

To: Berkeley City Council
From: John Steere, George Beier, Robert Collier, Beebo Turman, Shawna McCarroll, Nancy Carleton
Re: Lessons learned from parks planning process
Date: July 24, 2014

Dear Mayor Bates and fellow Council members,

Reasonable people can disagree whether the best election strategy for Berkeley's parks would be a Parks Tax increase for staffing and maintenance or a combination package that also includes more ambitious capital projects. The Council's June 24 choice of a Parks Tax increase passed up a rare chance to rescue Willard Pool, initiate the Santa Fe Right of Way garden greenway, and carry out major renovations at parks all around Berkeley. We believe that without such popular projects, the Parks Tax increase may lose the November election. But that's hardly the most important lesson to be learned from the parks decision-making saga. As veterans of this process, we would like to offer several long-term takeaways for the City Council, senior City staff and the interested public.

1) Plan strategically. Berkeley's public planning methods are dysfunctional. Consider what was discarded by the June 24 Council vote: 1) months of public hearings and deliberations last year by the Parks and Waterfront Commission, at which hundreds of people advocated for major parks improvements; 2) the Commission's [recommendation to Council](#), which called for an election package very similar to the final Mello-Roos combination proposal; and 3) a public groundswell in which hundreds more residents came to Council meetings and advocated for Willard Pool, the Santa Fe Right of Way gardens, and other parks projects around town.

Given this dismissal of so much community input, many residents will inevitably ask the most practical yet personal question of all: Why should I spend my time volunteering in City-run civic affairs? To restore meaningful participation, Berkeley needs a coherent system that can determine community priorities and create a framework of objective criteria to reflect those priorities. The Council should then review all capital projects and major budget decisions in light of these criteria and provide specific reasons for approval or disapproval. Such a process would provide much-needed public transparency and would increase the chances of voter approval of necessary tax measures.

2) Create Council committees to oversee complex planning processes. Since late last year, parks stakeholders repeatedly asked the Council to create a temporary advisory committee to examine parks needs and to provide recommendations for a ballot measure. No action was taken, and as a result the Council's long discussions of election options for the parks were superficial and repetitive.

The need for improved planning processes will increase in coming years when the Council confronts hard budget choices and huge capital needs, as described in the [City Auditor's July 8 report](#). Creation of issue-specific committees would allow the Council to address

complex topics in greater detail, and it would allow a mutual feedback loop with community stakeholders to clarify priorities and prevent misunderstandings.

3) Don't waste time and money creating "master plans" that will soon be discarded.

In recent years, the Parks, Recreation and Waterfront Department has overseen three major planning processes that have failed:

- 2006-07 - [Warm Water Pool Study](#). Planning cost: \$100,000+. The final plan called for a stand-alone indoor Warm Pool on the former tennis courts at Milvia and Bancroft. Cost estimate of \$9.7 million did not include construction contingency, soft costs, hazmat or assorted fees, so final project cost would have been at least \$15 million. Results: The plan was immediately discarded.
- 2008-09 - [Citywide Pools Master Plan](#). Planning cost: \$450,000+. The final plan called for \$29.2 million for pools, including an indoor pools complex at West Campus. Results: The plan was quietly discarded.
- 2008-09: [Terrace View Park Master Plan](#). Planning cost: \$100,000. The final plan called for \$2 million in work. Results: the City carried out \$422,500 in work with Measure WW funds. The rest of the project (\$2,337,500 in 2014 dollars) has been cited as a non-priority in the Parks Department's series of lists of capital project needs, and it is effectively discarded.

Each of these master plans involved the hiring of external consultants, many public meetings, countless hours of City staff time (not included in planning costs) and even more countless hours of community members' unpaid time. The City Council and City staff failed to provide effective guidance for projects' scope and price, and instead they appeared to use the processes as a way to dodge tough decisions.

In early July, two Council members informed us that the City Manager had "earmarked" \$100,000 to draw up a master plan for the Santa Fe Right of Way gardens. The Mello-Roos proposal rejected by the Council in June would have included \$1.2 million for this project – not only for the master plan but also for the construction of two blocks of gardens. While a stand-alone master plan might conceivably serve some use at a later day, we question whether investing any City money or community members' time makes sense at this juncture in light of the Council's refusal to fund work on construction of the project itself.

4) Be transparent about priorities of City staff. The Council's June 24 decision gave senior City staff what they appeared to have been quietly lobbying for all along – a Parks Tax increase that would give the City Manager an annual infusion of cash to patch holes in the City budget. In effect, the measure on the November ballot is not a Parks Tax but a City Manager Tax. Perhaps that's what Berkeley really needs, or perhaps not. But in future planning processes, City staff should be transparent about their priorities and Council members should be equally transparent about how they will resolve any discrepancies between the priorities of staff and those of the public.

5) Design voter surveys with realistic options. Members of the Council majority said they opted for the Parks Tax increase because they believed it would have a better chance of winning the election than a Mello-Roos combination measure. However, those assertions were not supported by results of the City's two voter surveys in [March](#) and [April](#). Despite our frequent requests, those surveys attempted no apples-to-apples comparison of realistically priced versions of a Mello-Roos and Parks Tax. The surveys' only question that succeeded in pushing both options over the 67 percent threshold (with little gap between them) contained the speculative and possibly false assertion that "without this investment, some parks and playgrounds will have to be closed" (see #13 [here](#)). The voter surveys wound up being of little use for parks decision-making.

6) More communication, less stonewalling. Over the past year, senior City staff often were non-responsive to our requests for information. The Parks Department's cost figures and priority lists for capital projects were divulged slowly and changed frequently, thus inhibiting planning for a Mello-Roos option. As in 2010 and 2012, when pools project costs appeared so [inflated by staff overhead](#) that they undermined public support for the pools bond measures, our requests for clarification of parks project costs often were ignored. On Feb. 20, 2014, the City's Public Information Officer went so far as to refuse any communication with our parks stakeholder group, writing, "I need you to not email me about the poll or potential bond measures." Our follow-up queries to him were met with silence.

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Above all, Berkeley needs a civic process that works. Our city has a proud history of participatory democracy that deserves to be acknowledged and restored. By taking the steps as suggested above, the City Council can demonstrate that it respects community input and is willing to harness it to confront the difficult challenges for budgeting and capital planning in the years ahead.

Yours truly,



John Steere, president, Berkeley Partners for Parks; co-chair Halcyon Neighborhood Association



George Beier, president, Willard Neighborhood Association



Robert Collier, co-chair of campaign for Measures N and O in 2012



Beebo Turman, coordinator, Berkeley Community Gardening Collaborative



Shawna McCarroll, chair, Land Use Working Group, Berkeley Climate Action Coalition



Nancy Carleton, former vice chair, Parks and Recreation Commission; chair of successful campaign for parks Measures S and W in 2000; former chair, Zoning Adjustments Board

Cc: Christine Daniel
Ann-Marie Hogan