

A Great Neighborhood Improvement Project: Bee Canyon Park

Host: Paul Napier
In-studio Guests: Mary Ellen Crosby, Granada Hills North Neighborhood Council
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City of Los Angeles
Insert Guest: Mary Ellen Crosby

Paul: Is your local park in need of improvement? I presume that there is a constant need for service in your parks and bringing them up to date, right, Kevin?

Kevin: That is very true. We have over 358 parks in the City of Los Angeles and many of those parks were built in the early 1920's or earlier, so you can imagine that there are many years of use and need of repairs. Very often we don't have the budget necessary to repair things as quickly as we'd like. The need for the community or the Neighborhood Councils to assist us is always there.

Paul: Getting involved is a natural transition to Mary Ellen because we're talking specifically about an instance where you got involved.

Mary Ellen: Yes. Our situation was a little different. It wasn't for repair and use, our playground was only about five or six years old, but the state sent down a ruling that all playgrounds in California had to come up to certain specifications or code and that meant that the mounts underneath the swings and the playground equipment had to be up to a certain spec. Even though it was only put in about five years ago, Bee Canyon Park wasn't compliant. Therefore, they came in, closed it down by taking the swings down, and chained it up. For a year our playground sat there and the kids really missed it.

Paul: The whole park remained open, but the playground was closed?

Mary Ellen: Correct. Our Councilman, Greg Smith, raised money to give to this particular park, Bee Canyon, and the money was even extended to Balboa. The Neighborhood Council also worked just as hard and also had a lot of input in everything that was done with the park. We argued a lot over whether to save certain trees or take them out or how deep that creek can be, and the Department of Recreation and Parks was good to work. In our neighborhood we have a lot of conservationists that weren't the easiest to get along with, but we came to good compromises.

Paul: Kevin, is this a problem that you're having in a number of the parks throughout the city?

Kevin: It does happen time-to-time that the state will modify or change the laws pertaining to playground safety, and whenever that happens the City of Los Angeles needs to bring those playgrounds up to standard. Right now, there is only one other playground in the City, Elysian Park, that's actually closed because of a safety concern. The Rec. and Parks Department works year round to try to keep the playgrounds open and when the laws change we send the crews out to make the appropriate changes and adjustments. In this case the law had changed

because the actual, what we call the fall zone, that's an area of the playground where when the kids are coming down the slide or when they're going to fall off or jump off the swing, the area has to be made of a certain type of material. The playground at Bee Canyon was, even though it was only a few years old, already outdated as far as the law was concerned. Because we knew that a major improvement needed to be done, we had to close the entire playground, which became a major concern to the community and the Neighborhood Council.

Paul: A lot of problems means a lot of solutions. Why don't we take a look at some of the changes at Bee Canyon Park?

<<video clip>>

Mary Ellen: Bee Canyon is two miles long. It runs from Sesnon Blvd. to Balboa and the side street of Van Gough and Nabisco. This is our lovely playground that's for the children under twelve and it's really been used a lot until the state came in and said there was a new law or a new provision that our playgrounds had to have certain requirements. As you can see, ours has rubber matting underneath it, but that didn't pass inspections so they came in and closed our playground down.

It sat empty here for almost a year. I went to the Neighborhood Council and I brought up this situation before them, which made them very interested in helping the community. Particularly because it involved children. I said, "look, we need this money to get this playground going." I checked with the Parks Department and they said that they will re-do it if you can get the money for us and when they told me how much, oh my God, \$51,000! I knew I couldn't get that amount from the Neighborhood Council, but nevertheless I tried other alternatives. I went to our Councilman, Greg Smith, 12th Council District, and he said that he was going to see what he can do for the communities that really need money. He came up with \$21,000 or \$26,000. The Neighborhood Council came up with \$25,000 and now after many months of going through all the legal ramifications of downtown, it finally went through. The Rec. and Parks Department has the money and they have started to buy the equipment. As you can see the swings over here have been taken down. What they're going to do is put an 18-foot little concrete wall around the bottom of it and fill that with 18 inches of sand. They are going to replace our two little spring harnesses over here, and there will be rubber underneath them. This is what we're gonna have done, and we promise to paint it a natural color because everything in this park is meant to be nature and be natural looking.

