

# Dilapidated playground lent a friendly hand

*Joint effort gives new life to West Portal site*

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West Portal Playground has seen better days, despite its reputation as the only public green space in the Portola and 19th Avenue corridor.

Among its myriad issues, the park's playground structure remains unsafe, held up by plywood and prone to flooding in many parts. Equipment is rusting, glass and debris litter the playground sand often and there is no lighting in the rest of the park for evening meetings and events.

Between daily after-school programs and a senior center, the park's need for improvement becomes more visible by the day.

Sitting above the West Portal Muni station, the park and playground in 2014 received a "D" rating from The City and San Francisco Parks Alliance that later dropped to an "F."

Even with the park's dismal appearance, hope remains.



MIKE KOZMIN/S.F. EXAMINER

West Portal Playground, above, is the only public green space in the Portola and 19th Avenue corridor. The Friends of West Portal Playground have secured funds to reimagine, at right, the neglected site.

A group of 50 residents determined to give the place a makeover banded together in 2013, calling themselves Friends of West Portal Playground.

Plans to redo the park kicked off

when a mother at the playground with her kids noticed its poor shape and decided to call on the neighborhood association for action.

Jessica Forys, another mother with a vested interest in the park, heeded that call. Forys, an IT-executive-turned-landscape-architect, was a local parent with a daughter enrolled at the adjacent school. She also coached her daughter's soccer team there and participated in community activities at the park and its clubhouse. "I knew the park intimately," Forys said.

The group got to talking about the project at a pickup soccer game at the park. They realized Forys was an architect, making her the perfect designer to bring on board. From there, a marathon of surveys, outreach, cleanup days, fundraisers, informational meetings and concept designs went underway.

"I would do behavioral mapping where I would sit here for hours and just watch how people use the park,"

Forys said. "I kind of see myself as a conduit to what people want."

The committee's efforts were rewarded with a \$500,000 grant from San Francisco Rec and Park's Community Opportunity Fund, \$250,000 from Supervisor Norman Yee's office and funding from the neighborhood association. The committee fundraised about \$780,000 and have \$200,000 to \$300,000 left to raise in the next phase.

The last major renovation in 2005 at the park focused mainly on roof repairs amounting to \$1.5 million.

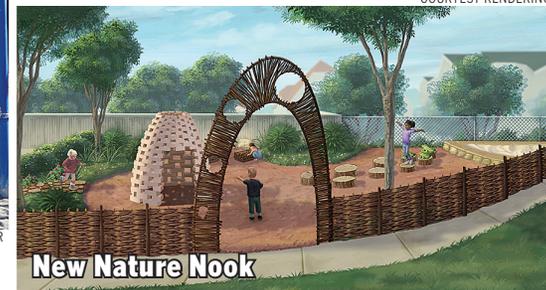
FWPP now needs an estimated \$1 million to complete what they have in mind. One reason for the high cost is because Muni offices are situated below the park area, Forys says. The new park design would resolve some of the leakage issues the office experienced in the past.

Dawn Kamalanathan, Rec and Park's director of capital and planning division, says construction itself can take eight to 12 months once funding



Dragon Slide

COURTESY RENDERINGS



New Nature Nook

is in place. Barring unexpected delays, they hope to roll out a new playground in two years. "We're a playground-rich city," Kamalanathan said. "And we're still trying to figure how to renovate playgrounds in the next few years."

"We're excited to work with this group. They've done a great job of raising awareness of the need of their park."

Forys envisions a park space that incorporates natural elements in an urban landscape, as well as pays homage to the area's Chinese heritage and Chinese immersion program of West Portal Elementary. Forys themed her design "above the clouds," featuring a dragon slide, rock climbing wall for older kids, a toddler zone and overall more interactive and musical components.

"It's a different kind of play," Forys said. "Our city has a lot of natural elements, but it would be nice to also see this in our play areas."

Her plan includes a nature nook with tree stumps and playhives scattered throughout the play area, a multipurpose field and the rebuilt playground. An expanded entrance and terrapave path complete the facelift.

Forys thought about everyone in her design, pointing out that, dysfunctions aside, the current playground does not accommodate kids with disabilities. Her idea for the new park incorporates a sand area and spinners with other wheelchair-accessible structures.

"One day, I saw a child in a wheelchair come up," she said. "There was nothing for the girl to do. They literally wheeled her up, and she just sat there. I felt awful about that."

To contribute or participate in the West Portal Playground redesign, visit their website at westportalplayground.com.

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