bcca
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for community
advancement



Balboa Park Community Progress Report

July 2024

Introduction

The Burnham Center for Community Advancement (BCCA), founded in 2021 by Malin Burnham and Tad Seth Parzen, is a nonpartisan 501(c)(3), created to help make our San Diego region a better place to live, work, and play for all.

A key BCAA initiative is preserving and enhancing Balboa Park, one of our region's most valued public places, which is often referred to as San Diego's "crown jewel." In November 2022, BCCA published its first report on the future of the park. The report included a summary of governance and financial stability options based on a national review of best practice regional park maintenance, operations, and funding systems. It also presented links to past Balboa Park-focused studies, noting their consistent emphasis on addressing governance, management, and financing issues within the park.

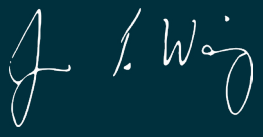
The ultimate challenge raised in our earlier report was how the community can move past its history of ignoring previous study recommendations — and functionally address long-problematic governance and decades of underinvestment in Balboa Park. BCCA's goal is to catalyze solutions, ensuring the park remains a treasure for future generations of San Diego County residents and visitors from around the world.

This interim report provides an overview of progress over the last 18 months and a roadmap for next steps. It details the need for community stakeholders to reassess the park's management and governance structures and highlights the critical need to address the City of San Diego's decades-long underinvestment in the park. Thank you to all who contributed, and to you, the reader, for caring about this regional treasure.



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Celebrating Progress

Over the past 18 months, the Balboa Park community and City of San Diego have seen several positive milestones within Balboa Park's administration. Recognizing these milestones is crucial to demonstrate confidence to the public that today's efforts are a departure from past efforts that did not bring about needed results, and as a basis for the work that will follow. Notably, none of the current work could have occurred without the contributions of community leaders, stakeholders, and passionate advocates to help Balboa Park realize its potential.

JANUARY 2023

Following the release of its report in November 2022, BCCA established a Balboa Park Working Group, focused on the park's long-term governance and fiscal sustainability challenges. The working group includes organizations such as the Balboa Park Cultural Partnership, Forever Balboa Park, Committee of 100, Girl Scouts San Diego, the Downtown San Diego Partnership, and others. Together, they brought a blend of longstanding and emerging advocacy ideas for the park, ensuring a diverse range of perspectives were considered and discussed.

APRIL 2023

A task force led by the Balboa Park Cultural Partnership (BPCP), and including Forever Balboa Park as a close collaborator, prepares and distributes a comprehensive set of recommendations similar to many of those in the BCCA 2022 report. These recommendations focus on improving park management and fostering closer collaboration with the City of San Diego.

MAY 2023

Mayor Gloria holds the first-ever "State of Balboa Park" event. For over 20 years, Todd Gloria in a variety of public service roles, including policy advisor, Council member, Assemblymember, and now mayor, has been a passionate and informed advocate for the park. In his speech, the Mayor noted that, "My focus is on working with partners to accomplish more than the City can do on its own." After noting recent improvements to the Park and contributions from the State, he said, "You may have noticed a

common element in these projects. We rely on our partnerships with our federal and state legislative delegations, plus private nonprofit groups in the Park. Only together can we accomplish so much more than the city could ever do on our own."

MAY 2023

Also during the speech, the Mayor announced the Prioritization Framework, and a companion Framework for the Future, both slated for completion in 2024. The framework is intended to help establish a systematic approach for prioritizing park initiatives and tackling the maintenance backlog.

AUGUST 2023

The state budget includes $7M for Balboa Park's essential improvements, underscoring, as the Mayor had noted, the continued dedication of state leaders' commitment to preserving and enhancing the iconic landmark for the community's benefit.

NOVEMBER 2023

San Diego breaks tourism records. In FY23, San Diego welcomed an estimated 30.5 million visitors who collectively stayed longer in the region and contributed a record $14.28B in direct local spending. Balboa Park is cited as a renowned attraction and economic engine.[1]

JANUARY 2024

City of San Diego issues a comprehensive Special Use Permit (SUP), conferring to Forever Balboa Park responsibility for and the right to act on certain functions within Balboa Park.