This bridge that I'm standing on, as you can hear, is metal. It won't burn. We used to have a bridge here that they had originally put on the playground that was made out of wood, but the reality is that the wood makes it susceptible to fires. We learned that because when there was a fire it burnt the bridge that was here. Most of the time that the playground was here we didn't have a bridge, and now that's not the case because soon we will have both. The children had to walk at least a half a block down that way to go over a bridge to get to our playground. Now we have a bridge, but we don't have a playground. We worked with good people that were working on the park when they started the redevelopment. We told them that we had to have a bridge here, and they promised us a bridge. With much work and talk, the Neighborhood Council got it done. Now the children can come right through here right into the playground.

If everything goes according to plan, the money is there, the Park Department is beginning to work on it, the equipment has been bought and I hope within the near future because of the Neighborhood Council, work with the Rec. and Parks Department, and with our Councilman Smith, I hope we're gonna have a playground again and all of the kids will be happy again.

<<End video clip>>

Paul: Very good Mary Ellen. Interesting that Bee Canyon Park seems to be a little more rusted and natural than what we associate with most of our city parks.

Mary Ellen: We are adjacent to O'Melveny Park, which is second largest park in Los Angeles next to Griffith Park, and that's a nature park. Everything in it is natural and lots of mountains and hills, mountain lions, coyotes, squirrels, snakes, roam around it. Bee Canyon is adjoining it, and it runs through the center of the area. It is very natural and everything is kept that way, even the new edition that was added to it. A little outdoor classroom was put in for the children. Everything is done in a very natural, so there are lots of wildflowers. It brings people together and when you're there you don't even think that you're in Los Angeles anymore. You think your out in the forest. It's marvelous.

Paul: You mentioned a predator amongst the occupants of the adjacent park. Is this a problem? Do we come across this in other parks? How do you secure against the immediacy of a predator like a mountain lion?

Kevin: That's one of the interesting things about Los Angeles. Even though that we're very urbanized and many of the parks are in urban areas, Los Angeles is bordered by areas that are very natural and very still wild; O'Melveny and Griffith Park are prime examples. Recently we've had several mountain lion sightings within Griffith Park and there's been a lot of thought to that. The City Council has discussed the issue and the basic philosophy is we'll just monitor the area. Park rangers keep a close eye out. We work closely with animal regulation and monitor mountain lions and coyotes. If there are no problems, then we essentially just leave the animals alone in their natural habitat.

Mary Ellen: That's why we've got those kiosks.

Kevin: Along with the Neighborhood Council, Rec. and Parks has installed informational kiosks for the public to use at both those parks.

Paul: In other words the kiosks serve as a posting of warnings, general information, etc.

Kevin: Just general information. It's good for people to know that there's potentially a rattlesnake in the area in case of O'Melveny or even mountain lions in some places.

Mary Ellen: We try to give information like what to do if you approach a mountain lion, if the coyotes come up to you, or how to react and there's a description of what to do. There was a few bulletin boards and kiosks up in O'Melveny, but we didn't have any in Bee Canyon, so there I went to work with our Neighborhood Council again, and they paid for them. I wanted three, but they wouldn't buy three. As you can see, I'm kind of picky when it comes to the park. I'm never happy.

Paul: Did Rec. and Parks help you getting all three kiosks?

Mary Ellen: I went to Rec. and Parks and asked them about it and Kevin said sure if you purchase them from this company and buy the ones that they say we'll buy one. We installed one in the entrance toward O'Melveny and the Neighborhood Council bought one for the

entrance at Bee Canyon Playground. We also went to another organization that works with the Neighborhood Council called the North Valley Coalition and they said well we'll buy one too. Now we have three kiosks. We've posted useful information like the stuff that I mentioned earlier, and also other types of information like about the schools and various organizations' special events. We also have posted the Neighborhood Council meetings, which take place once a month. This is helpful because Granada Hills is a very unusual area, we don't have, but one small grocery store, and we have no places to post this information

Paul: No central place where the community could go to, correct.

