

Griffith Park Master Plan – Working Group

Summary of Seventh Meeting held January 9, 2006

The Griffith Park Master Plan Working Group convened their seventh meeting on Monday, January 9, 2006, at 6:30 p.m. at the Griffith Park Ranger Station Auditorium.

Present: Working Group - Bernadette Soter, Clare Dareden, Craig Kessler, George Grace, Gerry Hans, Jeff Gardner, Jose Sigala, Louis Alvarado, Lynn Brown, Richard Bogy, Susan Swan, and Valerie Vanaman.
Rory Fitzpatrick, Council District 4
Steve Davis, Bureau of Engineering
Mark Mariscal, Recreation and Parks
Vicki Israel, Recreation and Parks

Facilitator: Kevin Regan, Assistant General Manager,
Department of Recreation and Parks

Mr. Regan opened the meeting and called the role of Working Group members. He then gave a verbal description of how the Working Group operates and summarized how the meetings are conducted. He explained that this meeting would include a presentation by Melendrez, the consultants who prepared the draft Master Plan for Griffith Park. Mr. Regan also informed the audience that the Working Group meetings are not subject to the Brown Act, but that there would be an opportunity for public comments toward the end of the agenda.

Councilmember Tom LaBonge was introduced and gave opening remarks. He said the work completed by the Melendrez Group is in draft form and that it is the Working Group's job to edit the draft and to garner community input with this process. Mr. LaBonge asked the group to line through items in the draft which they opposed and add ideas to make the draft plan better. He hoped that this could be completed by the spring so that a revised master plan can be presented to the community, and then to the Recreation and Parks Commission.

Recreation and Parks General Manager, Jon Mukri, spoke next, and thanked the community and Working Group for their attendance at the meeting. He stated that the master plan development for Griffith Park predated his appointment as General Manager of the Department of Recreation and Parks. However, he believes in master plans as a guiding principle. Mr. Mukri assured everyone that there are no plans for the commercialization of Griffith Park. He also shared that upon his appointment to the Department, he had requested that several audits of the Department be conducted. Those audits have been completed and are currently being made public.

Mr. Regan then introduced Melendrez and they began their presentation.

Ms. Melanie Smith of Melendrez, stated that they were not going to make a full presentation of the draft Master Plan, but that they would address some of the major concerns of the Working Group. She provided some background on Melendrez and stated that their work on the master plan project was officially completed in the fall of 2004. Since then, they have made presentations (including this one) that have been at their own expense and on their own time.

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She stated that the Melendrez Group took on this assignment due to the passion they share with everyone present for preserving Griffith Park.

The master plan project for Griffith Park was based on a set of goals provided by Recreation and Parks in an RFP (Request For Proposal). The scope of work was: defining the current and future public use of Griffith Park; looking at protecting and sustaining natural resources; enhancing public enjoyment and safety in Griffith Park; looking at cohesion among facilities and features in the park as well as looking at the park's image; and examining funding and external support, maintenance and management of the park.

Ms. Smith explained that master planning is a creative process based on a vision. Thus, a number of ideas are expressed in the draft plan as “sidebars” which represent ideas, suggestions, and/or concepts. She is aware that their presence has sparked a lot of debate and she stated that the removal of these ideas would not affect the integrity of the plan.

An overview of the different zones was then presented as well as descriptions of each zone. The four zones in the draft plan are: the California Heritage Zone, which consists of the natural elements; the Family Adventure and Education Zone, which consist of areas such as the zoo, Autry Museum, Travel Town and train/pony rides; the Old Los Angeles Zone, which consists of historic elements; and the Recreation Zone, which consist of recreation elements such as the golf courses, tennis courts and playing fields. Because Griffith Park is very large, complex and difficult to map, the concept of park zones was created to provide cohesion with other aspects of the Master Plan.

The Living Laboratory for Learning concept was explained by Ms. Smith and she shared that every element in Griffith Park can provide teaching and learning opportunities which would then engage visitors to become stewards of the park and provide for long term sustainability based on such stewardship.

A presentation was then made of the “built” areas of Griffith Park by Ms. Deborah Murphy. She stated that part of their work included mapping the 4,100 acres of Griffith Park so that visitors could find their way around the park. She explained that the interior roads have been closed to the public since 1979 and there were no proposals to re-open them. Major entry points into the park, however, would be designated with distinctive markers to provide visitors with maps and information. She explained that the re-design of Crystal Springs Drive and the change to the roadway dimensions was made to accommodate pedestrians, equestrian and bicyclists. The road itself would remain as a single lane for vehicles.

Ms. Murphy described proposed areas for additional development of open space for park land, picnic areas and active/passive recreational activities. She stated that it was both prudent and sustainable to remove acres of existing asphalt parking lots and replace them with smaller, multi-level structures.

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Ms. Murphy explained that the original draft included recommendations for trams to provide access to facilities at the top of Toyon Canyon and to the Observatory. Those recommendations were removed from the plan but could not be removed in time from the drawings prior to being printed.

