

PARKS IN EL CERRITO - A BRIEF HISTORY

FROM THE EL CERRITO HISTORICAL SOCIETY

In El Cerrito's younger days, parks were not a community priority. There were plenty of open fields where the kids could play, and streets where there was very little traffic. But after a generation or two, it became clear that this was a city of homes, and parks became a priority, particularly after World War II.

Our first two parks were the results of donations of land in the 1920's, and became Huber and Poinsett Parks. Both were deemed "unattractive" watersheds and remained undeveloped until the 1930's, when the federal Works Progress Administration ("WPA") funded some improvements.

By that time El Cerrito was home to two other grand parcels of open space which were not city-owned. The first was a golf course, originally founded as the "Berkeley Country Club" in February 1920. Nine holes were in play by September of that year. The club later expanded to 18 holes, and became today's "Mira Vista Golf & Country Club".

The other was a Boy Scout camp. In 1929 the Scout's Berkeley Council began negotiations to purchase 18 acres from the former Bates & Borland quarry on Arlington Blvd. On June 7, 1930 "Camp Berkeley" officially opened, later re-named "Camp Herms". The mortgage was paid off in 1934 from funds from a \$5,000 legacy. In 1937 during the Depression it was transferred to the city so that the WPA could finance construction of a swimming pool and other amenities; it was then transferred back to the Scouts, and remains a Scout camp to this day.

Early on El Cerrito was considered one of the few cities of its size in the nation to not have an established public park system. But in 1947 a ballot measure imposed 15 cents per \$100 assessed value to establish a park system and develop a park on Barrett, to improve Poinsett Park, and develop 17 acres purchased by the City at Cerrito Vista into ball fields, tennis courts and playgrounds.

In 1949 the city established a citizen Park & Recreation Commission, but no Director was hired until 1957.

In the November 1954 special election, a 10 cent levy for 10 years was passed, to complete 10 neighborhood parks including Cerrito Vista, to establish Arlington Park, to purchase and develop the Chung Mei Home, and to develop 10 tot-lots. Not all of these were accomplished, but the measure did lead to the improvement of Poinsett, Tassajara, Castro, Huber and Cerrito Vista parks, and paid for construction of the swim center and acquisition of land for Arlington, Canyon Trail and Hillside parks.

Park bond issues needed a 2/3 vote to pass. In 1958 and in 1959 park bond measures got over 63% but not over 66% so both failed.

Castro Park was dedicated on May 5, 1961; it was a joint effort by the City and the School District.

The Citizens Conference on the Community's Future adopted a Master Plan for Parks and Recreation in Spring 1964 and recommended the issuance of General Obligation bonds, needing a 66 2/3% to pass.

The proposal was to develop Harding Park, expand Canyon Trail Park, develop a Richmond Annex park, and improve Huber, Poinsett, Castro, Cerrito Vista and Arlington parks, to seek land at the high school and Fairmont school, preserve Hillside Natural Area and build a Community Center. The bond measure passed, and led directly to the exemplary park system now in El Cerrito.

By 1970 the land under BART's proposed tracks was developed into a trail by using federal funds. On May 12, 1979 a Santa Fe train made the last 9 mile run from Oakland to Richmond, which then allowed for the removal of its tracks and widening of the linear park in the BART right-of-way.

Beginning in 1974 individuals have been honored by the planting of trees in their name in the Memorial Grove area of lower Hillside Natural Area, and the posting of plaques at the Forrest Brown trailhead at the top of Schmidt Lane. Approximately 60 people have been so honored. As recognition of City Manager Ken Smith's personal efforts at getting park bonds passed between 1954 and 1964 and the parks built, the grove of eucalyptus trees below the foot of King Court was named "The Ken Smith Grove".

El Cerrito is now considered a city with admirable parks and open space given its size and population. It has the 2.5 mile linear parkway, an 80 acre nature area, 45 acres of owned parks and 18 acres shared with the school district, plus non-city open space in the country club and scout camp.

The Hillside Natural Area is the largest plot of city-owned open space. It is in the geographic center of town, like the hole in a doughnut with residential neighborhoods surrounding it. The name may seem strange to some, since its most prominent feature is a large former quarry, which contains the Recycling Center, the city's corporation yard, and facilities of Stege Sanitary District, certainly far from "natural". But whereas it was originally slated to have playgrounds and ball fields, the rest of this property has been dedicated solely to open space, with few developed amenities other than foot trails.

The Natural Area's main section, around the quarry, was donated to the city by the former quarry owners led by Forrest Brown, hence the name of the main North-South trail beginning at the top of Schmidt Lane, "The Forrest Brown Trail".

The Hillside Natural Area has two parts including the smaller piece north of Potrero. Volunteers are working to raise funds to purchase a seven-acre parcel of open land which would more closely connect the two current sections. This is the "Madera Open Space" between Madera School and Potrero Avenue. Once the City acquires it, which it hopes to do by the end of 2014, it will be possible to improve trails that will allow hikers and bikers to traverse from north to south without having to detour on streets and sidewalks. The Trust for Public Land bought the site to hold until the community raises the needed funds. The El Cerrito Open Space Campaign has committed to raise \$100,000 to help pay for this effort. For information, visit www.ectrailtrekkers.org.

Drafted in 2014 by Rich Bartke and the El Cerrito Historical Society, with thanks to Edward Staniford's 1976 book "El Cerrito Historical Evolution".