

## **Building a Park Where You Live:**

**The experience of the Friends of the Rockridge-Temescal  
Greenbelt (FROG)**



The building of Frog Park in the Rockridge - Temescal Neighborhood of Oakland took 8 years from the inception of the dream to completion of the play structures. It began in 1993 with a mom's quest for a neighborhood park. That same year, the Rockridge Community Parks Committee formed under the Rockridge Community Planning Council (RCPC) neighborhood association.

Over four ensuing years the committee searched for a place for a park. In late 1997 it identified a potential site on the back parking lot of the local DMV. By spring of 1998, a critical mass of neighbors supported the park and petitioned their City Council representative for support for the park. It seemed that things would flow smoothly, especially since the City of Oakland's Open Space General Plan prioritized developing parks in Rockridge-Temescal to address the long-standing dearth of recreational space in these neighborhoods.

However, not everyone supported the park and an oppositional coalition formed to voice an intense protest against the location and existence of the park. Unable to reach consensus, tension and conflict mounted in the community until the future of the park became uncertain. Beginning in November of 1998, Oakland sponsored mediation for the community, but these talks made little progress. Fortunately, in May of 1999 a new concept of the park design developed by two neighbors broke through the impasse. By replacing the original single-site park design with a "linear park" that connected 2 small parks via a three-block (1/2 mile) span of greenbelt, the park was revitalized.

This break-through enabled City Councilmember Jane Brunner to back the park and obtain \$400,000 in city park bond Measure I funds from Oakland. In January 2001 the Oakland City Council also allocated \$450,000 State Proposition 12 park funds in November 2000 State elections and Alameda County Watershed allotted \$50,000 for creek and greenbelt restoration. Oakland contracted with the landscape architecture firm Moore, Iacofono & Goltsmaon/Berkeley Builders Inc. (MIG/BBI) for site review and development of the Master Plan to restore the greenbelt and build a play area.

Meanwhile, in March 2000, the neighborhoods created the Friends of the Rockridge-Temescal Greenbelt (FROG), thereby transferring ownership of the process to a broader base. FROG then undertook the critical tasks of fundraising, site development, permitting, and community organizing.

While FROG worked to raise \$125,000 through individual and business donations, restaurant cards, T-shirts, a flea market and an auction, the design of the park was also underway. Because of FROG's commitment to an engaging play structure, it contracted Robert Leathers & Associates to take charge of the play areas in the greenbelt. Over 6 months, FROG, Leathers & Associates, and the neighborhood children designed a unique play structure that would be built by community volunteers. With the community's approval of the basic design, Leathers incorporated the ideas of over 800 children during Design Day, held in March 2001.

The park now had the support of a coalition of local leaders and organizations including RCPC, Temescal Neighbors Together, DMV Neighbors Association, Friends of Temescal Creek, local merchant groups and Councilmember Jane Brunner. FROG, following the Leathers' community organizing manual, enlisted approximately 30 core volunteers to do intensive organizing in preparation for the construction of the play structures. FROG ultimately mobilized over 1,300 volunteers to build the play structure. Groundbreaking in September and a massive "community build" volunteer effort from



## **From the volunteers:**

### **There's nothing more powerful than walking on your work....**

It gave me a sense of connectedness to the people that worked here, and in a sense to the larger neighborhood that you really don't experience any other way. You may meet people individually or whatever, but to be a part of a huge collective effort like this, it's amazing. So even the little friendships that you make carry over in the bigger sense (because of the shared experience). It was like an army out there!

We believe in doing service for the community – and I got to use a router.

It was addicting, to come here and feel the energy of so many people coming together to bring this whole thing together. It was contagious and I just kept coming back. It was fun, I learned a lot I learned how to use really fun power tools. It was fun to learn something about construction and engineering.

It seems pretty easy, but I think they worked incredibly hard to get it done.

I know which boards I cut, what I screwed in, and it's nice to see the kids playing on it. Hopefully I'll have kids one of these days, and we'll be playing here.

This is what the world should be like!

It made me much more open and welcoming to people in the neighborhood.

Because we can see who's here. Otherwise there's really not a place where you see everyone at the same time in this neighborhood, there's really not a gathering spot. We used to have a farmers market and then you could see some of the community, but still nothing like this. And it's gratifying to see people, some that I know and some that I haven't see in a while.

I've seen all these kids that I didn't even know existed!

I was tired, I was kind of sore, but to me that was kind of positive, it felt that I had done something. (and I didn't have to go to the gym to work out!)

**It sounds sort of cliché, but there's a sense of community building this sort of thing.**





## **Building a Park Where You Live: The experience of the Friends of the Rockridge-Temescal Greenbelt (FROG) creation of Frog Park**

### **Overview**

---

This paper is divided into five sections:

- 1) an introduction;
- 2) a rationale for building parks;
- 3) an assessment of the organizational and community-building components necessary for a campaign to build a park;
- 4) details of key strategies for managing the construction of a play structure; and
- 5) a perspective on why Frog Park succeeded and how it might be relevant to other communities.

