

WATERWAYS AND WATERSHEDS

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Decades of effort in the South Bay culminated on a bright Saturday in September with the opening of the Guadalupe River Park and Gardens, San Jose's new 250-acre central park. Tens of thousands of people visited the three-mile-long expanse, listening to music (and a few speeches), eating, cycling and walking through America's largest new city park.

To create this park, two problems in San Jose were turned into opportunities. Both entailed public works projects – changing the flow of the Guadalupe River to prevent downtown flooding, and reducing noise and improving safety by clearing residents and houses from a neighborhood under the flight path of San Jose's Mineta Airport. If not for four milestones over the past 20 years, though, the outcome of this effort would have been far different, and much less satisfying. The San Jose community and its leaders were able to seize the moment at each of these crossroads and make decisions leading to the beautiful park that is now ours to enjoy.

The first milestone was back in the 1960s and 1970s, when local members of Congress and South Bay leaders pressured the Army Corps of Engineers to agree to an environmentally and aesthetically appealing design for the flood-control project. Otherwise, San Jose would have been left with the kind of ugly concrete channel you see in so many other cities, rather than an attractive riverscape as a centerpiece for the park.

The second watershed was choosing the design for the park. The Guadalupe Gardens task force, appointed by Mayor Tom McEnery in the 1980s to plan the largest segment of the park, resisted the proposals to turn the site into a golf course, a motocross raceway or fields for commercial flower growing. The task force chair, Councilwoman Shirley Lewis, led the group to a design serving all residents of the region rather than a narrow special-interest group. As a result, the park includes bike and walking paths, picnic areas, playing fields, a carousel, open areas for festivals and events, native grass plantings along the river, a children's playground, a riparian habitat, tennis courts, a heritage rose garden and demonstration orchard to educate about the Santa Clara Valley's agricultural past, a restored Italian neighborhood of historic Victorian homes, even a monument to the South Bay's famous ice skaters – including Peggy Fleming, Rudy Galindo and Brian Boitano. San Jose was able to seize the rare opportunity of such a large piece of land becoming available in the center of a major city, turning it to benefit the largest possible cross section of the community.

Watershed number three was to successfully move from a city-led effort to a more broad based community project. I had served on the planning task force, and in 1996, when the

A biker in Guadalupe River Park and Gardens.



Photo courtesy of Friends of GRPG

park design was completed, City Councilman David Pandori asked if I would chair the board of a new non-governmental corporation to move forward the work of developing the park. I consulted friends in the community, who advised that this volunteer effort would need city support to get off the ground. So I asked Mayor Susan Hammer for a staff position and offices within the city's redevelopment agency, and she agreed. Given this head start, the Guadalupe River Park and Garden Corporation was able to quickly begin raising funds, recruiting members, holding events in the park to expose the community to the project, starting environmental education programs with the schools, and both pushing and assisting the government agencies involved to complete the project. Today, just one fifth of the organization's budget comes from the city; individuals and companies provide the rest.

The fourth milestone was the most difficult. In 1998, environmental groups threatened a lawsuit to stop the flood control project, and thus development of the park. They argued that widening the river channel would make the water more shallow and remove trees overhanging the banks, raising the water temperature and harming the habitat for the small but hardy population of salmon and steelhead in the river. But instead of a pitched battle halting the project for years, a collaborative process was established between the Army Corps of Engineers, the Santa Clara Valley Water District and the environmental groups, and a creative deal was brokered. A giant underground box culvert was built to carry storm overflow from the river out to the Bay, so the river channel and its habitat could stay relatively unchanged, and the lawsuits were averted. Building the culvert delayed the project for a couple of years, but it was soon back on track.

At a time when political processes often work poorly or don't seem to serve the public interest, San Jose's river park development has been a very positive example. Good political leadership that encouraged strong citizen involvement, good stewardship of the available natural resources, leadership on the project that was passed from generation to generation over several decades, support from the corporate community and collaboration and consensus among a wide variety of groups and agencies were just a few of the strengths that made all the difference. Ω