JANUARY 2024

Forever Balboa Park unveils its first-ever Strategic Plan, solidifying its position as a leading nonprofit entity within the Park, committed to annually raising substantial funds for continuous park improvements.

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1. https://timesofsandiego.com/business/2023/11/10/tourism-is-powerhouse-for-san-diego-region-generating-23-5b-in-economic-impact/

FEBRUARY 2024

The Balboa Park/San Diego High School – Connections Working Group, which includes the Balboa Park Committee of 100, issued its visionary report, "Connecting Neighbors: Parks, Schools, Jobs, Culture." The report is conceptually based on past ambitions, the existing reality of our City, and the desire to grow San Diego's urban core and fill it with life by creating vibrant and walkable streets, as well as incorporating recreation, arts, culture, and creativity into the public realm. It is named in respect to John Nolen and pays homage to his vision for a San Diego that is truly connected to nature.

FEBRUARY 2024

As jointly recommended by the BPCP task force and BCCA, the City of San Diego announces the creation of a newly restructured Parks & Recreation Department and the appointment of Jon Richards as its first Deputy Director of Balboa Park. It is critically important that Balboa Park be well-funded and staffed, plus be given the authority to do what is needed to serve the Park and its tenants effectively and efficiently. A major step forward.

MAY 2024

The Balboa Park Cultural Partnership releases its Experience Plan, which focuses on elevating visitor experiences and maintaining the park as a vibrant hub for cultural and recreational activities.

MAY 2024

The BCCA Balboa Park Working Group focuses on creating a strategy to manage the diverse components of Balboa Park, including the Cultural District and various areas of tenancy, more effectively to address their distinct uses and needs.

Next Steps for the BCCA Working Group

Building on the significant progress of the last 18 months, the BCCA Balboa Park Working Group is now prioritizing actions that will lead to specific and concrete results. A key aspect of our efforts revolves around park governance. By addressing governance issues, we establish a solid foundation upon which we can effectively address broader challenges within the Park, including fiscal concerns and deferred maintenance. A smaller subgroup of key stakeholders has formed to hammer out a concept for vastly improved governance that will lead to a higher functioning park, enhanced collaboration and support from the City of San Diego, and that will make our park more appealing to both public and private sector funding partners. We anticipate completion of an implementable concept by the end of 2024. This concept will naturally evolve over time and improve in its functions as the work emerges.



We Can Solve Balboa Park

As we continue the hard work of building consensus around how to address Balboa Park's needs and turning that consensus into a functioning and successful system of governance and finance, it is important to keep in mind the issues in Balboa Park are not unique to San Diego. As the 2008 Soul of San Diego report notes, parks across the nation suffer from decades of underinvestment in urban infrastructure. However, numerous cities have successfully revitalized their parks through redesigned funding mechanisms and partnerships.

> "The challenges being faced today by Balboa Park are not unique. In fact, San Diego would be unique among large cities if its destination park did not need millions of dollars of upgrades in an environment of ever-more-stretched municipal finances. All across the U.S., the legacy of decades of underinvestment in urban infrastructure has taken a toll on parks.
>
> However, bringing parks back to excellence can be done. Cities all over the nation have risen to the challenge, redesigned funding mechanisms and partnerships, and brought their facilities up to standards of beauty and functionality not seen for decades. With proper leadership, this can also occur here, and Balboa Park can continue to serve as the "Soul of San Diego" for centuries to come." [2]

With this understanding, we approach our task optimistically, guided by a central principle: Balboa Park's governance, operations, and financial systems must optimize the City and region's capacity to manage, fund, and maintain the park while enhancing the Balboa Park experience for all.

2. https://www.sandiego.gov/sites/default/files/legacy/park-and-recreation/pdf/bptf/1.thesoulofsandiego-january2008.pdf, page 21

