



Item No:
Meeting Date: 3/24/15

To: Planning Commission

Date: March 18, 2015

Authorized By: Ronald Munekawa
Chief of Planning

By: Sheila Canzian, Director of Parks and Recreation

Subject: Central Park Master Plan Update Study Session

RECOMMENDATION

Review the three conceptual options for Central Park, receive public comments and provide comments relative to the connections and interface between Central Park and the surrounding context.

BACKGROUND

Central Park was once one of the large estates which dominated the countryside around San Mateo. It passed through several hands until Captain William Kohl's purchase of the land in the early 1880s. Kohl's son, Frederick, occupied the estate for a number of years, but after he left in 1914, the family leased the property to the City of San Mateo for use as an experimental Junior College. After Frederick Kohl died in 1921, the City purchased the land with municipal bonds for use as a public park.

With the 1922 purchase of the 16.3-acre Kohl estate, the city's first municipal park, Central Park, was created. Although San Mateo is home to over 30 parks, Central park is known as its signature park due to its history, location, size, and variety of amenities. It contains a number of historic elements from the original Kohl estate, including a wrought iron fence, a pumphouse and an imported cast-iron dog statue. The alignment of the main pathway system throughout most of the park remains nearly intact from its estate days. Its location, adjacent to both downtown San Mateo and residential neighborhoods, creates a unique setting that makes it both a functional and symbolic link, ideal for use as both a special event venue as well as a place for family outings.

Today, the main features of the 16 acre community park include:

1. A baseball field (Fitzgerald Field) with grand stands and night lighting.
2. A 122 space, partially subterranean parking garage (which serves both park and downtown users) and is accessed from 5th Avenue. Six lighted tennis courts sit on the roof of the garage.
3. A one acre, fully fenced Japanese Garden built in 1966 as a token of friendship between San Mateo and its sister city of Toyonaka, Japan.
4. A 5700 sq ft recreation center originally built in 1967 and modified in 1981. It is currently leased to a private organization and used primarily as a senior center.
5. A children's playground that was partially renovated in 1994 and a children's miniature train that is operated by a private lessee.
6. A 42 table picnic grove with barbecues.
7. The Kohl Pumphouse, greenhouses and surrounding gardens which is leased to and maintained by the San Mateo Arboretum Society.
8. A Rose Garden maintained by the San Mateo Arboretum Society.
9. Passive landscaping and turfing areas, including the Great Lawn in the center of the park, with meandering pathways along with many large specimen trees.
10. A variety of support buildings including two restrooms and an office/ceramic studio.

The current adopted park master plan dates from 1982 and is no longer adequate to address the park's current and future needs. In 2004, teams of design professionals, including architects, landscape architects and planners joined together in a one-day design charrette to redefine the Fifth Avenue frontage of Central Park. The goal of the charrette was to create design concepts to improve the visual image and sense of the park. As a result some landscape and traffic flow improvements were made to the 5th Avenue entrance; however, no further improvements have taken place.

Central Park holds a special value to the community due to its unique mix of amenities and historic features that supports multiple recreational activities, community gatherings and provides linkage to downtown in support of downtown vitality and economic development. As such, the Central Park Master Plan update includes significant community outreach and a community visioning process.

COMMUNITY OUTREACH

In March, 2014, the Parks and Recreation Department began phase one of the Central Park Master Plan update. Working with a consultant team from RRM Design Group, staff facilitated one large community workshop, four focus groups, several stakeholder meetings and discussions on San Mateo Town Hall to gather feedback on the vision for Central Park. The team focused participants on developing Objectives and Planning Concepts for the update of the Master Plan. Staff and the consultants summarized all the public feedback and presented some initial Objectives and Planning Concepts for review by the City Council and Park and Recreation Commission at a joint study session in June, 2014. The City Council and Park and Recreation

Commission provided comments and agreed to the following 7 Objectives and 11 Planning Concepts:

Park Planning Objectives:

- Maintain and enhance open space
- Preserve and enhance the historic character of the Park
- Create a more open “park-like” feel along 5th Avenue
- Strengthen the physical and visual connection between the park and downtown
- Provide a variety of passive and active uses
- Enhance bike and pedestrian access
- Provide uses and space for multiple generations and demographics

Park Planning Concepts:

- Incorporate art and educational exhibits into spaces and facilities
- Create plaza/gathering space near 5th Avenue
- Increase/add performance areas (e.g., movies, dance performances)
- Enlarge and relocate Central Recreation Center within the park
- Make 5th Ave./S. San Mateo Drive area pedestrian friendly/more open
- Improve gateways to park
- Move bleachers (rotate field)
- Relocate Tennis Courts away from 5th Avenue (potentially to alternative site)
- Increase parking (below grade)
- Distribute parking (less central)
- Expand park (land acquisition)

The Department began phase two, the initial design phase of the Master Plan update, with these Objectives and Planning Concepts as a guide. The RRM Design Group used these Objectives and Concepts to develop their three initial, conceptual designs. The team has been gathering feedback on these three initial designs since January, 2015. This feedback, including comments from the Planning Commission and the Public Works Commission will be presented to the City Council and Park and Recreation Commission at an upcoming joint study session.

