

PUBLIC PARTICIPATION AND NATURAL HABITAT PRESERVATION ALONG ARCADE CREEK, DEL PASO REGIONAL PARK, SACRAMENTO, CALIFORNIA¹

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Abstract: Thirty-six hectares (90 acres) of riparian forest, high terrace oak woodland-savanna, and upland vernal pools were preserved along Arcade Creek in Sacramento, California as a result of citizen involvement in a city-sponsored master plan process for Del Paso Regional Park. Citizens formed an organization and called for a comprehensive Environmental Impact Report to evaluate project impacts, and to develop commensurate measures to avoid and mitigate environmental damage. The organization used the CEQA process to provide city staff, consultants, and City Council members with detailed proposals for accommodating development and preserving critical natural habitat. These proposals were largely adopted by city staff and the Council. The City is making the park available for academic research intended to promote restoration of the park's disturbed habitat. The citizen's organization is pursuing natural habitat designation for the park's biologically sensitive tracts that remain unprotected.

On 22 January 1985, the Sacramento City Council unanimously approved a revised Master Plan and Final Environmental Impact Report (FEIR) for Del Paso Regional Park in Sacramento, California (City of Sacramento, 1985). The action ended a 2.5-year public involvement process whereby development of a world class amateur softball complex, soccer/rugby fields, and picnic areas was balanced with the permanent preservation of 36 hectares (90 acres) of riparian forest, oak woodland-savanna, and vernal pools (fig. 1). This paper discusses how citizens utilized local and State public participation mandates in negotiating an agreement between interest groups and the City of Sacramento to protect a profile of the pre-settlement Sacramento Valley.

Arcade Creek and Del Paso Regional Park

Approximately 80% of Arcade Creek's 10,240 hectare (25,600 acre) watershed is developed. Once intermittent, the creek now maintains a summer flow from urban run-off, and swells to flood stage during periodic winter storms. The City of Sacramento owns and manages the 270 hectare (680 acre) Del Paso Regional Park; a roughly 4.8 kilometer (3 mile) stretch of Arcade Creek passes through the park's northern boundary.

In 1915, Del Paso Park was slated for development patterned after San Francisco's Golden Gate Park. However, fiscal constraints and the site's remoteness from the city center forestalled development until 1932 when the City began constructing golf courses. By 1980, park facilities included three golf courses, a trap shooting club, a baseball field, a private equestrian club, and community service organizations such as the Sacramento Science Center and Junior Museum. Approximately 99 hectares (247 acres), including the riparian corridor, remained undeveloped (City of Sacramento, 1982).

Del Paso Park became valued by the Sacramento Audubon Society for its diversity of bird species and accessibility. The Sacramento Science Center and Junior Museum built a wheelchair-accessible interpretive trail on its 5 hectare (12 acre) parcel south of the creek and developed a nature appreciation program. Also, equestrians, running teams, and nearby residents discovered and enjoyed the streamside trails.

A Conceptual Master Plan for Del Paso Park

In summer 1982, the senior author investigated the status of Del Paso Park's undeveloped land. The City was updating its city-wide park master plan. A key element of the city-wide plan was to develop a site-specific master plan for Del Paso Park.

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Figure 1- Oak saplings, mature "heritage" oaks, and vernal pools occupy a 16 hectare (40 acre) terrace, contiguous with Arcade Creek, that was preserved via the CEQA process. Photograph courtesy of Van Pierce Miller.

Besides expanding or renovating existing facilities, various community groups proposed using the park's undeveloped land for a softball complex, soccer/rugby fields, tennis courts, a frisbee-golf course, a velodrome, and polo fields.

In September 1982, the City held its first public meeting regarding the Del Paso Park master plan. Prior to the meeting, the senior author drafted a flier that described proposed park attendance at the upcoming meeting. Friends helped distribute the flier to over 100 households neighboring the park. At the well attended meeting, most of the neighbors expressed their contentment with the status quo, that is, the current level of park facilities and undeveloped land was satisfactory. It was evident that these same residents might support a sensitive development plan if it could maintain, indeed improve, environmental quality in neighborhoods surrounding the park.