As background, Oakland City hired the landscape architecture firm, Moore, Iacofano, Goltsman (MIG) to create and oversee a Master Plan for the park space. The Master Plan has two main components: 1) the overall park site/greenbelt and 2) the two play structures at either end of the greenbelt. The play structures are a *part* of Frog Park. This document focuses on the community's efforts to build the play structures, but that story is intimately intertwined with the creation of the overall Frog Park/Greenbelt. When relevant, we will make a distinction between the total Frog Park "park" or "greenbelt" and the "play structures."

To create the play structures, Friends of the Rockridge-Temescal Greenbelt (FROG) hired the company Robert Leathers and Associates<sup>1</sup>. Leathers served as the technical leader on the structures' design and construction, based upon their time-tested manual on community organizing around parks. Yet Leathers and Associates will only work with an equal community partner. Partnering on a park is a major undertaking, and so we offer our own experiences and lessons-learned as a community-perspective guide and complement to the Leathers and Associate's professional manual.

### **Introduction – We built a park for our kids and you can, too**

---

Parks are good for people and for communities. Having a park in your neighborhood gets kids moving and playing and gets grownups into the fresh air where they can meet each other. Things start to happen when you have a park: you meet your neighbors,

---

<sup>1</sup> <http://www.leathersassociates.com> Leathers and Associates is a company specializing in community-built structures, in particular they have an international reputation in community-built parks.



make friends, plan activities, learn from each other, look out for each other. You talk about the neighborhood and plan how to make it a better place.

Having a park is good. But what we learned with Frog Park is that *building* a park is as valuable as having a park. This paper tells our story and shares the lessons that we learned in building play structures for our new community park. We hope that our experience helps you to create a park in your neighborhood and makes the process as much about building your *community* as it is about building swings and sandboxes.

The neighborhoods of Rockridge and Temescal were on the City of Oakland's short list for a park since its Open Space General Plan identified them as having an urgent need for recreational space. But Frog Park isn't really the product of the City's initiative so much as it is the culmination of a mother's dream to have play structure for her daughter in her own neighborhood.<sup>2</sup> Over the course of 8 years, that dream was ultimately backed by over a thousand neighbors who worked to turn it into the community's reality.

Hopefully, by learning from our experiences you will build a play space more quickly, but you will still need perseverance. In addition to vision and perseverance, a community needs to get organized around its dream. Getting together, sharing the workload, and pooling skills helped Rockridge to overcome controversy and obstacles, raise funds, work with the city, and ultimately build a unique play structure for kids.

***You need to:***

Dream!  
Persevere!  
Articulate!  
Organize!  
Share the workload!  
Pool resources and skills!

***In order to:***

Overcome obstacles  
Resolve controversy  
Raise money  
Work with the City  
**BUILD A PLAY STRUCTURE!**

## **Why a Park?**

The success of a campaign to build a park first and foremost depends upon the ability to convey a convincing and engaging vision.<sup>3</sup> After all, there are so many things that

---

<sup>2</sup> The hallmark of community building and organizing is that the drive for change comes from the community, as was the case with Frog Park. Not only did the desire for a park originate from the community, it was ultimately supported by a broad coalition of community members, businesses, and neighborhood associations.

<sup>3</sup> Lee Staples makes the point that how a community campaign is "cut", or framed will be a key determinant in not only whether it will be successful but also in how it will (or won't) develop the community. Perhaps because this issue was cut to be about "parks" (a generally positive connotation) it was able to maintain enough support to survive efforts to make it an issue of "parking" (one of the points of opposition to the park). Additionally, Saul Alinsky underscores the importance of self-interest in mobilizing communities. That people's own children would play in the park was in some instances a strong motivating factor. (Although not all supporters had a direct "stake" in the park.) In sum, not only did FROG have a good cut for their issue, it was a project that could benefit the people who worked on it and the organizers implemented a participatory method that provided a high level of direct action from the community, allowing them to experience their collective power and secure their success.



neighborhoods need – and so little time to make them all happen. So why put the time and energy toward a park? Here's why:

***Parks make people healthy –***

especially children. In the U.S. today there is an epidemic of overweight and sedentary children. About 25% of American children weigh more than is healthy (double that of 30 years ago). Today's youth on average spend only about 2 percent of their day in high-energy physical activity in contrast to 40 hours per week watching television! Obesity as kids means poor health in adolescence and adulthood. Conversely, lots of physical activity improves children's self esteem and self-efficacy. When kids play in parks, they are doing more than having fun: they are building the foundation for a happy and healthy life.<sup>4</sup>

***Parks are like treasure in the community chest***

But the gems aren't material wealth, they're *social* wealth. When people meet in parks, they are building relationships that in turn build networks and trust. This social capital can make people healthier, reduce social problems, and increase civic participation. Development of social capital is key to a community's capacity to work together to meet common goals. Yet this type of connection-for-action is endangered in the U.S. The proportion of Americans who socialize with their neighbors more than once per year has declined 15% since the 1970s. Exponential rises in TV watching plus the technological advancement of computers and home entertainment has us in our houses rather than in our communities. So investing in a park has the potential to build the social capital necessary for creating civic networks that facilitate the coordination and communication necessary for collective action.<sup>5</sup>

