

Fresno to get park designed for disabled people

BY GEORGE HOSTETTER

The Fresno Bee April 10, 2014

<http://www.fresnobee.com/2014/04/10/3870984/fresno-to-get-park-designed-for.html?sp=/99/406/263/>

Fresno's long-planned regional park for the disabled is coming.

The City Council on Thursday voted to build the approximately \$9 million Universally Accessible Park on Gettysburg Avenue west of Highway 99.

"What an incredible message we're sending — we care about our community's quality of life," said Council Member Blong Xiong, who represents the park's neighborhood.

The vote was 5-1. Council Member Paul Caprioglio voted no, saying he loves the project, but worries about a lack of maintenance money. Council Member Clint Olivier was absent.

Xiong prefers Inspiration Park to Universally Accessible Park. While it will be open to all, the park's main purpose is recreation for those facing physical or mental challenges.

The park had a long journey through the bureaucratic maze.

Xiong began grumbling seven years ago about lack of green space in his District 1 neighborhoods west of 99. City officials in 2007 floated the idea of a park primarily for the disabled on Gettysburg near Polk Avenue.

There was a high-profile news conference at the site in 2010.

"This is a long-awaited park," Xiong said at the time. "To see it come to fruition gives me a wonderful feeling."

If something could go wrong with the dream, it did. The city got a \$5 million state grant to help with construction, but the Great Recession rendered City Hall's contribution uncertain.

Fresno flirted with bankruptcy for several years. City officials refused to build new parks unless someone stepped forward with cash to guarantee long-term maintenance.

City Hall in 2012 asked residents near the park site to create a special district whose modest taxes would pay for maintenance. The residents in an election rejected the idea by a nearly 4-to-1 margin.

The parks department was so desperate for money that it asked local nonprofits to take over maintenance and programming at various parks and community centers. City officials pursued

this strategy with Inspiration Park. Resources for Independence, Central Valley (which serves the disabled) stepped forward but, with no park to point to, has had only modest success with donors.

City officials even went back to the drawing board, thinking a few nips and tucks to park plans would sufficiently lower construction and maintenance costs. That didn't work, either.

Two things reversed this tale of frustration. City finances brightened, putting to rest the fear of insolvency. And the council in January showed a new attitude toward green space, voting to build Martin Ray Reilly Park in southeast Fresno.

City Manager Bruce Rudd (who doubles as parks director) saw his opportunity. He told the council on Thursday that money for construction (\$7.8 million) and other costs such as permits and contingencies (about \$1.3 million) is available without harming other services. He and several council members sparred a bit over annual maintenance costs (\$100,000 or \$250,000) and the funding of a reserve. In the end, the council decided a calculated gamble on behalf of the disabled is wise policy.

Construction should take about a year.

In other action, the council:

-- Took ownership of a vacant lot on the northwest corner of Stanislaus and L streets in downtown. The site was to be an affordable housing project, but the nonprofit developer failed to get its own financing. The city spent nearly \$1.2 million of federal housing funds on the project. The city will repay this money over the next three years. The property is worth an estimated \$250,000.

-- Postponed until May a debate on a resolution that would express disapproval of the state high-speed rail project.



The reporter can be reached at (559) 441-6272 or ghostetter@fresnobee.com. Read his City Beat blog at fresnobee.com/city-beat