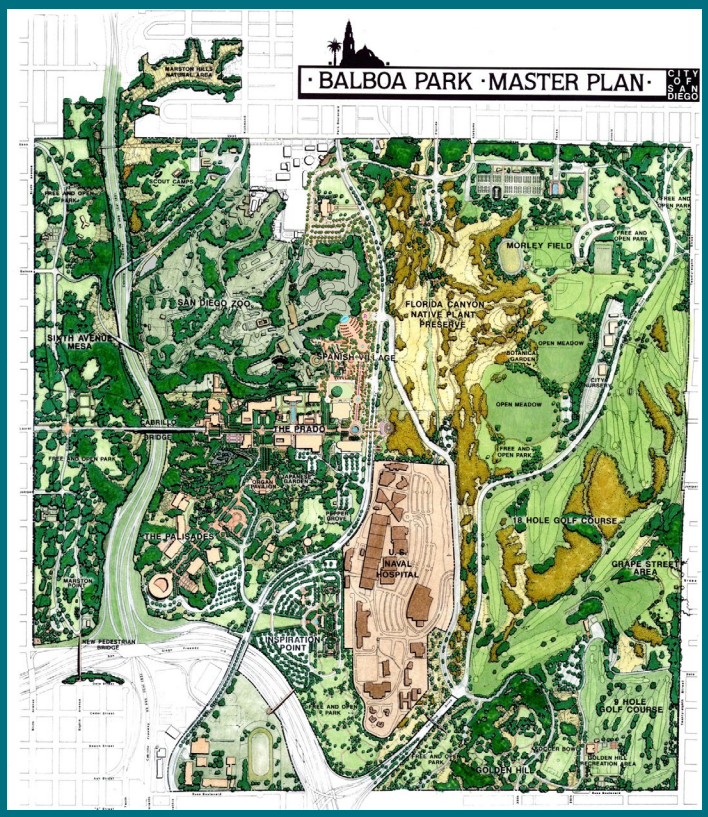
Understanding Balboa Park

When we talk about what Balboa Park “is”, we get many different answers to this seemingly easy question. Physically, Balboa Park is an approximately 1200-acre multipurpose park located in the center of the City of San Diego. That description, while accurate, does not capture the functional realities of the Park. Within its boundaries, the Park accommodates multiple and fundamentally diverse recreational and experiential activities on a scale unique among all of the City’s other parks that are, with few exceptions, unique in the nation. Viewed generally, Balboa Park provides:

- Critical neighborhood-serving parks, playgrounds, and recreation facilities, plus significant, irreplaceable passive open spaces within our increasingly urbanizing city.
- Access to multiple museums, arts organizations, entertainment venues, and the Zoo.



It is fascinating to look at the map of the Balboa Park Master Plan, which Estrada Land Planning prepared for the City years ago.[3]



The perimeter of the park jumps out as containing irreplaceable, visual open spaces for many of the City's most historic neighborhoods, including Golden Hill, South Park, North Park, Uptown, Hillcrest, and Bankers Hill. In these communities, Balboa Park is often the primary place to play, hike, or just get away from concrete and buildings. While there are some commercial activities within these areas, they are largely funded and managed by the City, such as the Balboa Park Golf Course.

Within Balboa Park's central mesa lies the Cultural District, housing many of the San Diego region's most cherished and frequented establishments, such as museums, performing arts venues, the Zoo, and restaurants. While the majority of these Cultural District venues operate as nonprofit organizations (with some being for-profit), each faces the typical challenges of sustaining revenue, managing facilities, staffing, and programming.

The Cultural District stands out as the Park's primary economic and cultural hub, attracting the highest number of visitors. Unfortunately, it also bears the brunt of facility and infrastructure deterioration, leading to significant challenges in implementing improvements and coordinating management efforts. These difficulties detrimentally affect both park users and cultural institutions alike.

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3. https://estradalandplan.com/portfolios/balboa-park-master-plan/

Decades-Long Challenges

Balboa Park's underfunding has exacerbated an already complex situation. Despite efforts to determine the extent of deferred maintenance, consensus on a precise figure remains elusive. However, it is universally acknowledged that the backlog is substantial. The "Soul of San Diego" report estimated the deficit at $238M in 2007 dollars, a figure closely aligned with a San Diego UT article from the same year citing $257M. Regardless of the current exact amount, it is undeniable that the figure has ballooned over the past seventeen years, perhaps as high as $1B.

Today, cities face ever-increasing demands on their fiscal resources, surpassing their ongoing operational, emergency, and capital needs year after year. Consequently, it becomes tempting for municipalities to make cuts or defer investments in what is perceived as "nonessential" areas, such as public parks.