***Creating a park makes communities healthy***

This social capital we speak of is not so much a product as it is a *by-product* of taking action.<sup>6</sup> That is why the *process* of bringing a park into the neighborhood becomes so important. A park that is built using the vision, creativity, and energy of community members will fill a community with a sense of strength, power, and unity. That kind of park will be embraced and cared for by the community over the years. For example, the company Leathers and Associates built over 1,600 parks using participatory methods. Without fail, reports from the communities who work on parks in this manner are filled with the excitement and pride of a community that has achieved something collectively (see [www.leathersassociates.com](http://www.leathersassociates.com))

**Dreams, Determination, Deeds: The Ingredients for Making a Park**

You must have a dream. Someone must envision the park, the children, the play structure, the trees and open space if it is ever to become reality. But vision alone is insufficient. The dreamer must be able to articulate the vision in such a way that others

---

<sup>4</sup> (Wang, 2001) (Deckelbaum, 2001) (Strauss, 2001)

<sup>5</sup> (Putnam, 1993 - 1996)

<sup>6</sup> Sara Horowitz Executive Director of Working Today, in Better Together: Report of the Saguero Seminar on civic engagement in America.



are inspired to take it on as their own. The sooner a vision can be effectively articulated, the sooner the campaign for a park can become organized and effective.

Once dreamed, the work begins. Managing the creation of a play structure requires significant effort, and the community must be determined to complete its task despite a heavy workload, busy schedules, limited resources, and competing priorities. There are many ingredients to building a play structure, some have to happen sequentially, others simultaneously:

**Core Leadership**

It takes many people to build a park. Those who attempt to do it alone are likely to burn-out before they accomplish their goal. For this reason, it's essential that a group of core leaders be formed as soon as possible. We had a core of 5 leaders, plus a steering committee of about 25 people.

**Ideal qualities of the leadership group (individually or collectively)**

Personal Qualities:	Skills / Experience in:
Knowledge of the community	Organization
Clear vision	Communication
Persistent / determined	Public speaking
Principle-driven	Conflict resolution / negotiation
Positive motivator	Fund-raising / politics
	City / Parks Advisory Committees

The core is the group that will make the preparations for mobilizing the community *en masse* when the timing is right. They will plan the initial strategy, address opposition, set the timeline, and identify the skills and resources necessary to bring the park to completion. Strong core

leadership is provided by people who are committed (they will spend a lot of their time being a leader on the project), have good organizational and communication skills, and ideally widespread familiarity with the community.

Additionally, leaders can only support the park if they themselves get support. Our coordinators benefited greatly from the backup that they received from spouses, parents, grandparents, and friends.

**Community Support**

A good play structure must be built with the support of the community. Enlist neighbors as early as possible. Methods for increasing awareness of the park include a petition drive or raising the idea of a park at a community or PTA meeting, etc. Once the project is under way, maintenance of community support is necessary. Good communication is key, and using the internet (email and a website), mass media and neighborhood newsletters and posters are ways that we kept community participation alive. One of our key awareness and communication vehicles was the Rockridge News, which published park-related articles every month for about five years. With each successful step toward completion, make sure to inform the community and create the opportunity to celebrate.



At the same time, there's nothing like trying to work together to discover the issues that can drive us apart. Understanding the likelihood of conflict helps to prepare for it.<sup>7</sup> Plan how to respond to opposition. Learn what your strengths are so that you can draw upon them quickly if necessary. For example, is there a critical mass of people available to demonstrate their support? Are data available to justify the campaign's position? Is it possible to imagine the points of opposition and devise responses to them before conflict arises?

Also, think strategically: Is the plan for a park going to be influenced (positively or negatively) by the timing of political events (such as an election?) Is the neighborhood's diversity represented in the core leader group? Is someone available to manage a response to opposition? Can processes for conflict resolution and decision-making be developed before disagreement becomes divisive? It is much easier to be against something than to be for something, so great effort is usually required to overcome opposition.

### Assessing Opposition

Opposition will be strong if IT has:	Opposition can be overcome if YOU have:
a vocal minority or a passionate individual with a lot of time	core organizational leadership
wealth or resources	time or resources
ability to form a counter coalition	broad community support
timing with election campaigns (if opposition is constituency)	solid support of city representative
use of misinformation (for example, in petitioning)	ability to communicate the community's will (ex: through petitions)
	ownership of space

In our story, we encountered strong opposition early on, centralized around two key points of contention: 1) whether there should be a park at all, and 2) where the park should be located. Opponents voiced fear of increases in crime, homeless sleepers, litter, traffic and parking. While these issues were truly felt by some community members, the conflict concerning the park was also a manifestation of an

underlying conflict related to demographic shifts in age and economic standing occurring in the neighborhood. There were also differences in sense of affiliation with the Rockridge neighborhood, with some perceiving Rockridge as coming from the outside to build the park.<sup>8</sup> Ultimately most conflict regarding Frog Park was resolved, but not before deep and painful divides in the community occurred.