Mary Ellen: There are no stores in our area. We are a bedroom community. With the kiosks, we can now post our Neighborhood Council meetings. It's working out wonderfully because Rec. and Parks is maintaining them. Recently we had a graffiti problem, but we simply called Rec. and Parks and they took care of it.

Paul: When we saw the tape before there was significant dollars amounts mentioned, \$51,000 that was needed for that improvement that was mandated by the state. Kevin, where does that money come from?

Kevin: In this case the \$51,000 was a combination of two funding sources. \$25,000 was identified and allocated by the Granada Hills North Neighborhood Council and the other part of this great collaboration was with the City. Council Member Greg Smith worked closely with the Department of Rec. and Parks to identify the remaining \$26,000. The Department of Recreation and Parks actually didn't fund any of the repairs because unfortunately with the difficult financial times that the city has been going through, much of our playground repair money has been cut from the budget. We didn't have the money to repair this play area. If it hadn't been for the great work of Mary Ellen, the Neighborhood Council, and the Council Member Smith the park would still be closed.

Paul: I'm sure that there are viewers who would like to see if their park and if their Neighborhood Council could be improved. Where exactly does the funding come from? If I'm understanding correctly, some of the money came from some of the Council Member's discretionary funds?

Kevin: That is correct.

Paul: Mary Ellen, where does the Neighborhood Council get their money from?

Mary Ellen: Every Neighborhood Council is allotted so much money, \$50,000 to be exact, during the year to run things, do things with, and so I went before the board and asked for the money. I was very fortunate that Becky Benickson who was our chairman last year and Mike Faye this year were interested and dedicated to getting the playground open. There was little convincing because we all know that the park is very much part of our neighborhood. They agreed that we should allocate that money to the park. There were other things that we wanted to do, but we thought the park was really important, so instead of spreading a little bit there and a little bit here, we put all our eggs in one basket.

Paul: You said that every Neighborhood Council, of which there are many throughout the City of Los Angeles, is allocated \$50,000. It's up to the community to decide what they want that money to go to, right?

Kevin: Correct.

Mary Ellen: Sometimes they have to pay for the use of a hall for meetings. Every time you use a school you have to make a donation, you have to buy supplies, and of course the inevitable printing of material. There are a lot of expenses to running a Neighborhood Council. The money isn't just sitting there. We plan community activities that come up during the year that you need the money for. We do a lot of budgeting and planning, but the people in our group, thank goodness, were very interested in the park and they decided to forgive some of the other stuff.

Kevin: This is not the first time that this has happened, where a Neighborhood Council has stepped in and helped us in the Parks Department to do some improvements at a facility. As a matter of fact right now the Bel-Air Beverly Crest Neighborhood Council....

Paul: Where is that? What area?

Kevin: In the Westside of Los Angeles. We're doing another improvement right now where we're doing a basketball court, re-stripping the basketball court, re-surfacing the court and also doing some additional play equipment in the children's play area and that's being funded by about \$10,000 from the Bel-Air Beverly Crescent Neighborhood Council.

The Parks Department has come up with a list actually of recommended improvements to many parks throughout the entire city and provided that to the Department of Neighborhood Empowerment, so that they could be in contact with the Neighborhood Councils.

Paul: Perhaps augmented by requests, such as you got from Mary Ellen or others out there watching, they can go to their Neighborhood Council and bring up the issue or the need.

Kevin: That's exactly true. In many cases the city's budget is not adequate to do everything that that particular community would like at a particular park. We need to seek funds from other resources that can help us, so the Neighborhood Councils are a perfect resource of not only getting things done, but also involving the community. We also have park advisory boards at the parks as well, which folks can join.

Mary Ellen: P.A.B. Boards.

Paul: What are P.A.B. Boards?

Kevin: P.A.B. stands for Park Advisory Board, and these are community members that volunteer their time to work with the park director to work with the maintenance staff at the park to set priorities and to try to create a vision for that particular park. Many times Neighborhood Council members are on the Park Advisory Board, as well.

Paul: Are these groups elected or chosen by the park?

Kevin: One of the best things that these advisory community groups can do is really help fundraise for special projects that they may be interested in at a park.

Paul: Interesting point. Is there a prohibition of any kind against taking donations? By the City or Rec. and Parks?

