center/Community Center

The previous Park Master Plan indicated a future community building, however, in lieu of a full scale community building, this plan is recommending a combination Learning Center/Community building just to the north of the dirt parking lot. The Learning Center would contain computer labs and community meeting rooms and could provide homework assistance as well as reading and research rooms for adults and seniors. The building is proposed to be a two to three story building and approximately 14,000 to 21,000 square feet. The building could take advantage of the sloping site with the entry at grade level with the parking lot along with a story below and a story above. The rooms would have glass curtain walls facing north for natural light and all floors would have panoramic views over the park to the distant

hillsides. The roof could be tilted to the south and covered with solar panels to either offset or totally supply clean energy to the building.

Bridges across Creek

Currently there are two bridges that go across Natividad Creek connecting the north and south sides. However, there are multiple casual crossings, including where users cross the creek during low water times utilizing boards and logs. There is clearly the need to have more ways for users to access facilities and activities on both sides of the creek. Therefore, two additional bridges should be added on the west side of the park and one new bridge on the east side. Not all bridges need to be accessible by maintenance vehicles.

Restrooms

Participants emphasized the need for additional restrooms throughout the park. The most heavily used facilities in the park are on the north side — the skateboard park, tennis, volleyball and basketball courts. These facilities, as well as the furthest picnic areas, are a long way from the current single restroom. The plan recommends adding a new restroom between the skateboard park and the basketball courts. This location would not only serve the facilities on the north side of the creek but would also be closer for half of the picnic areas, new and existing. A second smaller restroom is proposed near the dog park to service users on the eastern section of the park.

Skateboard Park

This plan recommends improvements and expansion to the skateboard park. Since this area is arguably one of the most used facilities in the park, improvements to the existing infrastructure and long-term enhancements are needed to help promote safer riding conditions. These improvements would include

- Expanding the skateboard park to include an area directly east of the existing facility. The new facility is proposed to fit into the existing

topography with shallow waves and more ‘Street’ elements on fatter surfaces, such as solid benches or slabs, curbs, steps and rails. This would allow for less experienced skaters to perfect skills prior to advancing to the existing facility.

- Adding painted graphics and murals over the entire skate park in fluorescent, night glowing paint. The fluorescent paint would allow for skaters to see elements and edges at lower light levels to provide safer skating conditions and extend the time skaters can use the facility. Additionally, the paint would need to contain grit to provide a safe surface. Overall, the murals would add an additional excitement to the space, engage current and future users and help reduce/eliminate graffiti.

Trails

There are multiple casual trails crossing the park. From aerial views it is very apparent that many of the trails originate from multiple points around the perimeter of the park that directly coincide with points of concentration as pedestrians enter the park from surrounding neighborhoods. The recommendation is to acknowledge the major points of entry and formalize the development of safer paths into the park. This can be accomplished through one of the following options:

- Rough graded dirt trails, with positive footing, with retaining systems similar to those found in State, Forest and National Parks
- Graded decomposed granite-topped trails
- Paving the major trails and incorporating new paved trails throughout the park

Stairs appropriate to each type of construction listed above should be added where needed to safely enter/exit the park.

Right now the only pedestrian access within the park between the west and east sides is an undercrossing of Freedom Parkway. However,

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during rainy seasons the undercrossing becomes impassable due to flooding. The only other alternative for safe crossing is to exit the park and walk to the Freedom Parkway intersections on the northern (Constitution Blvd.) and southern (Nogal Drive) edges of the park. It is recommended that signs and mechanical barrier gates be placed at both ends of the trail to warn pedestrians when the underpass is closed. In addition, adequate lighting needs to be provided for the underpass so that park users feel safe during the later times of the day.

Parking

Parking accessed from Las Casitas Drive appears to be sufficient for users in the northwest section of the park. However, there is limited paved parking to adequately serve the major use area of the park on the southwest end of the park. A temporary dirt parking lot exists to the west of the paved parking lot. The recommendation is to formalize the temporary dirt parking lot and provide a second driveway onto Freedom Parkway. Since there is a median on Freedom Parkway, this driveway would only allow right-in and right-out turns. This additional parking lot would more than double the number of spaces currently available on the south side of this portion of the park. The parking lots would also service the proposed Learning Center, sports field, exercise stations and picnic areas/pavilions as well as serve as an overflow for the existing parking lot. In the short-term the unpaved parking lot should be treated for dust control.

