

Sarah Reyes: south Fresno needs more parks — now

By Sarah
Reyes

When I grew up in Fresno, my sister and brother and I would always spend our summers at Holmes Park in southeast Fresno. When we visited Holmes, my parents were assured that responsible parks staff would be on hand just in case something happened, and there were more activities than one kid could take part in.

But today, I drive by Holmes and it sits empty: no park staff, no park bustling with activity. That neglect didn't happen by accident. It happened after the city's elected officials (mayors and council members) allowed it to happen. Not just at Holmes, but throughout the south part of the city of Fresno.

Recently, the mayor and council members stood in north Fresno's Vinland park and proclaimed they were on a track to "restore parks" in Fresno. The media, including The Fresno Bee, ate it up.

But the reality is the city's new plan does nothing to truly restore green space in Fresno. Did you know Fresno hit a new low in park rankings? Last year, The Trust for Public Land conducted a survey of park systems in 60 of the nation's largest cities. Fresno finished dead last.

Just recently, the nonprofit organization released a new report and Fresno isn't last, but our city actually lost ground. Fresno is No. 89 in total spending on parks per resident. The top 100 most populous cities were included in this new survey, but information was only available for 93 cities. It's not a coincidence that our elected officials held a news conference to talk about alleged progress in the face of such dire news.

Fresno's own numbers show a blatant disparity of park space in south and north Fresno. According to Fresno's own General Plan, south Fresno has a little more than 1 acre of park space for every 1,000 residents while north Fresno has nearly five times the amount of park space per thousand residents.

Now don't get me wrong, I am happy those living in the north have green space, but shouldn't everyone be allowed that great fortune? I say yes.

The mayor says she will work on a Parks Master Plan in the next year and a half, and it will be a 20-year plan for parks. What she is saying is, who cares about the tale of two cities? We will just tell people who have been disinvested and disenfranchised in Fresno to wait for 20 more years.

Well, if they said that back when I was growing up, I would haven't had the great experiences and memories I have today about spending time in Fresno parks.

A couple of weeks ago, I had the great fortune of speaking to some young people who told me they take three buses to get to the nearest park with a skate board area. Three city buses! Wow, and our city leaders want these youth to wait 20 years before they can see any change in parks? By that time, many of these youth will be probably too old to even ride a skateboard.

As a former California Assembly member, I worked hard to bring more green space to Fresno. Trolley Creek Park is a good example of that. I know there will be a new park bond on the 2016 ballot and it will be focused on ensuring funding for localized parks, but I am here to tell you the larger cities in our state won't wait 20 years to develop a plan to get their hands on that park money.

It's time, Fresno.

It's time for every one of us to urge our city to develop a Parks Master Plan now so we can ensure that we have more than 5 acres of green space for all those who call Fresno home.

I want every family to be able to have and create the fond memories I have of growing up in Fresno when parks were a priority.

Sarah Reyes is a former member of the California Assembly, representing District 31 in Fresno County from 1998 to 2004.