<sup>7</sup> Wandersman et al point out that decision-making almost inevitably involves conflict. They suggest that groups that use democratic decision-making process are more viable than those that do not. Additionally, they suggest the use of group techniques, such as the nominal group process to facilitate decision-making. As is always the case, however, the realities of time and resource constraints, particularly in volunteer efforts make this easier said than done. (Wandersman, 1999)

<sup>8</sup> Both the ecological system perspective and the social systems perspective on communities are useful for understanding the nature of conflict in this case. The ecological system focuses on population size, density, and heterogeneity; the physical environment; the social organization; and technological forces. Rockridge and Temescal neighborhoods are undergoing demographic shifts as large numbers of young, relatively affluent people with children move in, bringing different needs and interests with them. This population also accesses and feels more comfortable with computer technology, which was a key organizing tool in building the play structures. At the same





While conflict is an unfortunate by-product of having many interests at the table, it is essential to have multiple perspectives; “if you cannot have real conversation with your opponent, he or she will never become your ally.”<sup>9</sup> Ultimately Frog Park overcame controversy by creating a new park design that broadened its base of support to include a coalition of local leaders and organizations including Rockridge Community Planning Council (RCPC), Temescal Neighbors Together, DMV Neighbors Association (DNA), Friends of Temescal Creek, Rockridge and Temescal merchant groups and council member Jane Brunner.

A second area of disagreement occurred around the actual layout of the play structure. Philosophical differences were behind opposing visions of what the children’s play area would contain. In this instance the differences were primarily between the City’s contractor for the Master Plan (MIG) and the community. By independently hiring an additional contractor, Robert Leathers and Associates, the community was able to secure their vision of a dynamic play structure, which is where the stakes were highest for the children. The essential message is that communities need to demand a seat at the table when cities are designing their neighborhood’s park.

### ***Finding a home for your park***

Selecting a site for an urban park requires “building from the inside out” in that the space needed for the park will likely involve land that is already owned or in use. This will require work with outside entities and as well as advocacy and negotiation to find a home for your park. For example, the City will need to help identify workable sites in terms of zoning and permitting, and you may need to negotiate with different groups and public agencies that have competing interests regarding your ideal spot (see above section on community support).

### ***Determining the process that will be used to construct the play structures***

There is choice in how a play structure is built. The traditional approach is to purchase pre-fabricated structures and hire an outside company to install them. The alternative is for the community to design and build them itself. We chose the latter because of the potential to enrich our community’s social cohesion and the opportunity to create something unique for our children.

With these goals in mind, FROG chose to work with a special construction company that builds community while building parks: Robert Leathers and Associates. This agency works nationally and internationally to involve communities in the design and construction of unique parks. Their strategy successfully organizes and empowers communities because it gives communities ownership, draws upon the strengths and

---

time, the social system perspective views community in terms of formal organizations and socio-political processes. Not all members of Frog Park’s geographic catchment area felt connection to or representation by the Rockridge neighborhood association. The formation of FROG as a subcommittee that could incorporate a broader base of participation was important to increasing support for the project. (Minkler 1999)

<sup>9</sup> Texas Industrial Areas Foundation leader Ernesto Cortes Jr, 1993 (Staples, 1999)



skills of people in the neighborhood, brings people together in a mass action (involving literally hundreds of volunteers), and gives them something concrete and meaningful to organize around and celebrate.<sup>10</sup> Working together we built a park that we could not have afforded otherwise, we gained a common identity, created a legacy, and, as we raised a play structure, we raised our spirits.

### ***Funding***

Funding for the overall park/greenbelt was administered through the City and totaled nearly \$900,000. (The final bill will be \$1.2 million when later phases of greenbelt restoration are completed.) The play structures on the other hand were funded primarily through community efforts and ultimately cost around \$150,000. The play structures could have cost much more. Leathers made the structures “affordable” because their construction methodology incorporates a massive volunteer effort (think of a barn-raising). Nevertheless, one of FROG’s primary functions was to raise money.

The two primary funding categories were governmental allocation and private donation. Ninety percent of the funding was provided through city, county, and state propositions and bond measures. Success in obtaining these funds was related to:

- timing (a strong economy had placed funding for parks back on the political map)
- support from the local city council representative
- the ability to convey the vision, necessity, and feasibility of the park to the city council.

However, even though the source of funding was governmental, it took neighborhood-level initiative to advocate, lobby, and secure that the money went to our neighborhood. It was important to get the support of our council member in this effort.

---

<sup>10</sup> Saul Alinsky and Lee Staples both speak of the importance of amassing a constituency and using a process built from successive winnable (and won) issues.



