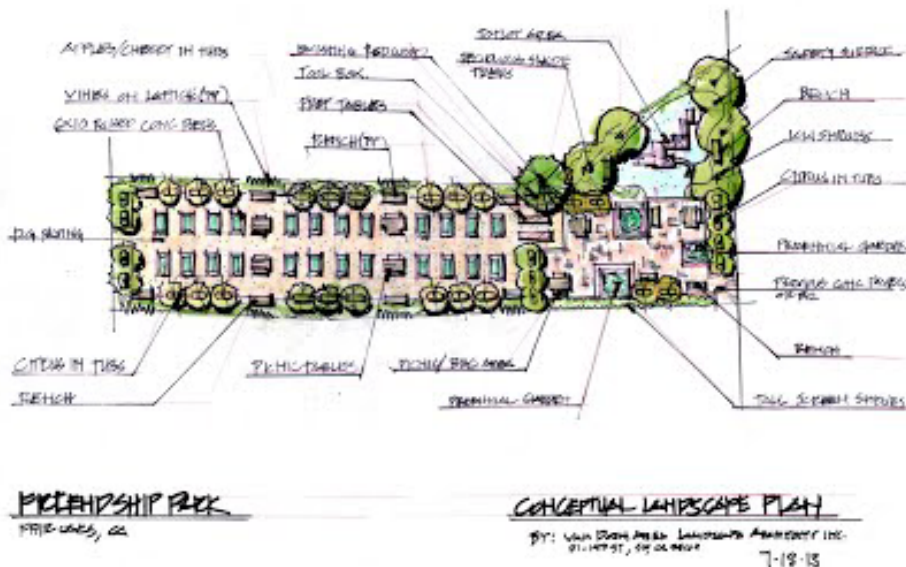


A Community Park Comes to Fruition



Vianey Alarcon loves a lot of things about her garden bed at Friendship Park – growing her own food, teaching her younger siblings about nutrition, and the chance to talk with other gardeners. “We’re all there checking on our plants several times a week,” Vianey explains. “So when you see what other people are growing or how their crops are doing, you can ask questions and learn from each other. We’ve built a relationship together.”

That same spirit created the park, turning a strip of land into a thriving gathering spot in North Fair Oaks, an unincorporated community near Redwood City. Owned by the San Francisco Public Utilities Commission (PUC), the land was a perfect spot for a park – uncontaminated, vacant, and in a high-density neighborhood. The question was how to put a great idea into action. The answer: collaboration and partnership.

Among the many early partners was Pamela Harter, who got involved thanks to a USDA grant

to inspire access to fruits and vegetables among low-income Latinos. She joined with the Rotary Club and the Sheriff’s Activity League to do initial research and planning.

And just as Vianey and her fellow gardeners learn what produce does well in their microclimate or how to finally get a grip on all the snails, the effort to build the park had many lessons along the way.

Early on, Pamela got important input at a California Convergence meeting. “I

went into the meeting saying, ‘we want to do a community garden on PUC land, I’m looking for any and all resources,’” says Pamela. “One of the valuable pieces of advice I got was that it’s really good to have one person who can see the project through.” After that meeting, the partners found Wolfram Alderson, a consultant with deep experience in building community gardens.

One key accomplishment was getting sign-off from the Public Utilities Commission. In concept, the PUC wanted the land to be used by the community – the commission knew it was better than having the space lie unused and attractive to vandals – but there were bureaucratic hurdles to overcome nonetheless. “Imagine being in a room with twelve engineers,” says Wolfram, “and all of them have to sign off on some aspect of the project. It took some time.”

Another big question the group faced was ongoing maintenance of the park. How would

they make it sustainable? “At one point, we didn’t know if we should put trash cans in because we didn’t know who would empty them,” says Pamela. In the end, the San Mateo County Parks Department agreed to take on all maintenance duties.

Design proved challenging as well. Large water pipes running underground meant that nothing could be built too deep into the soil, and PUC trucks had to be able to get onto the site quickly if a water main broke. All of this needed to be taken into account as the community – including many kids – designed the playground and gardens.

After funding and zoning considerations were worked out as well, after dozens of volunteers and numerous public and private entities had weighed in, it all came together in spring 2014 when the garden beds were put in. “My mom was one of the ones who helped build the park,” says Vianey. “She helped create the boxes and cart the soil.” Now, Vianey and her fellow gardeners are

deep into caring for their second year of crops. “I’ve learned so much – what grows well, how to check for worms, how to be consistent in watching for problems. You can see how much you’ve invested in what you’re eating.”

“Now that the park is there, the area is much more welcoming,” she continues. “You see people gardening and kids playing around. We all talk to each other more.”

Summing up her efforts, Vianey says “it’s hard, but it’s a good hard.” Kind of like growing a community park and garden.



Wolfram created a site for the project partners to share information; the site is public and can be found [here](#). Pamela notes that another key challenge is zoning; she recommends [this fact sheet](#) for anyone considering creating a community garden.

California Convergence is a network of community organizations, local government entities, policy support groups and resident leaders who work together to promote, lead and advocate for healthier communities across the state. We support community efforts – like the Friendship Park garden – and activate our vast network and resources to help fight for, and win lasting change.

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