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City Council to Decide Future of Leigh Creekside Park

By John T. Miller



Mary Jo Cass visits with neighbor David Rose and his two daughters Arianna and Mattea at the arts and crafts table. Photo John T. Miller

A neighborhood dispute over impending changes to the character of Leigh Creekside Park is still making waves in Lafayette.

At issue is whether or not to change the park's status from passive to active, allowing a proposed play structure to be erected on the grounds.

On one side of the debate, the Coalition to Save Leigh Creekside Park is asking to preserve the original intent of the park and keep it in its natural state for future generations. Another group, the Leigh Creekside Improvement Plan, has worked for over two years to build a play structure and accessibility improvements in a portion of the park.

On Saturday, Jan. 14, local residents in favor of a passive park gathered at the site for an afternoon in the park. The event was organized to demonstrate the park can be used to explore and play without structures, which distract children from nature.

On hand were local residents Gwen Colley, a volunteer with the Gardens at Heather Farms, who provided an array of nature arts and crafts for children; Jil Plummer, a reknowned Lafayette author who read children stories in the "StoryTime" corner of the park with help from Trina and James Audley; and Ben Pettersson, who leads the Lamorinda Senior Nature Walk and Bird Watching Group.

Lafayette resident Deborah Callister said, "We worked hard to put the community on notice and hope those who love this space will let the city council know how important it is to keep this last bit of tranquility in Lafayette as natural as possible."

Proponents of the play structure were allowed to share information about their project.

The park is named after John and Ethel Leigh, former owners of the property and early Lafayette residents. The 0.6-acre lot is situated on Moraga Blvd. near 4th Street, where the Lafayette-Moraga and Briones-Las Trampas Regional Trails meet. The park is adjacent to Las Trampas Creek and its riparian wildlife corridor.

When John passed away in 1998, a grassroots neighborhood campaign raised over \$35,000 to help the city secure a \$375,000 state grant to purchase the land and stave off development.

In a letter to this paper's Public Forum last year, original co-founders Mary Jo and Glen Cass, wrote: "In many ways, this park was a gift from residents who entrusted the City of Lafayette to honor the park's history and preserve it as a natural, open-space park for future generations." Although no original legal document was signed, the

group points to several directives to support maintaining the passive designation.

In 1998, a letter from Lafayette's former Parks and Recreation Director Jennifer Russell stated, "An overwhelming majority would like the land preserved in as natural state as possible."

Senator Richard Rainey, in requesting state money (in 1999) for the purchase of the property, wrote, "If Lafayette acquires the land, the neighbors around the land would like to keep it as natural as possible."

After Lafayette obtained the property, a plaque from then-mayor Erling Horn recognized the park's founders, with the assurance that "generations to come will appreciate your work to permanently preserve this land."

On the other side of the issue, proponents of the Improvement Plan claim widespread support and offer arguments to the "Let It Be" faction.

According to the proponents' informational brochure, the structures would take up less than 7 percent of the park with "design elements that look natural and do not obstruct the view of the heritage oak and meadow," adding that the play structures will inspire more people to play and come outdoors to enjoy nature.

The improvement plan includes an active play area where children can spin, rock, bounce, balance, sway, slide and climb. Additional features like handicap accessible pathways, picnic tables and more will take up another 12 percent of the area, and leave the greater part of the park in its natural state.

Grace Dixon, a 17-year resident in the neighborhood, said, "No other park east of Moraga Road is available for children to play, and all the school playgrounds are closed. None of the others are ADA available."

Last year, the city requested that the proposed budget of the project be reduced in half — from \$1 million to \$500,000. Proponents of the improvement plan claim this is a small price to pay considering the price of land elsewhere in the city.

In response, Cass states that Lafayette, in its stated goal to provide five acres of park land for every 1,000 citizens, "should work to find more park land, rather than reconfigure an existing one."

Both sides claim that a majority of the immediate neighbors support their plan. The council may have to channel the Wisdom of Solomon to come to a satisfactory decision.

The council was slated to discuss the park at its Jan. 23 meeting.

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