## Raising Money- COMPLETE

Funding Source	Amount
	\$1,098,000+\$
City/County/State	125k from Jane Brunner
Small business donations	47.5k+\$10k matching grant from RCPC
INDIVIDUAL DONATIONS	
fundraising drive	57.3k\$
Auction	2.4k\$
Flea market	3.9k\$
T-shirts	3.5k\$
Restaurant card	2.3\$
"Park Your Change" campaign	Na\$
Milk jars/LemonAid stands "Milk Bottle Penny Drive"	1.9\$
Sponsor tiles	4.0\$
In-Kind Donations & time from businesses*	41.6k\$

Grassroots fundraising was also essential. Our goal was to raise \$75,000 but at the end of the day we'd exceeded our goal and raised \$140,132,000 cash! We used several strategies from direct solicitation of businesses and individuals to an auction, to selling restaurant discount cards and T-shirts, to a kid-run change collection drive and lemonade. The largest single donations were generally from local businesses, making them a priority target for any fundraising effort. Other support from the business community, including discounts on construction materials and donation of volunteer workers and food, had the added benefit of showing us (for future reference) which local retailers were supportive and which were not.

The fundraising activities also served as key opportunities for publicizing and igniting enthusiasm for the park. A large fundraising event shortly before the build helped galvanize people and encouraged volunteerism.

Additionally, we cannot underestimate the value of in-kind donations and volunteer hours delivered to the community build of our play structure. During the two weeks that we erected the two structures we calculate that businesses donated roughly \$5,000 in food, \$3,000 in supplies, and that volunteers donated 12,000 hours (10 days x 100 volunteers/day x 12 hours/day) valued at at least \$72,000 (12,000 hours x \$6/hour). These figures don't consider countless hours dedicated prior to the build.

Because fundraising and managing resources is a huge and complex undertaking, we learned that it is useful to have one person in charge of fundraising, and another in charge of managing donated supplies. Additionally, it is necessary to have a formal organizational mechanism to account for all of the donations and to provide tax-deduction receipts for donors. In our case, Friends of Oakland Parks and Recreation (FOPR) administered Measure I City Bonds for the Master Plan design and first phase of construction and also served as the fiscal agent for FROG. For part of the time, RCPC also served as fiscal agent for the project. It was very useful in this instance to arrange for the same person who was treasurer of RCPC to also chair the FROG finance committee.



Some final advice on fundraising: Start early. Devise and work from a strategy. Keep a budget. Write a template for solicitations. Maintain a database. Make sure to plan your database out so that it is correct from the start (difficult to incorporate changes). We suggest using E Base’s free online database service ([www.ebase.org](http://www.ebase.org)). In planning the database structure, consider its long-term utility; although it shouldn’t be used for solicitation, it could be used (with members’ permission) to inform people of future park-related events, and for tracking volunteers.

### The Budget

Item	Amount (\$)
Landscaping, surfacing Clifton Corridor	250,000
Landscaping Redondo Park	90,000
Redondo Park play area	20,000
COMPLETE TABLE	

*Sources: \$400k Measure I funds, \$493k State Proposition 12 funds, \$125k City Council representative's discretionary funds, \$140k Rockridge/Temescal fundraising, \$50k Alameda County Watershed Awareness Program, \$30k Measure I*

### **Park and Play Structure Design**

The design of the park and play structure will be a key determinant in the success or failure of your work. First of all, the park design will determine the feasibility of the project. In our case, the initial design was for a single-site park, which limited our location options to one highly controversial site. When we had a breakthrough in the *design* of the park with the conception of a linear multi-site greenbelt park we were able to make a breakthrough in the conflict.

The design of your play structure will also influence its popularity. The design is the manifestation of your dream and is your tool for communicating and gathering enthusiasm for that dream. If it isn’t engaging or the design process isn’t participatory, then it will be difficult to get people to commit to it. Our play structure’s design captures our hearts and imagination because it is an expression of ourselves (and therefore unique to our community) because all of us – in particular our children – had the opportunity to contribute meaningfully and creatively to it.<sup>11</sup>

Finally, the design of the park will determine its function. For example, your park should provide activities for children of different ages so that it has long-term relevance in the community. It should have seating so that grown-ups can not only watch their children, but also meet each other, serving as a catalyst for community actions. It should be visually attractive so that it engenders community pride and appreciation. It should have bathrooms (or porta-potty). The park’s design will determine if it becomes the nexus of the community or an afterthought.

<sup>11</sup> As an aside, everyone always asks for swings in a park. Be forewarned that they are logistically and financially challenging to include!





