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## A Park for All the People

### SYNOPSIS

A small park in downtown Oakland, California, has been a focal point for community-building and neighborhood improvement. This effort embodies the Healthy Cities cooperative approach to promoting social justice and positive community change. The story of the revitalization of this park is a story of individual and personal actions that collectively have shaped policy and strategy to improve the quality of life in this city.

The authors are members of the Board of  
Directors of the Healthy City Oakland Fund.

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**N**eglected for many years, Lafayette Square Park, known in the neighborhood as “Old Man’s Park,” became a good example of a bad environment. A haven not only for the down-and-out but also for drug dealers, this little patch of trees and grass in downtown Oakland was an unsightly and sometimes dangerous place. Particularly disturbing were the boarded-up public toilets, which outraged both park users and advocates for the homeless.

In 1994, concerned citizens united under the banner of the Downtown Gateway Collaborative took a hard look at this park and began a process of revitalization. The Center for Urban Family Life, as facilitator for the collaborative, received a grant from the LEF Foundation to hire the firm of Hood Design to develop a master plan for the park’s redesign.

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Concurrent with planning for the park's revitalization, another Oakland initiative emerged to create the perfect partnership. Oakland became a participant in Healthy Cities, a program of the World Health Organization, and the Lafayette Square Park Project became a Healthy Cities project. When a fiscal agent was needed for completion of the project, the City of Oakland's Parks and Recreation Department asked the Healthy City Oakland Fund to take on that responsibility.

The Healthy City Oakland Fund was created in 1989 under the leadership of Mayor Elihu Harris as a not-for-profit, tax-exempt organization. When former State Assemblyman Harris ran for mayor of Oakland, his campaign pledged that "the City of Tomorrow, in valuing its human resources, will invest in the creation of an environment which supports and enhances health. This will require collaborative action involving community residents along with the public and private sectors."

## A DISTINGUISHED HISTORY

As the project moved forward, the history of this small, forgotten park began to emerge. An 1853 map shows the park as one of seven public squares established as open spaces. In 1883, the park became the site of the Chabot Observatory and home to the official clock of the East Bay. Graduates of Oakland High School, which sat across the street from the park, included novelist Jack London, writer Gertrude Stein, and architect Julia Morgan.

Through the years, this park served many groups. When the Philosophers Club, an outdoor debating society, met there in the 1940s, female visitors occupied a special section called the Petticoat Corner so as not to be subjected to the comments of the "sit-and-argue-boys." Elder residents gathered to play checkers and card games, and various landscaping and improvement projects occurred through the late 1950s. In the 1980s, a

decline in economic conditions drew transient and homeless people to the park, and Mother Wright, a long time Oakland activist, initiated a feeding program.

## A MOVEMENT FOR REVITALIZATION

In 1993, the City of Oakland's Department of Parks and Recreation responded to requests for revitalization of the park, and a public/private partnership was launched. Park regulars and Oakland residents took part in the official planning process, as did representatives of businesses, community organizations, congregations, and public agencies. A special session was even conducted to include children. All had an opportunity to help create the vision and establish priorities for the park's design.

The Wayne and Gladys Valley Foundation contributed seed money for the project. Public funds were committed from several sources, including the City of Oakland and the US National Park Service. Fundraising continues among organizations and individuals; the Clorox Company Foundation, Summit Medical Center, and Warren Wilson and Walter Shorestein are among recent contributors. The total project budget is about \$2 million and includes funds for landscaping, infrastructure, public toilets, and a small community building. A two-phase plan was adopted to accommodate funding realities and construction management. Phase I was completed in 1999.

Typical of the Healthy Cities process, the Healthy City Oakland Fund Board meetings are opportunities to remind ourselves of what we are up to in many areas of our personal and professional lives. Organizations represented include the four major hospitals in the area, including the county facility; the academic community, including the University of California at Berkeley; the YWCA and other community organizations; Oakland Sharing the Vision, which is responsible for strategic planning for the city as well as other large funding entities; and several congregations from the faith community. It has been particularly important to have the director of

the county Public Health Department and the superintendent of the Oakland Unified School District as board members.

Advisers for the park project include lead organizations from the Gateway Collaborative such as the First Unitarian Church of Oakland, Berkeley/Oakland Support Services, Catholic Charities, and the American Friends Service Committee. With this ethnically diverse range of talent and ability, project organizers were able to move quickly and strategically.

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## AT ITS HEART HUMAN VALUES

This effort has a concern for human potential at its heart. While bricks and mortar issues are addressed, they do not obscure the basic purpose of creating "a park for all people." Early in this process, a serious commitment was made not to displace the disenfranchised population that claimed this park as home during the years of neglect. Everyone is welcome. Standards of behavior are set and will be monitored not only by law enforcement but also by neighbors and users of the park.

Projects such as Oakland 2000 Ready to Learn, Camp Read A Lot, Women with Wings, Marcella Give a Doll, and Children's Express also enjoy the support of the Healthy City Oakland Fund. Participants in these and many other community-building projects are involved in

the park revitalization. The Healthy City Oakland Fund recently hired park regulars to create a clean-up committee. Raking, cleaning toilets, pick-up, and safety patrol are among the tasks of these long unemployed committee members.

The neighborhood surrounding this park is ethnically diverse, including African Americans, Vietnamese and other Asian Americans, Latinos, and whites. The park is bordered on two sides by residences, on a third by a historic district of restored homes that serve as offices for nonprofit organizations, and on the fourth by the edge of the City Center business complex.

Programming at the park must reflect the diversity of potential park users. Activities such as craft fairs, folk art



performances, and jazz concerts are designed to attract people of all ages and all of the ethnic populations that coexist at the edges of the park.

On June 13, 1999, dignitaries, planners, designers, funders, advocates, and neighbors gathered to celebrate the official Lafayette Square Park reopening. Food, fun, and festivity set the stage for a new beginning as a dream and vision became a reality. Phase II, including community building activities, is to be carried out in 2000. Meanwhile, improvements already completed provide public toilets, game tables, and a tot lot with a large climbing structure, all in an attractive environment of trees and landscaping that includes an ancient, giant oak that reminds us of how Oakland got its name.

Landscape architect Walter Hood has created the focal point of the park, an earth sculpture called a hummock, with an innovative, submerged fountain called a runnel. Visitors can recline on this circular mound and listen to running water while enjoying a day in the park. The hummock is positioned to accommodate an audience for park productions such as jazz, theater, and dance

performances. Neighborhood children lying on their backs on the hummock experienced the July 4 fireworks fired from nearby Jack London Square and were thrilled to be so close, yet so safe, for this display. Part of community building will be an outdoor screen for projection of videos, another attraction to be enjoyed from a seat on the hummock. The dome and arched runnel are reminiscent of the structure of the former occupant of the same space, the Chabot Observatory.

The logo for Lafayette Square Park includes an oak tree, the symbol of the city, with the words "A Park for All People." This park and its logo provide an outstanding example of positive community transformation. The current mayor, former governor Jerry Brown, has set a goal of bringing 10,000 new residents into downtown Oakland, and the park will be the neighborhood gathering place for many of these new residents.

Lafayette Square Park is a focal point in Oakland for the Healthy Cities approach, with its emphasis on creating and improving physical and social environments to maximize human potential. ■