Ms. Murphy also explained the terminology “eco-hotel” and stated that it did not mean a hotel complex would be developed in Griffith Park. She emphasized that there is no commercialization proposed for the park. Ms. Murphy also described and explained the proposal for the “pleasure pier” overlooking the Los Angeles River. She stated this was an overlook for visitors to enjoy the view the river and not a commercial opportunity.

The necessity for a single manager to oversee all of the activities and entities in Griffith Park was explained. Ms. Murphy also stated that all of these proposals would require some type of funding, and to request such funding a master plan would be required. There needs to be adequate financial resources to sustain the Park.

This concluded the presentation by the Melendrez Group.

A question and answer period between the Melendrez Group and the Working Group then followed. Here is a brief synopsis.

Question: It is recommended that current open space remain open space except for the south end of Travel Town, why?

Answer: There is no proposal for development, but if something new is needed, the area mentioned is not in a natural condition and could be used as the site.

Question: Explain the contradiction of the recommendation that Toyon Canyon be restored as well as the building of sports fields.

Answer: The restoration concerns the slope at Toyon and the sports fields could be located on a small area at the top of Toyon.

Question: What were the determining factors in designating areas of the Park as wilderness vs. natural environment?

Answer: A consulting biologist examined the existing environment and if the area was degraded or there were too many non-native plants, then the area could revert back to its native habitat as the current vegetation died off.

Question: Was a needs assessment done for this master plan?

Answer: The group was not hired to conduct a needs assessment but they did conduct three community workshops to garner input. An outline of tasks was provided by the Department of Recreation and Parks and it was completed. The survey by Cal State University Northridge was not completed in time to be included in the Master Plan.

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Question: How does the recommendation for parking structures relate to other entities in the Park? To what degree were other master plans incorporated into this one?

Answer: Any recommendation for a parking structure was to replace existing open lots. No other plans were incorporated

A discussion of parking structures taking up open vertical space and the inherent problems of noise, light and crime then took place. It was also stated that paying to park in Griffith Park is against park use.

Answer: The parking structure could be limited to two levels and it would not be built where there is current open space. Noise and crime issues currently exist and lighting problems can be mitigated by design. Other funding methods can resolved the parking issue.

It was stated that the pictures depicting the pleasure pier show too much commercialization, drawing the inference that economic development is being planned.

Answer: Different conclusions can be drawn, thus the reason for the open process. The drawings can be revised. The pier viewing platform idea was never intended to be a commercial venture.

A comment was made re: the need to preserve green space and not overdevelop Griffith Park. It was stated that if the Department is planning to spend millions of dollars in Griffith Park for improvements, it would be better if the Department would redirect those funds to develop parks in other areas of the City.

Question: Will the Melendrez Group finalize the Master Plan Draft?

Answer: Currently, there are no plans for that. Melendrez does currently have an “on call” service contract with the City. However, Melendrez has not been retained for this purpose at this time.

Question: What methodology would have been used for a needs assessment?

Answer: The needs assessment would have been based on community needs and would have included the neighborhoods surrounding Griffith Park as well as other neighborhoods throughout the area.

Question: The Master Plan Draft lists organizations under the heading “prepared with the assistance of” but the resources were not utilized. Why?

Answer: The contract limited the Melendrez Group to three public workshops and the entities listed participated in those workshops.

A recommendation was made to halt the current Working Group process and to have the Department rethink the process. It was suggested that the current forum be utilized to discuss park needs Citywide as Griffith Park cannot meet all of the City’s needs.

Answer: The Melendrez Group stated that the current dialogue was raising some very important public policy issues, and that the working group process should continue.

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Councilmember LaBonge also spoke and encouraged the Working Group to move forward and continue their work. He stated that the plan before them was not a development plan, but a guide that needed corrections made to it.

Question: Were any demographic studies conducted?

Answer: The Melendrez Group did not perform any direct needs assessment or the collection of demographic data.

Mr. Mukri then shared that he agrees there is a need for a Citywide strategic plan for acquisition of park land and the process to address this issue has already started. Census data is being currently used to identify those areas in need of additional recreational services and land is being added based on this information. He informed the audience that the Department recently received \$4 million in grant monies and will be adding three new parks in areas where the need is highest. A master plan existed for Griffith Park prior to the development of the current draft plan, but it is out of date. The current draft plan is a vision, a broad guide to assist in determining the future direction for Griffith Park. Mr. Mukri acknowledged that everyone wants to keep the natural elements in Griffith Park as natural as possible. One of the ways the community can assist with the development of active recreation areas is to support joint use agreements with the LA Unified School District. He acknowledged the need for a more comprehensive plan for parks in the City but does not want to minimize what is being done by the Working Group.

A discussion followed re: a request by Ms. Soter for cooperation from the Department to determine the actual number of facilities and activities that occur in Griffith Park. A request was made by Ms. Soter for a moratorium on any project initiatives in the park. Further discussion determined that the request could not be fulfilled.

After additional discussion re: a garden for the Korean Community, the implementation of smart irrigation systems, and the role of the Working Group; a question and answer session began with the audience and the Melendrez Group.

It was stated that there is a need to fight for the notion that “..all lands set aside as a park are to remain inviolate” as quoted from the City Charter.

The Melendrez Group replied that they are very cognizant of that fact, and believe in the retention of natural areas.