### **Promotion / Advertising / Marketing**

The community needs to know about the park building process in order to stay interested and be helpful. Promoting the park also increases fundraising and volunteer capacity. We found that we needed visibility through the following channels: the media, the internet, and the street. We created an information brochure that was critically important to PR and fundraising. We also had terrific coverage by the local newspaper and our neighborhood newsletter.<sup>12</sup> The positive media attention lent credibility to our work and notified people of upcoming events. The editorial section of the Rockridge News was a primary forum for the playing out of controversy. Similarly, we had great coverage through almost two years of promotion from our local children's store, Rockridge Kids that donated an entire display window, collected volunteer information, sold T-shirts, and donated significant amounts of money and staff time. Signs were also important. We posted large roadside signs at a major intersection near the park and at the local BART (rapid transit) station as well as providing signs for people's homes and storefronts. We also created a website and an email mailing list, both of which were critical to keeping the community informed and excited. They were also the most efficient way to communicate with a large and diverse group of people, especially because both were interactive. For example, people could sign up for a work group via the website. Finally, we almost completely covered the commercial district with posters and pamphlets and often had volunteers actively recruiting others out on the street. We think this approach had the effect of keeping the park and play structure on people's minds, building enthusiasm as the build date approached, and creating a common sense of familiarity and ownership with the project. Additionally, our acronym and symbol (frog) were friendly images around which to build our identity.

### **The Big Build: Constructing your play structure**

Your core leadership is on board, you have community support, a park site, funding and a good design, and you've told just about everybody within 100 miles about what you're up to. You are ready to build. This section describes the details of preparation and management of the "community build."

<sup>12</sup> Including three cover stories by two different reporters – see appendix or [www.frogpark.org](http://www.frogpark.org)



## Useful Committees

Committee	Description
Childcare	Set up, staff, and plan program for children's activity center
Food	Procure, serve, and clean-up donated food
Fundraising	Solicit donations, raise funds, generate broad-based enthusiasm
Kid's Committee	Spearhead kid-sponsored fundraising, school awareness activities / participation
Materials	Procure park building materials
PR/Marketing	Educate as many people as possible about the project with posters, banners, news articles, etc.
Tools	Gather, service, distribute efficiently and return all the tools lent by the community for the build
Volunteer Recruitment	Recruit up to 1,000 people for the construction

## Committees

In addition to five core leaders, and a steering committee of 25 members, we needed several committees. As early as possible, designate committee chairpeople for the committees to maximize their effectiveness. But to avoid burnout or last minute crises, do your best to develop *depth* of leadership on each committee as well. We found that we needed eight committees: Childcare, Food, Fundraising, Kid's Committee, Materials, PR/Marketing, Tools, and Volunteer Recruitment. Most committees became highly activate about two months prior to the build, although a few began earlier than that.

## Running the build

We erected two play structures back-to-back, one on each end of the

greenbelt, in a 10-day 8AM to 9PM whirlwind called the Community Build. While the atmosphere of our community build days was like a carnival, the event was in fact a major, complex, technical feat. Leathers provided the highest-level management and technical expertise, and we contracted out the crane work (although we did the Bobcat work ourselves). All other aspects of construction were done by and for the people. Over 1300 volunteers total descended on the park sites to contribute 13,000 hours of labor in 10 days of 30 four-hour shifts.

We used several levels of worksite organization to keep everyone safe and productive (only one injury requiring stitches).<sup>13</sup>

- **Construction, unskilled labor** – Unskilled laborers shoveled, painted, raked, and carried supplies.
- **Construction, skilled labor** – Skilled volunteers helped operate power tools or heavy machinery. The ability to cut a straight line with a circular saw defined “skilled.” Craftsmen/women and artists help with the finishing details that made the play structures unique.
- **Construction, captain** – At least 10 construction captains per shift acted as foremen on the site. This position required some construction experience and good delegation skills.

<sup>13</sup> see [www.frogpark.org](http://www.frogpark.org)



- **Food Service** – The largest cadre, many volunteers prepared and served the meals. Lunch and dinner were provided for all workers.
- **Childcare / Children's Activity Center** – Caregivers for children of parents working at the site. While children older than 10 years could participate at the build site, younger children took part in the activities at the childcare area.
- **Other Non-construction Activities** – Individuals helped at the registration desk, ran errands and took on other miscellaneous assignments

Nearly all of our construction goals were completed on schedule. Doing two parks back-to-back was more complex than a single-site park would have been. The smaller park seemed to be a little like the “down-trodden younger sibling” (says one committee member), always being a little short on coordinators, water, or attention.

The food committee worked miracles on a daily basis. Charged with feeding all of the volunteers two meals a-day plus daily set-up and clean-up, this group worked incredibly hard and struggled to combat burn-out. The coordinator frequently found herself on the phone with restaurants making last-minute donated food appear on the site the way a magician pulls a rabbit out of a hat.

The intensity and duration of the work of the food committee was an example of why all of the committee coordinators and team captains had to be on the watch for fatigue. At the same time, these leaders did not necessarily want to reduce their work hours since they felt that being on the site to be in touch with the process was critical.

### **Volunteers**

We signed on 1,500 volunteers in advance of the build. The key to success lay in recruiting groups of volunteers to the project. A cadre of enthusiastic firemen, UC Berkeley Graduate students, the Junior League (women), Circle K (young Kiwanis Club), Community Impact, the East Bay Conservation Corps (4-6 big people) (and 50-60 loyal community members) were the backbone of our effort. Nearby school students were also critical: 100 to 175 of them arrived to move (a lot of) lumber on the first day. With hindsight, our recommendation for recruiting groups (such as churches and large community organizations) is to get on their calendars well ahead of time since some set their schedules up to a year in advance.

