

Leigh Creekside Park is as controversial as ever

By Pippa Fisher



Leigh Creekside Park

Photo Pippa Fisher

More than 50 meetings later, the controversy around Leigh Creekside Park remains as acrimonious as ever with many residents questioning the fairness of the focused Environmental Impact Report.

The Lafayette City Council heard a status update at the meeting July 26 from Parks, Trails and Recreation Director Jonathan Katayanagi, who said that the focused EIR that city staff had been ordered to prepare at the February meeting would begin in July. The results of this EIR, focused solely on noise, should be available in early 2018. The city is working with the environmental consultants PlaceWorks.

During the February meeting, the council approved the development of the controversial play structure to be built subject to the results of the focused EIR, against the wishes of those residents who prefer the park to remain "passive" – left in its natural state which is what they claim was intended all along for that parcel of land.

On the opposite side are those who want a play structure; who want a more "active" park.

And, several years since the first meetings about this, both sides are still as divided as ever.

The "passives" argued that the city has ignored a glaring need for complete environmental review by opting for the narrow EIR. They say that many areas need further study, including traffic, parking, damage to tree roots, soil compaction, loss of

habitat for birds and other wildlife, including the endangered western pond turtle and California red-legged frog.

One speaker, among the several that urged the council to look for creative alternatives, suggested building a "tot lot" by the gazebo on Mount Diablo Boulevard where he said there would be less environmental damage since the area has already been covered with concrete.

Lafayette resident and lead proponent for the play structure, Grace Dixon, did not agree. She said that the gazebo area was too close to Mount Diablo Boulevard. She said what Leigh Creekside Park is currently lacking is kids and what it needs is something to draw kids in.

Council Member Ivor Samson noted that there were many questions about the fairness of the process. He said the fact-based comments from area residents constitute "fair argument," which he said, "we ignore at our peril." He said there was significant risk of litigation, but that even beyond that, it is "not the way Lafayette does business."

Samson went on to say that many people in the community are concerned the council is not looking at this objectively.

Although this item was only on the agenda in the form of an update, with no action to be taken, Vice Mayor Don Tatzin and Samson both said they would be putting it back on the agenda at a future date.

Vision for Lafayette creeks

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The plan addresses the improvement of water quality, encourages parcel-specific enhancements and proposes using the public projects in the west end of Lafayette as a catalyst for private projects.

Unifying elements include creek walkways, interpretive signage, creek icons and uniform fencing.

Water quality will be improved through low impact development requirements, pervious paving, rain gardens, which take runoff water from the streets to gardens that serve to purify the water before it goes to the creek, and riparian habitat restoration, including some removal of non-native plants.

Elder explained that the plan was to focus initially on the west reach and to start by addressing erosion. He said that once the public sees what can be done, it would be a catalyst for private development. They plan to restore the creek all the way along to the gazebo on the east end, through the downtown area.

Using the creek which flows by the Cooperage as an example of a private project, Elder said they are looking into replacing the current concrete sections of the creek with stone, making the walls more decorative and re-

placing the current chain link and barbed wire fencing with a more attractive alternative.

City council members uniformly praised the work of the creeks committee. Council member Cam Burks said it showed "excellent vision" but noted, having only just seen the report, that he would like more time to review it before making further comment on something that could cost the taxpayers millions of dollars.

Similarly Council Member Ivor Samson said that because of the financial implications he would need more time to study it and give it the time it deserves.

Council Member Mark Mitchell echoed concern about the cost and the need to look into outside funding sources as well as the implications for cost in terms of maintenance.

Vice Mayor Don Tatzin said he supports the plan but noted that it is a long report and most members of the council had not had enough time to review it thoroughly so suggested it be continued to the second city council meeting in September when all members would be present.

That motion to continue was carried unanimously with Mayor Mike Anderson absent.

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