Question: How will the kiosks be staffed? There is already a current shortage of park rangers.

Answer: We were not asked to provide a staffing plan, but to make recommendations on how to make the park more accessible to the public and how to locate facilities in the park.

Councilmember LaBonge suggested that volunteers could be used for this service.

Question: Are there any specific plans for the area known as “Pollywog?”

Answer: None.

Question: Is Councilmember LaBonge dictating what goes in or out of the Master Plan Draft?

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Answer: The councilmember is not dictating the plan, but only making recommendations.

Question: What is the re-draft process and how will the Master Plan be implemented once the Working Group process is completed?

Answer provided by Mr. Regan: The Working Group is making recommendations for changes in the draft Master Plan. Subcommittees are re-writing portions of the plan. Presentations are made at the Working Group meetings to the whole group where a consensus is reached. When this Working Group process is complete, a final version needs to be completed, incorporating portions of the draft, the Working Group's recommendations and chapter reviews, other public input, petitions, e-mails, etc. and any other relevant materials. The best way to accomplish this would be with a consultant. Once a final version is completed, an environmental team will need to review this plan to determine the level of environmental review necessary. Once this determination is made, funding will be needed for the actual environmental study. During the environmental process, there will be another round of community input and meetings. A recommendation is then submitted to the Board of Recreation and Parks Commissioners and public testimony will be heard. Once the matter is adopted by the commission, a final plan and environmental report will be submitted to a City Council committee prior to being submitted to the full Council. After the City Council adopts the report, it becomes an official City document. A master plan document differs from a planning document in that it is a policy document and not regulatory. Policy documents are binding in their scope, however, they are not law. Policy documents can be changed or amended over time. A realistic timeline is difficult to predict as the environmental process alone could take up to nine months and legislative review could take up to six months. Locating funding sources could also be time consuming.

Question: Will use of the proposed overnight facility be free of charge?

Answer: Fees would be involved in the way that fees are charged for the Zoo and Observatory. Comments were then made that any exchange of monies involved commercialization. Mr. Regan explained that the consultants were not asked to review revenue development and that the "Pleasure Pier" for example, could simply be a wildlife observation post without any pay facilities. He assured the audience that the Department is aware of their desires for no commercialization and for the preservation of open space.

Question: Does the plan include a school site?

Answer: No.

A comment was made regarding the intent of the gift of Griffith Park to the City and how that intention should be incorporated into the Master Plan.

Question: Was consideration made for constructing a building to house Griffith Park staff at an off site location rather than constructing it in the park?

Answer: There is no proposal to construct a building in Griffith Park, but there are recommendations that locations for meetings, etc. be found within the park for staff use.

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It was stated that there are currently no facilities for senior citizens in the area and it was hoped that a location in or nearby Griffith Park could be found. The Working Group was cautioned that if they say they don't want anything new, then they would be stuck with nothing new.

A representative from the Autry National Center stated that the Autry Museum recently presented a plan to a local neighborhood group who would be commenting on it. Once commentary input is received, the plans will be made public.

Question: Why is there no mention of mountain biking opportunities in the Master Plan Draft?

Answer: A City ordinance does not allow mountain biking on park trails so it was removed from the plan.

Dismay was expressed at the recommendation to relocate the zoo magnet school inside of the Zoo. The Melendrez Group replied that the recommendation was based on open space and circulation issues and that the school was in an awkward location.

Question: Is it possible to “back track” the process and involve the CSUN study as well as the Working Group?

Answer: This could be accomplished if the necessary funds could be generated.

Question: If more people are brought in to Griffith Park, what's to be done about the trash problem?

Answer: The trash problem is a park maintenance issue and the education process could help to alleviate this problem. If the people visiting Griffith Park are educated about the park, they will learn to care for the park on a long term basis.

At this point, Mr. Regan thanked the Working Group for their efforts and stated that the next meeting will be held Monday, February 6, at 6:30 p.m. at the Ranger Station. The Human Dimension chapter would be on the next agenda.

Ms. Soter publicly thanked and acknowledged the Griffith Park Neighborhood Council for providing the handouts at the meeting. She said that the neighborhood council has committed to underwrite the cost of 100 copies for the next four meetings.

Mr. Regan thanked the Melendrez Group for their presentation and he also thanked Councilmember LaBonge and General Manager Mukri for attending.

Public comment consisted of:

- An inquiry as to why the Brown Act did not apply to this meeting. Mr. Regan explained that the Working Group was not established by an official board or legislative body, therefore, was exempt from the requirements of the Brown Act. He stated that public comments are taken so the Department can hear what the public has to say.

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- A comparison was made of Griffith Park to a grand lady and fixing up the park was likened to the lady undergoing medical procedures for self improvement. The audience member concluded by saying the purpose of Griffith Park is to generate rest and relaxation for the masses, not to generate revenue for the City or any developers.
- An inquiry was made regarding the status of the urban wilderness petitions. Mr. Regan replied that they are a part of the public record.
- A request was made for the possibility of a site in Griffith Park for the Los Feliz Charter School. A brief discussion ensued regarding the concept.

The meeting was then concluded.