When working with volunteers on the site, ascertain how long each volunteer will be at work before assigning tasks. This way the more interesting assignments can be given to the volunteers who will be there the longest.

### **Celebrate!**

While hard work, building a park should fundamentally be about fun. We celebrated as much as possible. We celebrated each fundraising milestone. We celebrated groundbreaking day. We celebrated at each meal during the build. We REALLY celebrated on grand opening day. In short, don't forget to celebrate as much as



possible! Celebrations make us feel optimistic about our progress and happy to be involved. They keep our spirits up and sustain us through hard times. Most of all, celebrations bring us together and keep us together as a community. Viva!

## **Why Frog Park Worked**

---

Even during economic downturns, Rockridge is a fairly well off neighborhood, with a fairly high educational level among its inhabitants. So when people ask why Frog Park worked, some reply, “Oh, well, because it’s *Rockridge* of course.” We disagree. We believe that all neighborhoods have the capacity - with enough determination - to build a park. In support of this claim, we’ve categorized some of the factors that facilitated our success. We hope that they will be applicable and attainable under any circumstance. There are two categories of facilitating factors, the inputs and the outputs.<sup>14</sup>

Inputs for success:

- **The project was well organized, with tiers of responsibility.** From the core leadership to the steering committee to the committee chairs to the site supervisors, there were multiple layers of responsibility. These tiers distributed responsibility and workload, provided multiple opportunities for leadership, and broadened the sense of ownership felt by the community.

---

<sup>14</sup> As is the case with coalitions, using the open systems framework analysis helps to clarify the underlying supports facilitating the project, namely that it garnered adequate resources, established organized structures to manage the process, set clear and definable activities and was oriented toward concrete, attainable accomplishments. (Wandersman, 1999)





- FROG cultivated and relied upon the talents local to the neighborhood.** This is an assets-based approach to community building that finds solutions by turning to internal rather than external resources. The results are empowering, economic, and infused with the flavor unique to the community. *All* communities, rich and poor, have talented people residing within them. All have someone good with tools, someone with artistic flair, someone who knows everyone, someone who speaks eloquently, someone who helps everyone get along. We believe all communities have the pool of talent necessary for a community-built park. And even better, a community-built park will cultivate and expand the talent pool of a community!<sup>15</sup>

**Factors that influence park-building**

Essential	Facilitating	Detracting
Persistence	Process to develop new leaders	Wedge issues
Clear vision	Support of local business	Late involvement of community
Community ownership of mission	Democratic decision making	Competing interests / Conflict
Core leadership group	Media support	Vocal minority opposition
Community support	Internet-based organizing	City bureaucracy
Local relevance	Good political timing	
Legacy-building	Donated food for volunteers	
Tangible intermediate and final outcomes	Ability to work with politicians	
Strong volunteer base	A good model and process to work from	
Utilization of community's assets		
Shared leadership		
Clear organization and communication		
Meaningful work for volunteers		
Adequate funding		
Childcare		
Food		

- FROG raised adequate funds.** Some might wonder if less affluent neighborhoods could do the same. Yes and no. Perhaps donations from individuals would not be as great, but there are other ways to get funding. As noted, local businesses were generous supporters. Additionally, the majority of funds came from the government, so probably more important than locally-based assets is the ability to articulate and advocate for your vision in the political arena, starting with your local council member. Once on board, your local representative can advocate for you at a higher level. It is also possible to gain funds through grants from charitable foundations.

- The build provided childcare and food (for the stomach and spirit).** The park is about supporting families; process and product cannot contradict each other. We changed volunteer babies' diapers, we fed volunteers, gave them important

<sup>15</sup> Fundamental to community building is the development of the leadership capabilities of community members.



work to do, trained them, offered ownership of the task so that everyone felt part of a successful venture.

- **FROG inspired people.** With positive coverage from the media, donated graphics, and an internet presence, FROG kept people informed, interested, and motivated. These are critical elements when a project extends over years and when it must intensively draw upon the resources of the community. In our case, by the time the build arrived, many volunteers actually took vacation days from work to be able to participate.
- **Volunteers got to play with tools.** This opportunity was a big draw for lots of the volunteers who came to the build. Whether it was the weekend power drill warrior or the timid tool novice, many people were excited by the opportunity to improve their construction skills.
- **We recruited groups of volunteers as much as individual volunteers.** The human power required to erect a play structure is incredible. Securing the volunteer time necessary is challenging because many people are busy working and / or caring for their children. Involving groups, such as a school group, Boy or Girl scouts, churches, or the fire department can fill in the gaps, especially in a neighborhood where many residents may be struggling to make ends meet with multiple jobs. Groups also have the advantage of generally being predictable and reliable. Group recruitment must still take place in the context of getting individuals from the community involved.
- **Frog Park fit a broader political and social agenda.** Our timing, ultimately, was good. California has rededicated itself and its resources to parks and open spaces, so the opportunity to procure adequate funding was there in a way that it might not always be.