To accomplish this objective, detailed information was needed to identify the parcels most critical to the

park's biological integrity, and to quantify the amount of land required to sustain the park's raptor and mammal populations. The senior author contacted local naturalists to begin developing the necessary data. During this seminal phase of coalition building, respected bird watchers testified at City Council meetings about the need to preserve upland oak woodland-savanna contiguous with riparian forest to retain an "edge effect" desired by many avian species. Occasionally, an arborist would explain that the oak reproduction within Arcade Creek's now fallow high terraces was a California rarity. But beyond these technical opinions, both the citizenry and local government lacked the scientific expertise to make ecologically sound land-use decisions.

In the conceptual Del Paso Regional Park Master Plan sent to the City Council, the staff responded to community concerns by relocating the proposed softball complex from the park's east end, adjacent to residences, westward to an open tract bordered by the creek, a golf course, and a freeway (Interstate 80). The City

proposed to designate Arcade Creek's active floodplain as natural habitat, along with other sites too small and/or isolated to develop. On 16 March 1983, the City Council approved this conceptual plan and its attached Negative Declaration, and stated that "environmental analysis will be conducted on each element of the master plan prior to construction." (City of Sacramento, 1983).

Developing a Biologically Sound Master Plan

At the behest of a concerned City Councilwoman, the senior author began organizing monthly meetings, independent of city-sponsored meetings, and encouraged residents to identify common goals and expectations. He also sought media coverage to focus community-wide attention on the resource issues involved with developing Del Paso Regional Park. The Sacramento Bee newspaper's Neighbors affiliate became interested in the public participation angle of the park planning process and, on 10 November 1983, printed the first in a series of articles devoted to Del Paso Park.

New faces appeared at the monthly meetings, including activists from local environmental groups (Environmental Council of Sacramento, Sacramento Audubon Society, and the Sacramento chapter of the California Native Plant Society). We named our organization the "Arcade Creek Restoration Project" (ACRP) and, in February 1984, began writing a monthly newsletter entitled *Creekspeak* to discuss local environmental issues, report on park cleanup projects conducted by the City and community volunteers, announce future ACRP meetings, and promote attendance at city-sponsored forums.

In February 1984, ACRP requested that the City, as part of the aforementioned city-wide park master plan, create a policy for ensuring identification and acquisition of sites with significant natural or cultural character, and for managing these areas for passive recreation (Vendlinski, 1984). The City responded by stating that "identification and acquisition of sites containing significant native plant communities, historical or archaeological resources, or examples of ecological relationships, is a legitimate function of the Department", and that these resources are of educational and recreational importance (City of Sacramento, 1984a).

In July 1984, ACRP mapped dominant vegetation and landforms within undeveloped park parcels. We discovered that valley oak (*Quercus lobata*) and interior live oak (*Quercus wislizenii*) were reproducing over broad areas of the park's high terraces and uplands. Relatively rare blue oak (*Quercus douglasii*) reproduction was documented in the vicinity of increasingly scarce, albeit degraded, vernal pool habitat along the western parcel's

high terrace-upland ecotone, the proposed site of the softball complex (fig. 2). We transmitted this information to the City's Director of Parks and Community Services, underscoring the dearth of blue oak reproduction in California since the 1880's, and the value of the park's vernal pools (Talley and Vendlinski, October 1984a).

As the City prepared to implement the Del Paso Park master plan, ACRP was concerned that the staff might interpret the conceptual facility boundaries, approved by the City Council, as essentially fixed. We asked the staff to view these boundaries as malleable, because they were generated using a Negative Declaration rather than a formal environmental study. Moreover, we remained wary of the city's approach of documenting environmental impacts of individual park elements as funding became available; an approach that might miss cumulative impacts.