The San Diego Independent Budget Analyst (IBA), in an April 12, 2024 report dealing generally with San Diego's capital project planning, wrote:

> "The City faces significant fiscal challenges, with a structural deficit in the operating budget, chronically underfunded maintenance for several assets (e.g., stormwater and facilities), and a significant five-year $4.8B capital funding gap which continues to grow. Existing revenue sources have limitations and are not sufficient to address the City's infrastructure needs. Ultimately, new revenue sources are needed to both maintain and build necessary City infrastructure." [4]

As we embark on the next phase of work on our journey to enhance Balboa Park's governance, operations, and financial systems, let us remain steadfast in our optimism, knowing that with proper leadership and concerted effort, we can create a new approach for addressing the Park's challenges.

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4. https://www.sandiego.gov/sites/default/files/2024-04/24-08-effective-capital-planning-financing-and-capital-improvement-program-cip-execution_0.pdf, page 13

Park Governance

Not one person or entity with whom we have spoken denies that meaningful change and real, concrete action is required if Balboa Park is to continue to maintain in the decades ahead its place as a widely visited and iconic symbol of what makes San Diego a great city. Despite this recognition, the historic inability of the City and Park advocates to implement past recommendations and the pressing issue of underfunding underscore the need for decisive measures. What avenues can we pursue to bring about substantial change and secure the financial resources essential for Balboa Park's future?

Mayor Todd Gloria, in his 2023 State of Balboa Park speech, emphasized the significance of partners helping and supporting the City to do more for the Park than the City can do on its own. All agree that San Diego, and Balboa Park, would benefit tremendously from the City formally partnering, under an MOU, with a strong organization possessing the appropriate scope, authority, and structure to fulfill its mission.

Across the United States, more than 40 cities and counties facing similar challenges have forged MOUs with dedicated partners, thereby bolstering governmental initiatives, leveraging existing resources, and achieving objectives that would otherwise be arduous for the City alone. It is important to clarify that these partners are not vehicles for privatization; rather, they operate as independent entities dedicated to the park's benefit, while the city retains ownership of the land and structures.

> "Conservancies are private, nonprofit park-benefit organizations that raise money independent of the city and spend it under a plan of action mutually agreed upon with the government. Most conservancies neither own nor hold easements on the parkland; the land remains the city's … The impetus for their creation often comes from a combination of users and nearby residents, but the political receptivity of the mayor and city government is a de facto requirement." [6]

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5. https://e7jecw7o93n.exactdn.com/wp-content/uploads/2015/07/ccpe-Parks-Conservancy-Report.pdf
6. https://www.tpl.org/resource/public-spacesprivate-money, page 8

The concept of a partner or conservancy for Balboa Park was first proposed in 2010-2011 during the tenure of former Mayor Jerry Sanders, supported by then-Councilmember Todd Gloria. Although this effort did not succeed as initially envisioned, the “Balboa Park Conservancy” and “Friends of Balboa Park” merged to form “Forever Balboa Park.” This previous effort provides invaluable lessons on forming a public-private partnership with a robust organization to support the diverse interests within the park. These lessons include:

- Successful efforts operate under a clear written agreement, generally an MOU, with the public entity that owns the park. These agreements are critical to aligning the efforts of the City, the private partner, and the broader community.
- Initially, a new or coalesced entity should concentrate on actionable initiatives within its immediate capacity and financial means, with the flexibility to expand its scope as capacity grows and objectives are achieved.
- The entity should be formed privately, and not under the direction of or at the request of the City.
- Unlike the traditional “support” organization, a central role of the entity would be to raise money and/or manage projects as agreed with the City. The entity will gain credibility by demonstrating the capacity and resources to do what it has committed to do.

Currently, various entities like Forever Balboa Park, the Balboa Park Cultural Partnership, and the Committee of 100 (C100) operate with distinct focuses on specific roles and parts of the Park. The Balboa Park Cultural Partnership serves as the collaborative association of 26 arts, science, and cultural institutions in the Park. C100 is a volunteer-driven organization dedicated to preserving the Park’s historical architecture, gardens, and public spaces. Forever Balboa Park is actively fundraising for the restoration of the Botanical Building and is dedicated to fostering collaboration, promoting sustainability, and enriching the cultural experience throughout the Park. The organization has recently adopted a three-year strategic plan, focusing on elevating the Park as an environmental resource, enhancing the visitor experience, and coordinating and completing emergent improvement projects. They are committed to expanding their efforts in the future.