ALTERNATIVE CONCEPT PLANS

General Description

The three conceptual plans prepared as alternative schemes, address and analyze the 7 Objectives and 11 Planning Concepts that were reviewed by the City Council and Park and Recreation Commission. The plans share common characteristics that are foundational to the Master Plan, as well as distinctions to be discussed by the community, commissions, and Council. There are several existing park features including the Japanese Garden, Kohl Pump House, Rose Garden and 9th Avenue entry corridor, Central Concert/Event, and the historic Kohl fence on El Camino that will remain in the park under all scenarios. Further, the majority of the urban forest within the park will be preserved (individual, or small groups of trees may be subject to impacts). The

balance of the park property is the subject of the Alternative Concept Plan design process. Park land expansion was studied, but determined to be infeasible for the scope of this master plan.

Common Features

The following features and concepts are common to each of the three alternatives.

- The number of parking spaces in the park will increase, and a new below-grade parking structure (multi-level) will be located near 5th Avenue
- Diagonal parking is shown on Laurel Avenue
- Plaza at the end of S. San Mateo Drive (size of space varies)
- A new children's play area will be constructed at the same location of the current playground
- A train-ride is included in all plans
- The tennis courts are relocated to other City parks
- New restrooms (2 or 3)
- Controlled vehicle access and concert lawn drop-off area (from Laurel)
- Undergrounding existing overhead utilities
- The streetscape on 5th Avenue is proposed to be enhance with wider sidewalk and new trees
- Concept allows for continued use of temporary stage or permanent stage at event lawn
- Proposed public art and historical interpretation features and exhibits

Alternative Concept Plans

The following descriptions focus on the unique characteristics and features of the three alternative plans.

Option #1- Community Center focus

This plan features a new, larger community recreation center located at the edge of the park on 5th Ave. At a schematic level, the new 2-story building is shown at approximately 20,000 square feet to accommodate a range of uses and facilities. The space currently occupied by the Recreation Center would be converted to a new group picnic area and shade structures and community space that is closer to the parking structure. The current picnic ground site would accommodate much needed ADA parking for the playground area, and a vehicle access route to the back of the Kohl Pump House, removing the need for cars and service vehicles to access the park through the 5th Avenue entry, thereby reducing conflicts with pedestrians. The building containing the pottery studio, landscape architect's office and restrooms would be removed to make way for the new recreation center building.

Additional features, details and elements in this plan include:

- A fenced dog park on Laurel Ave
- Remove outfield fence- opening outfield grass to multi-use and easier community access
- Reduced and remodeled ball field bleachers(repurpose space for new uses)
- New park gateway signage
- New path (inside Kohl fence) starts at El Camino & 5th
- Picnic area added between concert lawn and play area

Option #2 – Enhanced Open Space

This plan focuses on several objectives including maintaining and enhancing open space, creating a more open, park-like feel along 5th Avenue, and strengthening the connection between the park and downtown. A large plaza is featured at the terminus of S. San Mateo Drive, at ground-level, above a new parking structure. The pottery studio building is proposed to be remodeled for community arts space. The old restroom is removed and replaced. The ball field bleachers are removed to open the view into the park, and replaced with smaller scale bleachers. The picnic area remains in the current location. This plan also addresses the concept of increasing the space available for community gathering and performance by expanding the event lawn into the area currently occupied by the Recreation Center. Those programs and facilities contained in the current Recreation Center are proposed to be relocated.

Additional features, details and elements in this plan include:

- Dog park remains in ball field
- Expanded train ride
- Picnic area added to playground zone
- Plaza accommodates tables and benches for everyday use as well as events

Option #3- Community Gathering

This plan is referred to as the Community Gathering option because it focuses on the creation of spaces that are intended to be flexible for many activities and events, to be enjoyed every day by the broader community. Existing facilities such as the Recreation Center, tennis courts, and the ball field are relocated to other City parks to facilitate the creation of a large civic plaza, Central picnic/event pavilion, and Community green or Great Lawn. These areas include open-use areas, tables, benches, shade structures and new paths to emphasize increased space for all types of groups and demographics, as well as year –round and non-programmed informal and pedestrian access. In this plan, the park edge along 5th Avenue is completely open and transparent, creating a stronger visual and physical connection to the downtown.

