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## Public Forum

Preserve Leigh Creekside Park  
By MaryJo and Glen Cass

We lived next to Leigh Creekside Park (LCP) in Lafayette in the 1990s and participated in the grassroots effort to create the park. It's a fascinating story, and an important one, given the fact that the park's rustic, open-space ambiance is currently targeted for development.

Defined in City plans as a "passive neighborhood" park, Leigh Creekside Park is located at Moraga Boulevard and Fourth Street, next to Las Trampas Creek, a few steps from the Lafayette-Moraga Regional Trail. It's less than one acre, with an open-space ambiance and an inviting wildlife riparian corridor.

The park is named after John and Ethel Leigh, former owners of the property and early Lafayette residents. Developers often knocked on their door over the years, offering to purchase their land. Their answer was always no; they preferred to keep development at bay. After John passed away in August 1998, a developer again tried to purchase the parcels that comprise today's park, to build five homes.

Concerned about development and remembering John and Ethel's wish that their property would one day become a park, neighbors got busy. Lisa and Tom Christophe spearheaded a grassroots neighborhood campaign to honor the Leighs' wish. We joined them in this effort, knocking on doors, asking residents if they would like a park, and make a donation. They said yes to both, but wanted to preserve the property as an undeveloped open space that would not invite noise, vandalism and traffic.

In a recent conversation, Lisa Christophe described our objective at the time. "Donors were told that the property would be preserved in its natural state with no development whatsoever. This was the whole point of the purchase." In a December 22, 1998 letter, she wrote, "John Leigh relished the property's preservation as an open space. Neighbors have been very supportive of acquisition of the property and its preservation in its natural state. Over 150 people signed a preservation petition."

In a December 18, 1998 letter to the East Bay Regional Parks Land Acquisition Department, Lafayette's Parks and Recreation Director Jennifer Russell wrote, "an overwhelming majority would like the land preserved in as natural a state as possible."

A Dec. 19, 1998 article in The Contra Costa Times reported, "A groundswell of neighborhood support and financial pledges for saving the flat site at Fourth Street and Moraga Boulevard and its towering oak tree has helped persuade the [City] to move toward buying it."

Residents and grade-school students wrote to state representatives requesting park grants; real estate agents offered 10 percent of their commission.

Neighbors contributed over \$33,000 to help City leaders secure a \$375,000 state grant. In a report to Lafayette's City Council, Russell explained, "State funds plus the donations provided enough money to purchase and develop the property as a passive neighborhood park. The City took title on October 21, 1999."

In many ways, this park was a gift to the city from residents who contributed and campaigned for state funds. They did not sign a legal document to preserve this quiet, passive park, but their intentions were clear. They entrusted the City of Lafayette with this legacy and expected them to honor the park's history and preserve it as a natural, open-space park for future generations. That history and those expectations are at risk. A so-called LCP Improvement Plan is working its way through City departments with a design concept that would completely transform the quiet natural character of the park into a developed park with added pavement, elaborate play structures and rubberized fall-zone material covering roots and soil. Trees would be cut down and roots compromised with possible impacts on the riparian area and wildlife. Traffic, parking and noise could impact this quiet single-family residential neighborhood.

The plan is also expensive. At the March 14 city council meeting, gasps of shock filled the room when a \$1 million budget was presented. The council cut in half the budget, but it still surpasses the original combined cost of land purchase and park creation.

In recent months, council members have received over 100 letters asking them to stop the Improvement Plan. Many also attended the meeting and spoke against the project.

Playground parks are great, but not here; two are within walking distance. LCP offers a unique alternative for children, a chance to explore and engage in nature, listen for birds, identify trees and use their imagination in unstructured play. Parents across the country are on waiting lists for outdoor pre-schools costing \$700 a month for an environment that LCP provides for free. Experts claim that today's children have lost touch with nature; they call it a "nature deficit disorder."

Therefore, we residents are offering an alternative to the Improvement Plan. We are offering to hire a professional landscape designer, at our expense, to present a conceptual design of a nature-based playscape for children that include ADA improvements. We want to preserve LCP's natural beauty and at the same time, open new doors for children, to explore and engage with nature.

Last year's Community Conversation survey described Lafayette as "a quiet oasis of civility amidst a turbulent sea of urbanity." If that's true, why then are we about to destroy our oasis in Leigh Creekside Park?

Please urge the council to preserve the original wishes of John and Ethel and retain the natural ambiance of the park. Email [cityhall@lovelafayette.org](mailto:cityhall@lovelafayette.org).

Lafayette residents MaryJo and Glen Cass are original founders and donors to the park. They lived on Fourth St. when the park was founded in 1999.

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