In the meantime, there is a pressing need to address issues within the Cultural District and other tenant-occupied areas, which are outside the scope of Forever Balboa Park's current strategic plan. These areas lack organization, management, and leadership, suffer from substantial deferred and ongoing maintenance issues, and face challenges in coordination, despite being central to the Park's cultural and tourism activities.

We need to bolster capacity in this critical area, now and with clarity. The Cultural District and other buildings are the most highly used by the public and have most of the deferred and ongoing maintenance issues, among other specific needs such as landlord-tenant issues, common areas, permitting, and coordination with the City. In no scenario is it wise to leave the most economically and culturally productive asset in a City portfolio susceptible to further decline.

The BCCA Balboa Park Working Group is dedicated to identifying or creating an entity capable of addressing these challenges. The focus on the Cultural District is not to the exclusion of other park areas; rather, it represents a strategic approach to ensure each part of the park receives the attention it needs to thrive. To achieve this, the Working Group and its members will spend the next several months reaching a consensus on how to proceed effectively.



Fiscal Sustainability

Acknowledging the limitations of relying solely on the City's annual budget to address Balboa Park's capital deficiencies is paramount. Despite numerous studies highlighting the pressing need for significant investment in the Park's buildings, not enough progress has been made. With the City facing ongoing financial constraints and unexpected events, expecting it to single-handedly rectify decades of underfunding is unrealistic.

To navigate this challenge, embracing alternative methods to secure substantial capital dollars is essential. By establishing sustainable implementation structures, Balboa Park can tap into philanthropic potential and garner political and regional will for future funding mechanisms and allocations. To do so necessitates good planning and implementation, supported by reliable data, in order to instill confidence that any new money is under good management.

While the current City administration may not be responsible for past underinvestment, it has the opportunity to enact proposals that will generate the necessary capital to preserve Balboa Park's iconic buildings and address its critical needs. By recognizing the limitations of relying solely on City resources, exploring alternative funding avenues, and prioritizing effective planning and management, Balboa Park can secure its future as a cultural gem for generations to come.

In collaboration with the City, the BCCA Balboa Park Working Group is committed to exploring alternative funding options to address the Park's capital deficiencies. We eagerly anticipate reviewing the City's upcoming Framework for the Future and Prioritization reports, which will provide crucial long-term plans necessary for identifying the resources needed to tackle deferred maintenance. By working hand-in-hand with the City and private partners, and leveraging these strategic documents, together we can chart a sustainable path forward for Balboa Park.

Conclusion

Over the past decades, multiple reports have focused on Balboa Park's challenges. Even though the language has varied from report to report and from decade to decade, the messaging and conclusions were essentially the same—Balboa Park is not functioning up to its potential, and its current organizational structure and funding challenges may inevitably erode this civic treasure.

These issues are not new. What is new is that we are striving to present tangible ideas that could produce real solutions and positive outcomes. Change is not easy, seamless, or without controversy. When a place is so loved by so many, there will always be passionate disagreements and debates.

In the past 18 months, Balboa Park has witnessed remarkable progress, fueled by the unwavering dedication of the community and City leaders. The accomplishments achieved thus far serve as a testament to the power of collaboration and a shared vision for a revitalized Balboa Park. As we look ahead, we recognize that the path forward requires sustained effort and innovative solutions to address the Park's governance, fiscal sustainability, and maintenance needs.

Through a multifaceted approach that encompasses exploring alternative funding mechanisms, fostering strategic partnerships, and implementing sustainable management practices, we can overcome these challenges and ensure Balboa Park's continued vibrancy. The BCCA Balboa Park Working Group remains committed to working hand-in-hand with the City and partners to forge a path toward a prosperous future for the Park.

We are confident that with unwavering determination, collaborative spirit, and courageous leadership, we can create a Balboa Park that not only thrives but also sets a new standard for urban parks nationwide. Together, we can build a legacy of excellence for generations to come, ensuring that Balboa Park remains a beloved cultural treasure and a source of pride for the San Diego community.