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New foundation to help fund San Jose park projects

By Stephen Baxter
Almaden Resident
Posted: 08/30/2009 08:10:47 PM PDT
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Following a big-city trend of private funding for public parks, a new nonprofit group in San Jose is set to launch in September to improve city parks and recreation services.

Organizers hope the new San Jose Parks Foundation will help fill a void in park services that continue to be targeted for cuts as San Jose's \$90 million deficit looms.

Since last fall, San Jose Repertory Theatre co-founder James Reber and San Jose Recreation Superintendent Neil Rufino have been quietly working with a steering committee to explore the concept of the foundation, which would be independent of the city.

Rufino initially approached Reber to lead the effort because of his nearly 30 years of experience in fundraising and launching nonprofits. A resident of San Jose's Blossom Valley area, Reber was the first employee of the Berkeley Shakespeare Festival — now called California Shakespeare Theater. He also produced the Santa Clara County Walk for AIDS for seven years and has raised more than \$25 million in Silicon Valley in his career.

Reber said he sees parks as "our garden, our frontyard, where our children go for walks."

"It's a respite from everyday workaday life," he said, "so it serves everyone."

Park foundations have handled corporate and individual donations for decades in cities like San Francisco, Chicago and New York. As the idea for a San Jose foundation came together, committee members met with leaders of the Golden Gate

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corporate partners like Adobe to expand an Adopt-a-Park program.

Members of the San Jose Parks Foundation steering committee said they would like to see the money raised through the foundation used for youth and seniors programs rather than to pay for park maintenance — though maintenance has been a struggle for the past few years.

City park officials said that if the foundation, through grants and other donations, funded such high-profile projects as new bridges and playgrounds, it would free the city to do more mundane projects like installing bathrooms in

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Alison Yew looks for more roses that need deadheading at... (Jacqueline Ramseyer/SVCN archive)

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neighborhood parks.

The San Jose Parks Foundation hopes to raise \$500,000 to \$1 million in the next 12 months and plans to launch a Web site in the fall.

"I think it's a great direction for the city," said San Jose Councilwoman Nora Campos, a longtime advocate for city funding of summer and after-school programs. Private money from a foundation, she said, "will actually make a huge dent in making sure the kids are off the streets and safe and feeling productive in society."

The group's state filing papers are due in the coming weeks, and Reber is seeking about eight more directors for his 15-member board.

"I want to find people who share a vision for all park space as one entity," Reber said.

The steering committee included more than a dozen people, including Helen Chapman of the Shasta Hanchett Neighborhood Association and Leslee Hamilton, executive director of the Friends of Guadalupe River Park and Gardens.

The Friends of Guadalupe has relied on volunteers and smaller donations aimed at projects exclusively at that park, but the new foundation would be wider in scope and able to handle a larger endowment. Similarly, the Happy Hollow Foundation has supported the Happy Hollow Park and Zoo since its inception in 1956, and dollars from the new foundation could aid projects there as well.

"I have great hopes for it and I think it's really needed," Chapman said of the foundation. Chapman, a former parks commissioner, said land acquisition should be a priority. She believes San Jose depends too much on the money developers are required to pay when they build houses, condos or apartments in San Jose.

"If we're really going to look at parks, we have to find alternative methods of funding outside the parkland dedication ordinance," she said.

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