Outputs for success<sup>16</sup>:

- **Community-built parks succeed because they get people physically working together.** There is a raw and essential quality to sweating, lifting, sawing, and solving construction problems together that just feels good. It's simple, it's positive, it's a relief from all of the ways we are anxious and divided in our lives.
- **With a community-built structure, everyone has a role.** Everyone is important, everyone learns that they can make a difference. As Robert Leathers & Associates explains,

---

<sup>16</sup> Frog Park accomplishes almost all of the points promoted in Charlotte Bunch's "Feminist Reform Toolkit": material improvement; increased self respect, strength, collective identity; organizational development for future change; and a more powerful community.



Our designers collaborate with volunteers from your community to design and build a custom-made structure of outstanding quality. The collaboration and volunteer effort is like an old-fashioned barn-raising and has the same empowering effect on participants from all communities, whether large or small, rich or poor, urban or rural. A community built project builds community.

We absolutely found this to be the case. From a play structure came friendships, partnerships, and plans.

- **A tangible end product** kept people enthusiastic and motivated. At the build, you could see your progress, and it was exciting. As one organizer said, there is nothing better than “being able to walk on your work.”
- **Everyone benefited from the park.** This project was for our own neighborhood. It feels good to do work that improves your home. Rockridge is materially improved by Frog Park, and not only kids and parents but also anyone who wants to be in nature will benefit. It is also likely that homeowners can anticipate increased property values.
- **We knew how and when to celebrate.** Every achieved fundraising benchmark was acknowledged. Every day of the build was a party. The groundbreaking ceremony was a party. The grand opening day was a party. We acknowledged people’s work, we acknowledged our victories, and we kept things fun as much as possible.

## **Conclusion**

---

We built a park. We are tired, we are sore, but we are happy, proud, and better than we were before. We know each other and enjoy each other more than before. We feel stronger. Community-built structures *do* build community. The Leathers’ strategy and guidance is a recipe for success. Your children will miss you while you spend hours and years making your park a reality. But they will be in awe of the gift that you give them, and they will know that it comes from the heart. We built a park, and we hope that you will, too.



## References

- Better Together: report of the Saguaro Seminar on Civic Engagement in America*, John F. Kennedy School of Government, Harvard University (Cambridge, MA: 2000).
- Cart CU. Chapter 20: Online computer networks. In: *Community Organizing and Community Building for Health*. Ed Minkler M. Rutgers University Press, New Brunswick, New Jersey, London. 1999.
- Deckelbaum RJ, Williams CL. Childhood obesity: the health issue. *Obes Res* 2001 Nov;9 Suppl 5:S239-43
- Frog Park website: [www.frogpark.org](http://www.frogpark.org)
- Minkler M, Wallerstein N. Chapter 3: Improving health through community organization and community building. In: *Community Organizing and Community Building for Health*. Ed Minkler M. Rutgers University Press, New Brunswick, New Jersey, London. 1999.
- Putnam RD. The prosperous community. *The American Prospect* vol. 7 no. 24, December 1, 1996.
- Putnam RD. Bowling Alone: America's declining social capital. *The American Prospect*, 1996.
- Putnam RD. The strange disappearance of civic America. *The American Prospect* vol. 4 no. 13, March 21, 1993.
- Staples L. Chapter 11: Selecting and "cutting" the issue. In: *Community Organizing and Community Building for Health*. Ed Minkler M. Rutgers University Press, New Brunswick, New Jersey, London. 1999.
- Strauss RS, Rodzilsky D, Burack G, Colin M. Psychosocial correlates of physical activity in healthy children.. *Arch Pediatr Adolesc Med* 2001 Aug;155(8):897-902.
- Wandersman A, Goodman RM, Butterfoss FD. Chapter 16: Understanding coalitions and how they operate. In: *Community Organizing and Community Building for Health*. Ed Minkler M. Rutgers University Press, New Brunswick, New Jersey, London. 1999.



## About Authorship

This document ideally reflects the experience that the Rockridge-Temescal neighborhoods would like to record in their community archives and to convey to others embarking upon a similar path. The content is the community's, although the words were written primarily by Heather Kuiper. Heather is currently a Rockridge community member and doctoral student of public health at the University of California at Berkeley. The document was also submitted in fulfillment of the course: Community Building and Community Organizing for Health. Prior to entering UC Berkeley, Heather worked for 12 years in national and international public health, earning a Masters of Public Health from Johns Hopkins University in 1996 and most recently co-founding and co-directing the Global Health Access Program, a small-scale international health and development non-profit organization.

### Acknowledgement of Major Contribution to the Paper

Invaluable information and perspective were provided by Theresa Nelson, Steve Costa, and Sally **Fitzhugh**, all leaders of the FROG Park endeavor. Additionally, about 20 volunteers of diverse roles were interviewed on the day of the grand opening, and their perspective and spirit are hopefully represented in this paper.

Further requests about this project and document can be made to Theresa Nelson and Steve Costa.

