State of Play
The Landscape of Play in San Francisco
The Playground Initiative

The Playground Initiative is a partnership between the San Francisco Parks Alliance (SFPA) and the San Francisco Recreation and Park Department (RPD) dedicated to ensuring that all children in San Francisco have access to safe and engaging play spaces in their own neighborhoods.

Introduction

This report highlights the positive work that has been done in San Francisco over the past two years to improve the quality of our city’s playgrounds, as well as the work that still remains to be done to ensure that all children in San Francisco have a safe and engaging play space near home.

Since the Parks Alliance’s publication of the 2012 Playground Report Card, a lot has happened: deteriorating playgrounds have been renovated, new playgrounds have been built in neighborhoods that previously had none, and voters weighed in that they wanted more funding for parks and playgrounds by passing the 2012 Clean and Safe Neighborhood Parks Bond by an overwhelming margin.

This report primarily focuses on the local scene in San Francisco — outlining the activities and recommendations of the Failing Playgrounds Task Force and the work of neighborhood groups who have successfully raised funds and rebuilt playgrounds. It also presents a snapshot of playground design trends nationally, and the successes and challenges of other cities in delivering quality playgrounds for their residents. The concluding section outlines the Parks Alliance’s recommendations for what should be done going forward.

Local Scene: 2012 Parks Bond and the Failing Playgrounds Task Force

Background

In November 2012, San Franciscans voted in favor of the 2012 Clean and Safe Neighborhood Parks Bond, a $195 million General Obligation Bond which included $15.5 million to renovate, replace and fix dilapidated playgrounds throughout San Francisco. The bond language did not specify which playgrounds would receive funding.

The SF Recreation and Park Commission authorized formation of a Failing Playgrounds Task Force, as required in the Bond Report. The Parks Alliance and the SF Recreation and Park Department share a vision that the process for prioritizing playgrounds to receive Parks Bond funds should be fair and include extensive community engagement. Both organizations co-convened the Failing Playgrounds Task Force in Spring 2014 and enlisted Steve Rasmussen Cancian from Shared Spaces, a third party moderator, to serve as discussion facilitator.

The Task Force consisted of children’s advocates, parents and community park leaders, as well as representatives from public schools and open space non-profit organizations. The primary role of the Task Force was to create a list of playgrounds they deemed most worthy to receive the $15.5 million in Park Bond funds, and to bring these recommendations to the Recreation and Park Commission. The Task Force met six times from April to September 2014 with robust public involvement.
**What was the Process and Outcome?**

Task Force members were introduced to current frameworks for playground condition assessment (such as the Parks Alliance’s Playground Report Card) during the first couple of meetings and toured various playground sites to see firsthand the difference between an A and F-graded playground.

At later meetings the group discussed various criteria that could be used to determine which playgrounds had the most need, and possible ways to formulate their list of recommended playgrounds. After coming to agreement on which criteria they deemed most appropriate (see Methodology Used), Task Force members utilized an online tool, Tableau, to create a list of 13 playgrounds, which they approved by full consensus at their 6th meeting.

The recommendations of the Failing Playground Task Force were brought before the Recreation and Park Commission on December 18th, 2014, and were approved unanimously by the Commissioners.

RPD Capital & Planning Division staff are developing a capital delivery strategy, including a schedule and budget, that will be brought back to the Commission in Spring 2015.

Currently RPD playground renovations cost between $1 million to $2 million. The $15.5 million in bond funds will cover renovations of playgrounds in Tier 1. If those renovations are less expensive — costing closer to $1 million and/or additional private funding sources are secured — a considerable number of the playgrounds in Tier 2 could be renovated with remaining funds.

“Members of the Task Force each brought our individual background and experiences to the table and worked as a group to come to an agreement on our common goals: ridding our outdated playground equipment of chemicals and creating the kind of safe play environments that foster a renewed sense of community in our neighborhoods. I feel confident that the Task Force was able to keep public interest in mind as we arrived upon the final list of playgrounds to recommend to the Recreation and Park Commission.”

— Lee Anne Weldon, Member of the Parks Alliance’s Park Policy Council, Failing Playground Task Force Member
Methodology Used

The playground list was formulated by selecting playgrounds with the presence of hazardous CCA pressure-treated wood* in or around the children’s play area. The list was refined by prioritizing sites with low household median income and high youth density. After these demographics, the 2012 Playground Report Card grades were used to further refine the list.

Results

The 13 playgrounds prioritized for funding are geographically spread across the city, prioritizing some of the neediest neighborhoods.

*Wood that is treated with a chemical wood preservative containing chromium, copper and arsenic (CCA). When the wood degrades over time, the arsenic may leach out depending on factors such as climate, amount of CCA and the age of the wood.
Impact

When all 13 playgrounds are renovated, San Francisco will have no playgrounds with hazardous CCA-treated wood. This will be an important and long overdue milestone for the city.

The recommendations resulting from the Failing Playgrounds Task Force’s work, as well as the process the Task Force followed in making those recommendations, are consistent with the Parks Alliance’s core values of civic engagement and thoughtful, data based decision-making.

For an in-depth report that includes meeting summaries and exhibits, please see the Failing Playgrounds Task Force Final Report: sf-parksalliance.org/playgrounds

“I was impressed with the Failing Playgrounds Task Force members and the complexity and thoroughness of their discussion. They were asking very good and tough questions, and worked diligently with complex data. It seemed to be a complete and thoughtful process.”