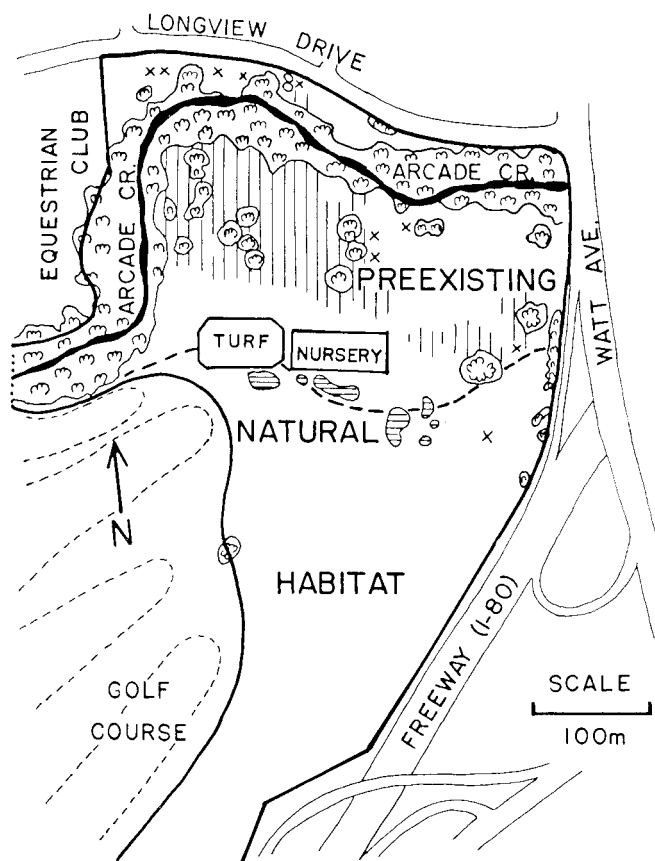


Figure 2- Selected natural habitat features in western Del Paso Regional Park prior to master plan implementation included Arcade Creek's riparian forest and associated oak woodland (stippling), oak reproduction areas (vertical lines), individual young oaks (x's), and vernal pools (horizontal lines). Remaining areas were annual grassland except for a tree nursery and turf production area. The high terrace extends from the dashed line north to the southern edge of the riparian forest.

In September 1984, the City committed itself to preparing an Environmental Impact Report (EIR) pursuant to the Californian Environmental Quality Act (CEQA). The CEQA Notice of Preparation (NOP) proposed siting the softball complex on the western parcel's environmentally sensitive oak terrace and uplands (fig. 3). ACRP arranged a scoping meeting with city staff and their environmental consultants. We urged them to replace their preferred alternative with a softball complex situated further south to avoid the park's unique environmental elements. The staff responded with a second alternative that, although similar to ours, located the complex too far north to avoid displacing the vernal pools (fig. 4). The City also offered a third alternative for a linear, rather than circular complex, well south of the vernal pools. While the third alternative was environmentally superior, it was clearly inferior from a recreational standpoint.

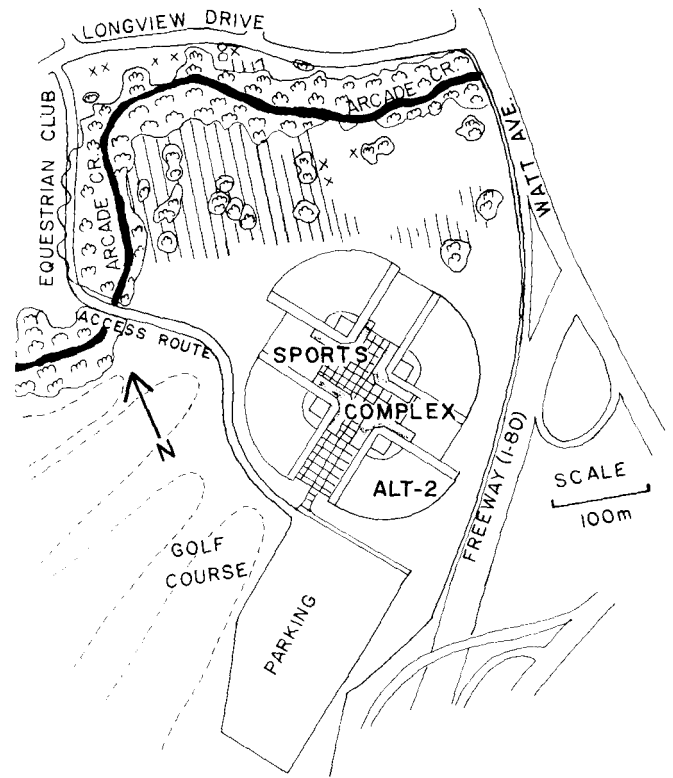


Figure 4— City alternative-2 featured a setback of the softball complex to preserve high terrace oak woodland and oak regeneration areas, however, it would still eliminate vernal pools.