Kevin: Not at all. We'll take donations, any amount, and I think in today's economy, the City really can't do it alone anymore. We need to rely on public-private partnerships, on corporate sponsorships, on community donations, and I think it really is the way of the future.

Paul: There were concerns back in the late 1970's when Proposition 13 passed and those who opposed to it said that it was going to be at the expense of cutting a lot of services, like library hours, park hours and so forth. Now that we've got a perspective of history of over 25 years, how has it been?

Kevin: It certainly has and I think it was only really the beginning of the problem. I think that much of the way that the revenues have shifted in recent years, in regards to how the City used to benefit a lot from the property taxes and today it's mostly relying on the sales tax, everyone knows that government across the boards, state, federal, local is going through the hard financial times right now. There are a number of reasons why that occurred. It is very difficult to manage and maintain these large city agencies, like Rec. and Parks without proper funding. That's the message we are trying to send. The Parks Department has a lot of good volunteers, has a lot of good employees, but we just can't do it alone. We really appreciate everything that not only the Granada Hills Neighborhood Council did and everything that all the other Neighborhood Councils are doing.

Paul: Mary Ellen, what's the status of Bee Canyon Park, right now?

Mary Ellen: They just bought the equipment and now they're gonna install it.

Paul: Is that an additional cost?

Mary Ellen: No. No more additional costs, but like I told you I am never satisfied with what happens, as Kevin will tell you.

Kevin: If you haven't discovered that yet, I already knew that.

Mary Ellen: Now that we've got the playground, this is probably new to Kevin, I want some benches to circle around the playground, and I want a tree behind each bench because it gets over 100 degrees in the summertime. It's not uncommon to have a hundred a hundred and two degrees in the afternoon in that park and when the parents are there with their kids. The kids don't mind the heat, but the parents, we need trees in a circle around the playground, and we need more benches. Now that I've exhausted all the Neighborhood Council funds this year, I'm going to trust in them again next year, along with Rec. and Parks.

Paul: Hear that Kevin? You have a lot of work ahead of you. Would that be under what would be considered normal maintenance or improvement of the park out of your budget, such as more benches or trees?

Kevin: We do have some money available to add additional benches and trees. The great thing about trees is that the Department of Water and Power has a really helpful and wonderful program right now called the "Trees For A Green LA Program." They will provide free trees, not only to the Parks Departments, but to LA city residents, as well. We're utilizing that program to plant additional trees, and I think we can get you a free tree out of that program. I know we have two benches coming into the play area already and your asking for two more?

Mary Ellen: I'd like two or four more because people sit around there.

Kevin: I think we're gonna have to do that. We expect to have the playground to be fully completed by the first of the year, January 1st.

Mary Ellen: That's good news!

Kevin: I think that all of the parts have been ordered and the demolition of the existing area is starting.

Mary Ellen: It started.

Kevin: So that's good news and I know the community has been waiting a long time for that.

Paul: One of the things that perhaps we take for granted here in Southern California is that the year round weather gives us access to the parks all year round, which means more maintenance compared to other sections of the country where they get wintered in. Kevin, Rec. and Parks always has concerned residents to answer to, right?

Kevin: Yes, and that's a good thing.

Mary Ellen: I also wanted to commend Rec. and Parks for lining the creek that runs through the park, the way that they did. When it rains it helps a lot of the run-off.

Paul: As long as there are concerned citizens as Mary Ellen, your job is not going to become boring.

Mary Ellen: Never boring. I have a lot of job security because there are plenty of people out there that need things done and we're always happy to do it.

Paul: Right. There she is, right on time our girl Nancy with the tab. Do you think there's any money left over that you could do something about this bill?

Paul: We're just about out of time. I want to thank our guests, Mary Ellen Crosby from the Granada Hills North Neighborhood Council and Kevin Regan, Superintendent from the Department of Recreation and Parks. If you have any questions or topics you would like to see covered in future shows, you can email your comments to the Department of Neighborhood Empowerment at www.lacityneighborhoods.com or you can call 866-LAHELPS, and that is a toll free number, and if you need information on any city service simply call 3-1-1, your one call to City Hall. So for everyone here at the Neighborhood Café, I'm Paul Napier.