Playgrounds and Other Outdoor Facilities

The improvement of the Children's Discovery Garden and Playground will provide a much needed play area and gathering location for children and their families. Currently all of the playground features are damaged or missing. Over time all equipment should be removed and replaced by new age-appropriate play equipment that is universally accessible with safe fall materials. Also, large shrubs that hide the trails and garden should be removed in order to provide greater visibility from the main park.

The large playground is in moderate disrepair, so recommendations are to remove heaving concrete curbs and walkways and replace them with relocated curbs and walks to accommodate existing tree roots. Similar to the Children's Discovery playground, aging equipment should be replaced with equipment that is universally accessible with safe fall materials.

There are several other facilities that appear to be used minimally or not at all by community members. The plan recommends that additional evaluation be done on the usage of the BMX track, tennis and basketball courts to see if it makes sense to convert them to other popular uses. For example, the tennis courts could be converted into two volleyball courts.

The existing amphitheater is in disrepair and not compliant with the Americans with Disabilities Act. The plan recommends that the seating and stage be repaired in order to attract more performers and audience members. The trees and shrubs need to be thinned to help create more visibility, along with reducing the height of the stage. Closing off access from the steep slope at the back of the amphitheater would help to centralize entry points. Lastly, there needs to be better access and seating for all park users.

Many park visitors noted that the picnic areas are usually high in demand and are reserved on a first come, first serve basis. The design proposes a second medium-sized picnic area adjacent to the existing large playground, along with multiple small picnic areas and two additional medium or large picnic pavilions. Most of these picnic areas are located near the sport fields. The six additional small picnic areas are proposed as follows:

- Two near the existing smaller picnic table areas near the horseshoe pits
- Two more near the large playground
- One between the existing BMX track and the Skateboard Park
- One at the existing basketball courts

Erosion

Portions of the park, especially on the southwestern section of the park behind the amphitheater, have significant erosion issues due to unchecked casual trails and bare soil. It is recommended that additional intermediate water collection swales be included to help reduce the speed and volume of water flowing over the face of steep slopes. These swales would be collected into open downward leading swales that could be hardened and faced with riprap to mimic streams. These swales would exit to the flatter areas into bioswales, which could collect rainwater and support seasonal wet low area riparian plantings. In addition, temporary erosion control measures such as straw wattles, silt fences and jute mesh could be installed to reduce water speed, the collection of rainwater and allow for the establishment of native plantings. Examples of native plantings are: wildflowers, forbs, low growing groundcovers and native trees. All of these strategies would help to stabilize the slope and greatly reduce or even eliminate erosion.

Street Improvements

During the walk, residents expressed concern about be able to safely cross Freedom Parkway from one side of the park to the other. As shown in the plan drawing, the City should consider adding one or two mid-block crossings with marked crosswalks and advance yield markings, and, if deemed necessary, vehicle warning systems and/or pedestrian activated warning systems (e.g. a rectangular rapid flash beacon) on Freedom Parkway. This would increase the visibility of crossing locations to motorists, driver awareness of the presence of pedestrians, and the likelihood to yield.

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See Page 12
for area detail



See Page 13
for area detail



Appendix A: Detailed Map





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Appendix B: Workshop Participants

- Lisa Wartinger
- Laura Lee Lienk
- Leo Saiuhez
- Juan-Carlos Gonzalez
- Deb Pareaslo
- Ben Pareaslo
- Efrain Jimenez
- Luis Rodriguez
- Angelica Hernandez
- Daniel Hernandez
- Leticia Hernandez
- Jeanette Pantoja
- Andrew Brown
- Nicolas Chavez
- Kristan Lundquist, city staff
- Dan Reynolds, city staff
- Oscar Muniz
- Joe Gunter, Mayor