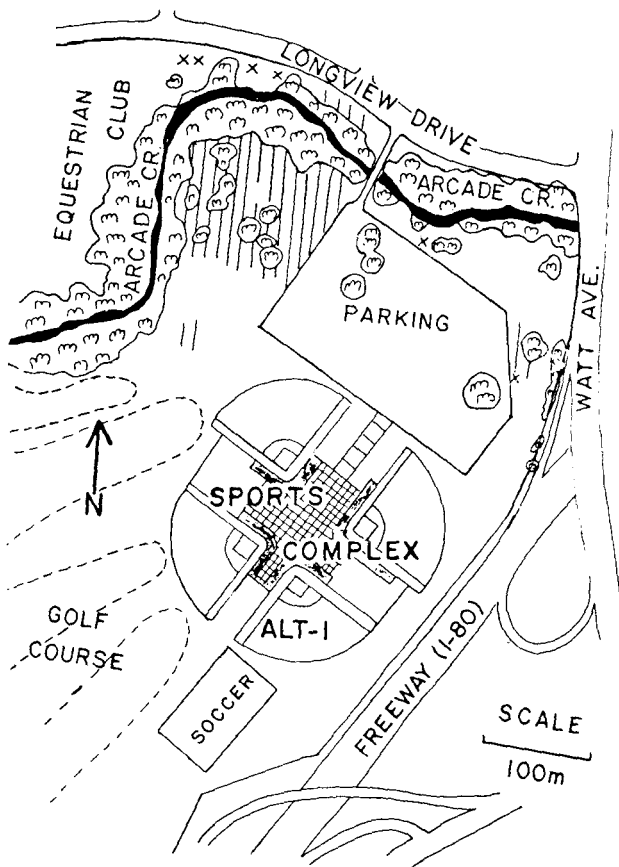


Figure 3— Principal environmental features of city alternative-1 included siting a 700 car parking lot just south of Arcade Creek, resulting in the loss of vernal pools and the core of the western terrace's oak woodland and oak regeneration areas.

At the early public meetings for the EIR, residents, athletes, and environmentalists gathered to present their views regarding the staff's site-specific design proposals. ACRP's proposal for an "alternative-2 type" sports complex that would avoid impacting the vernal pools and oak habitat was endorsed by speakers from local environmental groups and, importantly, drew praise from softball association representatives. Nevertheless, the City instructed its consultant to analyze all three alternatives rather than use the CEQA process to refine alternative-2.

Using the city's precise topographic maps, ACRP continued its technical appraisal. On 15 October 1984, ACRP provided the City with quantitative data demonstrating that cut-and-fill requirements for the construction of alternative-1 were actually greater than for alternative-2. We also submitted two variations on alternative-2 that would save the vernal pools and their watershed, and create an approximately 16 hectare (40 acre) natural area on the western parcel (Talley and Vendlin-ski, October 1984b).

In November 1984, the City issued the draft EIR. It found that all three proposed softball complex designs offered by the City "would result in direct and indirect impacts on oak regeneration areas, large oak trees, vernal pools, and riparian vegetation, which would be inconsistent with both City and County policies" (City of Sacramento, 1984b). The city policy in question was the one proposed by ACRP and incorporated into the city-wide park master plan; it recognized the legitimacy of identifying and acquiring sites containing significant plant communities or examples of ecological relationships. The draft EIR did not analyze the detailed proposals submitted by ACRP.

During the public hearing on the draft EIR held 14 November 1984, ACRP proposed a mitigation package aimed at "preserving and enhancing wildlife, plant, and aesthetic values throughout the park" (Talley, 1984). In summary, the mitigation package would do the following:

- restore the ecological integrity of the western creek terrace and vernal pool watershed, including the removal of the tree nursery and turf production facility that together covered 2.6 hectares (6.5 acres);
- combine recreation elements in the park's eastern end to allow for the protection of a high creek terrace contiguous with the already designated riparian natural habitat; and
- landscape the new park facilities and selected golf course rough areas with locally native plant species.

On 28 November 1984, we went before the City Council's Planning and Community Development Committee to describe the grave environmental consequences of alternative-1, and the avoidable impacts of alternative-2. We were concerned that the environmental consultants were not evaluating our proposals at their client's direction, and we deemed it necessary to directly address members of the Council. Prior to the Committee's meeting, we visited each Council member and supplied them with our written design and mitigation proposals.