Additional features, details and elements in this plan include:

- Fenced dog park on Laurel Ave
- Community use room/building at edge of plaza
- New gateway plaza entry at 5th and El Camino
- ADA parking for the playground area, and a vehicle access route to the back of the Kohl Pump House
- New Picnic areas around Great Lawn
- Picnic area added to playground zone
- Plaza accommodates tables, benches and arbor for everyday use as well as events
- Expanded train ride

COMMISSION REVIEW AND INPUT

Staff and the design team will be at the Planning Commission study session meeting to present the design options to the Commission and to answer questions. The review of the Central Park Master Plan by the Planning Commission is expected to be focused on the project relative to the

connections and interfaces between Central Park and the surrounding context, as well as, any implementation items which may come before the Planning Commission at a future date such as the location of a new parking structure in relationship to pedestrian and vehicular connections to the park. Planning Commission comments will be forwarded for consideration by the Park and Recreation Commission and City Council at a future joint study session (see Next Steps section below).

The final preferred master plan will not likely be chosen from any of these three initial conceptual drawings; but rather include desirable features from each of these plans, as well as, reflect the continued public input.

At this time, staff is seeking Planning Commission input on the following questions:

Physical and Visual Connections to/from Central Park. The changes in Central Park may alter physical and visual connections to/from the Park including the following connection points. Consider connections from:

- San Mateo Drive,
- 5th Avenue (at Laurel Ave),
- 6th Avenue (at Laurel Ave),
- Along El Camino Real (northbound and southbound), and
- At the 5th Avenue and El Camino Real (gateway to Downtown).

Given the three Options, what are the Planning Commission's thoughts on the physical and visual connections to and from the Park?

Parking. The current partially subterranean garage serves both park visitors as well as downtown visitors. In 2014, the City Council reviewed and approved a Downtown Parking Management Plan that includes a recommendation to identify location(s) for additional parking in the downtown area. The update of the Central Park Master Plan presents an opportunity to consider providing replacement parking as well as parking in addition to the current inventory.

Given the three Options, what are the Planning Commission's thoughts on the proposed parking opportunities?

Design of New Buildings. Currently, several buildings are located within the park grounds including the partially subterranean garage, recreation center, office of the landscape architect, pottery studio, restrooms and grandstands. For planning purposes, the removal of these buildings expands the available options for future buildings. It must be noted that buildings in Central Park are limited by the General Plan to a maximum height of 32 feet. The location of future buildings should be considered with respect to visibility from Downtown, gateway intersection, and other view corridors such as 5th Avenue or 6th Avenue.

Given the three Options, what are the Planning Commission's thoughts on design considerations of the proposed buildings in relationship to pedestrian connections to Downtown and the neighboring context? Additionally, should the design of the building(s) consider how and whether the building(s) can serve as a landmark?

ENVIRONMENTAL DETERMINATION

In accordance with CEQA Guidelines section 15061(b) (3), this review and comment is not a project subject to CEQA in that it can be seen with certainty that the Planning Commission is providing comments only. An environmental document, consistent with the California Environmental Quality Act, shall be prepared and made available for public review at a future date as part of the Central Park Master Plan update process.

NOTICE PROVIDED AND PUBLIC COMMENTS

Notices were published in the Examiner newspaper 10 days before the meeting and were sent to the following parties:

- Property owners, residential tenants and business tenants within 1,000 feet of the project site;
- The City's "900 List" which contains nearly 100 Homeowner Associations, Neighborhood Associations, local utilities, media, and other organizations interested in citywide planning projects.
- The Parks and Recreation Department email and mailing list for community members interested in the Central Park Master Plan updates.
- An email message on San Mateo Town Hall and a posting on the Central Park Master Plan Facebook page.

Public comments received prior to printing of this staff report are included in Attachment 2. Comments received following printing will be provided to the Commission on the evening of the study session at their desk.

NEXT STEPS

Following this meeting, the Alternative Concept Plans will be presented to the Public Works Commission at a study session on Wednesday, April 8, 2015 at 7:30 pm. Comments from the Planning Commission and Public Works Commission will be forwarded to the City Council and Park and Recreation Commission for their consideration at a future, as yet unscheduled, study session on the three Alternative Concept Plans.

ATTACHMENTS

- Attachment 1: Alternative Concept Plans
- Attachment 2: Public Comments

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Interested Parties (if email address was provided)