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Leigh Creekside Park closer to getting play structure

By Pippa Fisher

If it was said that the divisive issue of Leigh Creekside Park would require the wisdom of Solomon and the patience of Job to solve, in the end perhaps it took more of the statesmanship of Pericles to move the proposed new play structure forward.

At the city council meeting on Feb. 27, with standing room only, Lafayette City Council once again heard from close to 50 impassioned residents as the meeting went well into the early hours of the following morning. With tension running high the council heard from those who want to add children's play structures to the small area of land that is the neighborhood park, located at the corner of Fourth Street and Moraga Boulevard ("actives") and from those who want the leafy park to remain passive ("passives"). Jonathan Katayanagi, the city's director of the parks, trails and recreation department, told the council of several options for moving forward, given recent studies that show "exceedances of the city's noise ordinance due to the sound of children playing."

Option one would be to prepare a focused Environmental Impact Report, now required -a study that would cost \$24,000 and take three to six months to complete. Option two called for the temporary tabling of the issue and the amendment of the city's noise ordinance, which was set in 1977.

Option three suggested bringing together the two sides to work on another redesign and option four presented no amendment to the Leigh Creekside Park master plan so that the play structure could not move forward.

Katayanagi said that the city had received hundreds of letters both for and against the project with the split being about 50/50, a claim that some of the "passives" said they doubted and pointed out that many of the "actives" used form letters.

The packed room heard from several children arguing for keeping the park passive, citing that they enjoy the park as it is - a place to enjoy nature.

Many of the passives spoke of benefactors John and Ethel Leigh's original desire to keep the park passive, as well as with concerns over increased traffic and parking problems.

At least a couple of the passives were elementary school teachers who noted the benefits of quiet reflection and sensory exploration for young children. Lafayette resident Karen Ward pointed out that passives are not anti-child or anti-Americans with Disabilities, as had been implied. She said that often students from Springstone School or adults from Las Trampas walk there and that there are many with invisible disabilities currently using the park.

Lafayette resident Mary Jo Cass expressed that everyone is exhausted from this subject, that this is a divided community. She said that social media such as Nextdoor "continues to serve as a pulpit for misinformation." To her the only way forward was to "stop the project tonight" and she suggested instead spending the money on community events such as community gardens and storytelling in the park. Many actives pointed to what they claim is the current underutilization of the park. Furthermore, Brian Bowman rationalized that the neighborhood is changing with more young families moving in. He questioned the "technicalities of noise" holding the project up and urged the council to move forward.

Still other actives pointed out that whereas they have been compromising on the scale and scoop of the project, the passives have remained unbending. "Let's have a park with something for everyone," said Shannon Cahoon.

All members of the council were in agreement that a decision needed to be reached for the community to move on, although they differed in their opinions. Council Member Ivor Samson said he was very disappointed and "appalled by the level of quality of participation" referring to many "nasty in tone comments." He said that in his opinion what is proposed breaks the covenant of the original use.

Council member Mark Mitchell argued that the original intent for the land was to stop development rather than to prevent play equipment.

Council member Cam Burks recognized a shortage of places to go to play for young children and said that they need to move forward, having invested too much time, money and emotion to walk away.

Mayor Mike Anderson emphasized the need to overhaul the noise ordinance separately, something the council agreed on. "We can't have a noise ordinance that precludes children from making normal children sounds," commented Vice Mayor Don Tatzin.

And so the playground inches nearer as a motion passed by three to two for a focused EIR with Anderson, Burks, Mitchell supporting and Samson and Tatzin against.

As Tatzin commented, he has never seen so much effort put into three quarters of an acre.

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