



FACILITY PROFILE

PARKS

A Park Reborn

CALLAGHAN PARK

WATSONVILLE, CALIF.

BY RICK DANDES

Callaghan Park, in Watsonville, Calif., had deteriorated over the years, but thanks to the efforts of a concerned city government, an engaged community and the good work of SSA Landscape Architects of Santa Cruz, it is now safe, family-friendly and a jewel near the center of the city's downtown area.

Callaghan was also one of the first parks in Watsonville; it's more than 100 years old and it had a great history. But once the site degraded it became a magnet for inappropriate use—primarily gang activity and drugs.

“Our challenge,” said Steve Sutherland, SSA principal, “was how do you take a park back from this kind of element? Our approach was that if you build a good enough park so that families would want to come there and occupy the park, then it would push out that bad element.”

And that's exactly what happened.

But, it wasn't easy.

SSA senior project manager Scott Reeves explained, “Yes, the biggest challenge was to get community involvement. This park is set on the border of a densely populated residential neighborhood, the downtown epicenter of Watsonville. It's a population that is primarily Spanish-speaking, and so everything we did on the project was bilingual.”

With the help of the city, the design group held a number of neighborhood meetings and workshops. To ensure the success of those outreaches, community groups literally knocked on doors and distributed fliers, all geared toward capturing the attention of the entire community.

The project had a budget of \$850,000, Reeves said. “Our overall design approach process was multifaceted,” he explained. “We were mainly looking at improving the play equipment. The city wanted to encourage families to recreate together. We decided to make creative play a big emphasis in this park, but at the same time really encourage the family to be out there together.”

Maintenance was the other challenge. With cities losing so much of their maintenance staff to budget cuts, Reeves approached the project with the idea that there would be one person maintaining the park on a limited-time basis.

All the while, the city put a great effort into the park redesign, Reeves said.

“The other takeaway from this project is that we looked at the park at a macro level,” he said. “When we started, city council asked us to redo about half the park, focusing mainly on the play equipment. But we just took a step back and looked at the entire site. Through the years they had added a few things here and there, basketball court, and a tennis court.

“We worked ‘outside the box’ to get this done,” Reeves added. “We asked if we could move some of the other pieces of equipment, like the basketball court, which was right near the 2-to-5-year-olds’ play area. We saw an opportunity to divide the park according to appropriate age uses.”

So the redesign moved all of the adult recreation opportunities to one side of the park and children's activities to the other side of the park. The child play area was relocated into the center of the park away from



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the busy streets, into the neighborhood side, rather than the urban side of the park near the busy highway.

It all worked, Reeves said.

The redesigned park officially opened Easter week, 2010.

“We have since been told that the park is being used from 10 a.m. to 10 p.m., and by families. The mayor and local businesses are very pleased. The community is proud of it. That's extremely gratifying.”

Reeves said he also learned to be very aggressive in bringing people into the project. And the city council had a key role in all this.

10 Months Later

“The revitalization of Callaghan Park has given the neighborhood a greater sense of place and has improved the image of the neighborhood and the city as a whole,” said Ana Espinoza, director, Parks and Community Services, city of Watsonville. “Moreover, there is increased pride and ownership of the park as residents themselves guided the design plan.”

The park has been remodeled to meet community needs and interests. And, today, Callaghan Park is providing greater opportunities for individual and group recreational and social activities to take place.

“A park only becomes alive and serves as a true asset to the community,” Espinoza said, “when it is used and enjoyed by the community, by residents of all ages, genders, racial and cultural groups.”

The usage of the park has certainly doubled, if not quadrupled, she added.

“On one of my recent visits to the park, on a sunny and warm day, I noticed a group of about eight elderly individuals having a picnic and I approached them and asked them how they liked the park and they shared that they ‘loved it’ because it was a comfortable place for them to be and that they typically spent several hours in the park. They look forward to coming to the park on a weekly basis and would like to come more often if they could.”

They had their lunch together, relaxed, sang songs together and reminisced about their youth. Being in the park made them feel younger, and they appreciated all the younger generations engaged in play.

“Our department,” she said, “continues to receive compliments and positive feedback about the transformation of Callaghan Park and express their amazement in the number of families and individuals they have seen enjoying the park.”

In 2010, the California Park & Recreation Society (CPRS) honored Callaghan Park with a Neighborhood Park Planning & Design Award. **RM**

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Watsonville Parks: www.watsonvillerec.com

SSA Landscape Architects: www.ssala.com

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