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## Greening the city with parks, plazas, open spaces

**By Mary McLellan and Michael Stepner**

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"In building the city, let us remember that the material things which will endure the longest are those that express the spirit of man in art. In the art of landscape and architecture, the spirit of a city can be preserved for ages."

*George White Marston at the dedication of Presidio Park, July 16, 1926*

The San Diego Chapter of Partners for Livable Places sponsored the "Greening the City -- Love it or Leaf it Conference" earlier this month at the new McMillin Event Center at NTC Promenade. The conference brought together several hundred people to hear local and national speakers talk about the critical need to plan our region for sustainable development. The conference was designed to cultivate a "better understanding of the economic, environmental, psychological and special benefits of parks, gardens, greenbelts, trails and inspired green urban spaces."

The conference once again reminded us that a "green" city with adequate parks, plazas and green spaces is also a healthful city. This has been an overriding theme of city planning and community building since the beginning of the "modern" city-planning movement in the 1890s. The importance of parks and open spaces was seen as the lungs of the industrialized city and the key to a more healthful urban environment. In San Diego, this became official city policy with the adoption of our first general plan prepared by John Nolen at the behest of George Marston 100 years ago.

The speakers at the conference all spoke to the intrinsic benefits of a "green" city. Peter Harnik, director of the Center for City Park Excellence at the Trust for Public Lands, spoke of the broad benefits of parks and open space to the community. His presentation highlighted the environmental value of clean air, the value to the resident through direct access and improved health, and the economic value of parks and open space from tourism and increased property values.

The economic value of parks and open space is not new but is something that has been recently rediscovered. On a national level, the economic value of parks goes back to discussions in the late 1880s when the Minneapolis Board of Trade stated: "Parkland, when secured and located as it is now, be at comparatively small expense, will in the near future add millions to the real estate value of the city."

In San Diego, we had Minneapolis beat by 20 years when in the late 1860s the city board of trustees had the foresight to set aside 1,400 acres for a city park, now Balboa Park, which at that time equated to almost one acre per capita.

Dr. Kathleen Wolf of the University of Washington urged everyone to "get their greens" when she spoke to the importance of nature and trees to our overall quality of life including our moods, our emotions, and our physiological and physical health.

Fred Kent, president of Project for Public Spaces founded by William H. Whyte in the 1960s, spoke to public spaces. Kent worked with Holly Whyte on the groundbreaking study, "The Social Life of Small Urban Spaces," which was the first scientific study of how people use parks and public space and how to design them so that they can and will be used.

Kent's comments spoke to the need to pay attention to the small planning details to take best advantage of our great assets here in San Diego. He suggested carefully observing how our public plazas are designed for use and making sure parks are accessible and safe and streets serve pedestrians as well as cars. Another key to successful open-space use is waterfront development and the careful balance needed between public use and privatization.

Kent's presentation questioned directly how we in San Diego are implementing the North Embarcadero Visionary Plan. We need to take a fresh look at that plan to assure that we are taking best advantage of our unique waterfront opportunities. The U.S. Navy Broadway Complex development process provides a great opportunity to revisit the plan and to assure that what gets developed at that site is indeed a reflection of sustainability, which not only generates economic growth but also pays attention to wider social and environment issues. To create a

viable city of the future we must demand that sustainability be the key component of our waterfront plan equation.

Another major asset is our canyons. A start has been made with the Multiple Species Conservation Plan but we need to build upon that. Kent said: "Parks should reach out like an octopus and bring the parks into the neighborhoods." This is the pointed theme of the Canyonlands Initiative developed by San Diego Civic Solutions. We should preserve these natural features that form our communities not only for environmental reasons but also for the health of San Diegans. How do we make the canyons accessible for people where appropriate? Equally as important, how do we bring the canyons up and into our neighborhoods and create view corridors into the canyons? Connecting canyons through pathways, boulevards and tree plantings with major community anchors provides a great solution to storm water runoff. It also provides a network of arteries carrying the blood life of this community to the heart -- the citizens of San Diego.

In the 1908 Comprehensive Plan for San Diego's Improvement, John Nolen wrote: "A system of parks is unquestionably demanded. Such a system can be secured more easily than in any other city that I know of, ... connect this system of parks by the boulevards and parkways already planned, develop it naturally, simply, harmoniously, and then confidently invite comparison with it to any park system in the world. It would give the citizens health, joy and more abundant life, and to the city, itself, wealth and enduring fame."

Greening the city is critical to the region's sustainability and quality of life -- socially, physically and economically. In an article by Gruen, Gruen + Associates, they state: "The success of a place is determined by how well it responds to the economic, technical, institutional/cultural and social fabric of the times." Will San Diego rise to the occasion to build the city of our dreams or will we fall into mediocrity? It's all up to us!

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