

Team effort brings Almy Street Playground to southwest Fresno neighborhood

By George Hostetter
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Fresno's newest park found itself full of happy youngsters on Tuesday.

Hard work, civic pride and plenty of privately raised cash made it happen.

Mayor Ashley Swearengin and other community leaders gathered in southwest Fresno to dedicate the Almy Street Playground. Habitat for Humanity Fresno County teamed with many community partners on the green-space project.

Torin Blount, Habitat for Humanity's interim executive director, told an audience of dozens that the site had once been a bleak and empty dirt lot.

"It's now going to be a place where children can play and adults can gather," Blount said.

I'm picking up the baton.

Habitat for Humanity's Sabrina Kelley, whose family has long championed west Fresno

Sabrina Kelley, Habitat for Humanity's community development manager, said her grandfather Clifford Kelley (an architect) saw the need for parks and infrastructure in this neighborhood a half-century ago.

"Today I check off that final goal my grandfather had, of building a place to play for kids in west Fresno," Kelley said. "No one person does it alone. Everybody here had a role to play, including the neighborhood kids."

Swearengin, who has made the revitalization of older neighborhoods the top goal of her administration, said the playground "is going to be an incredible gift to this neighborhood for years to come."

The playground includes play equipment for older kids, a tot lot, grass and a walking path.

The construction cost of about \$350,000 was raised by individuals, groups and businesses. Of special importance was a grant of nearly \$120,000 from Wells Fargo. Cargill Meat Solutions, the huge plant just west of the playground, will maintain the park for its first three years.

Other groups getting a verbal high-five included Guarantee Real Estate, Guarantee Good Will Network, Darling International, Pacific Gas & Electric Co., Peter Bennett Family Foundation at the Fresno Regional Foundation, City Hall and the deep team at Habitat for Humanity.

Randy Kammerer, president of Habitat for Humanity's board, said Sabrina Kelley in particular "jumped through more hoops than you can imagine to make this park happen."

Equity was a theme throughout Tuesday's event.

It is welcome, it is encouraged and it is long overdue.

Mayor Ashley Swearengin on the City Hall and community effort that brought a new park to southwest Fresno

"This park is a symbol of hope and shared determination that every Fresnan, regardless of geographic location, deserves the best life has to offer," Kammerer said.

Swearingin said City Hall is committing \$800,000 for street and infrastructure improvements in the neighborhood.

The playground is on Almy, a street at the south end of town. The area is full of the industry and agriculture that make Fresno in many respects one of California's most dynamic cities. There also are lots of houses.

This combination has not been fertile ground for the blessings found in a typically modern urban setting. Swearingin said the community virtue that produced Almy Street Playground and the commitment of her administration are starting a new era.

"Sitting here today, I think about years past in Fresno and how, for so many decades, neighborhoods like this one were absent from the conversation" of city leaders, Swearingin said. "Yet, that has begun to change, and today is a great example of that change.

"This neighborhood is now visible. Neighborhoods just like this are now a centerpiece when it comes to decisions at City Hall."

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