On 10 December 1984, as the consultants worked to complete the final EIR, the Director of Parks and Community Services asked citizen leaders to meet with city staff for the purpose of designing site-specific recreational facilities and delineating natural habitat boundaries. The staff incorporated most of ACRP's proposed mitigation measures into an implementation plan, and prepared to send this plan to the City Council for approval. However, citing relocation costs, the staff chose not to recommend the removal and restoration of the 1.8 hectare (4.5 acre) turf production facility.

On 22 January 1985, the City Council unanimously approved the final EIR and the aforementioned implementation plan. Furthermore, the Council directed their staff to phase-out and restore the turf production facil-

ity, thereby partially offsetting the loss of creek terrace habitat to construction of the softball complex.

The softball complex would be located south of the vernal pools, while the access route across the creek would be built on the freeway side of the western high terrace to minimize conflicts with wildlife and equestrians. The proposed parking lot site was shifted from the sensitive creek terrace north of the softball facility (and south of Arcade Creek) to a highly disturbed parcel south of the facility between a golf course fairway and the freeway (fig. 5). On the eastern end of the park, the soccer/rugby fields would be combined with a neighborhood park, thereby allowing for the preservation of an additional 13 hectares (33 acres) of riparian forest and high creek terrace. A total of 36 hectares (90 acres) of riparian and upland habitat throughout the park would be designated as "natural habitat", protected from off-road vehicles by an extensive post and cable barrier, and preserved in perpetuity. Landscaping for the softball complex and new park elements would consist of locally native species except for turf grass.

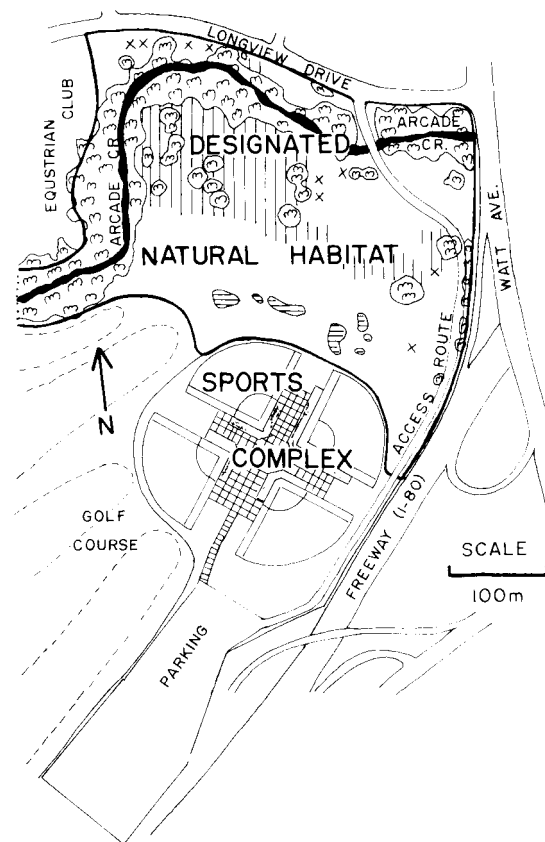


Figure 5– The implementation plan for the Del Paso Regional Park softball complex featured a setback of athletic facilities to preserve the primary environmental amenities between Longview Drive, the freeway, the golf course, and the equestrian club. Designated natural habitat is bounded by a solid line. Note the removal of the tree nursery and turf production facility from the designated natural habitat.

The Del Paso Regional Park Master Plan owes its success to the iterative technical process and public participation requirements mandated by CEQA. Today, thousands of people participate in year-round softball leagues at the park. A recently published interpretive pamphlet invites visitors to "discover" local wildlife along improved park trails. Still, there is unfinished business. Several sensitive park parcels remain unprotected; and while the City welcomes academic study to the park, it has yet to make a fiscal commitment toward research, resource management, or habitat restoration.

Making Public Participation Work

If citizens want to influence government decision-making, they must become technically credible, cognizant of bureaucratic and political pressure points, and skilled at the art of compromise. They must grasp the laws and policies governing their situation, and determine the link between what is desirable and what is possible. They must define their cause in specific terms and use the media to rally support. If a "policy gap" exists that impedes their progress, they must participate in the policy-making arena to fill the void. They must work until their vision becomes an institutionalized part of government's operation. Finally, they must persevere to ensure that their gains are not eroded by political whim or lost via decay of institutional memory.

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