— Beth Rubenstein, Legislative Aide for District 11 Supervisor John Avalos

Tier 1
Guaranteed Renovation List:

- Alice Chalmers
- John McLaren Park – Group Picnic Location
- Merced Heights
- Panhandle
- Sgt John Macaulay Park
- Washington Square
- Buchanan Street Mall
- Golden Gate Heights
- Herz Playground
- Juri Commons
- Richmond Playground
- Stern Grove
- West Portal

*Contain CCA-treated wood

Tier 2

- Golden Gate Heights
- Buchanen Street Mall

Playgrounds Slated for Renovation

Tier 1
Guaranteed Renovation List:

Unanimously agreed upon by the Task Force and the Recreation and Park Commission.
Local Scene: San Francisco’s World of Play

Among its 110 fiscally-sponsored Park Partner groups, the Parks Alliance sponsors 17 “Friends of” playground groups. These Park Partner groups have raised funds enabling the successful renovation of nine playgrounds across the city since the Parks Alliance published the 2012 Playground Report Card. These groups have spent an extraordinary number of hours rallying their communities, fundraising and leveraging public and corporate partnerships.

### PLAYGROUNDS RENOVATED AND REOPENED

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>PARK</th>
<th>Neighborhood</th>
<th>Reopened</th>
<th>New Features</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Lafayette Park</td>
<td>Pacific Heights</td>
<td>June 2013</td>
<td>Climbing boulders from Montana; water pumps and a play stream area; several netted climbing structures; serpent shaped slide; amphitheater. Designed by local landscape architect Jeffrey Miller</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Cayuga Playground</td>
<td>Outer Mission</td>
<td>August 2013</td>
<td>Reinstallation of 300 historic wooden folk statues carved by artist and gardener Demetrio Braceros who tended the park for 24 years; ornamental gates donated by the San Francisco Arts Commission</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Boeddeker Park</td>
<td>Tenderloin</td>
<td>Fall 2014</td>
<td>Pyramid-shaped net climber; spinner; swings and vertical chimes; two egg shaped mosaics created by a local artist, Laurel True; new clubhouse; multi-purpose lawn; raised planting beds for gardening; full basketball/volleyball court; fitness zone; perimeter walking path; stage.</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

### PLAYGROUND RENOVATIONS IN PROCESS

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>PARK</th>
<th>Neighborhood</th>
<th>Renovation Status</th>
<th>Planned New Features</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Mountain Lake Park</td>
<td>Richmond/Presidio</td>
<td>Construction to begin Winter 2015</td>
<td>Wooden climbing maze, rope play structures, larger toddler play area, expanded lake views, improved safety.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Larsen Playground</td>
<td>Sunset</td>
<td>Broke ground Fall 2014</td>
<td>Replica of the original F-8 Crusader jet used for years as a play structure; new play structure for toddlers; concrete slide.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>South Park</td>
<td>South Park</td>
<td>Construction to begin Spring 2015</td>
<td>Increased accessibility; improved safety and updated play areas for toddlers and older children.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Joe DiMaggio</td>
<td>North Beach</td>
<td>Construction begins early 2015</td>
<td>Larger playground with more seating areas, new courts and 50 new trees.</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

### NEW PLAYGROUNDS

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>PARK</th>
<th>Neighborhood</th>
<th>Opened</th>
<th>Playground Features</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Dogpatch Playground</td>
<td>Dogpatch</td>
<td>August 2014</td>
<td>Colorful playground equipment geared towards children aged two to five, with a slide and climbing structure; benches for parents and caregivers.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Sue Bierman Waterfront Playground</td>
<td>Financial District</td>
<td>July 2013</td>
<td>Pirate ship play structure; large climbing dome; playground was designed as sustainably as possible with non-toxic and recycled materials.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Emerald Park</td>
<td>Rincon Hill</td>
<td>July 2013</td>
<td>Interactive spinners and marbles; climbing structure; large adjacent grass area.</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

All playgrounds in the chart above are the products of the Parks Alliance’s Park Partner groups’ work, save Cayuga Playground and Emerald Park. Emerald Park is preserved as permanent open space through a conservation easement and special arrangement between the Emerald Fund and the Parks Alliance, and is open to the public at no cost to taxpayers.
Spotlight: Peru Street Playground, McLaren Park

In 2007 Chuck Farrugia and his neighbors created Help McLaren Park to revitalize the dilapidated areas of this 312-acre park in the southern portion of the city. McLaren Park, serving the Portola and Excelsior neighborhoods, had not received public money in decades, and the last major maintenance effort had not taken place since the 1980s. After much deliberation, the group selected Peru Street Playground for its first renovation project.

The group was the recipient of four major grants, totaling $315,000, to fund the renovation. The group received a Community Challenge Grant and a Community Opportunity Fund grant, as well as large donations from different trade unions and PG&E. Community pancake breakfasts and various other grassroots fundraisers also contributed to the rebuilding effort.

After five years of fundraising and community organizing, construction began in December 2012 and the playground re-opened in October 2013. The group faced several obstacles along the way, the largest being the complications of building a playground on a slope rather than a flat site. Several key donors stepped in to assist the effort including District 11 Supervisor John Avalos’ office. The new playground features a toddler play area, renovated picnic areas, trails, irrigation and a community kiosk.
National Scene: Successes & Challenges

San Francisco prides itself on having world class playgrounds. Still, there is much to be learned by looking at the bigger picture. To learn from the playground scene in the rest of the country, we selected 20 cities* from the Trust for Public Lands’ ParkScore® index and interviewed stakeholders from local park agencies and associated playground-focused nonprofits on the “state of play” in their areas.


Most cities surveyed faced significant funding challenges which impacted their ability to maintain their playgrounds. Common issues are vandalism, and the wear and tear on playground equipment from overuse and harsh weather. City park departments struggle with innovation due to the restrictions placed by certain codes, standards, and regulations.

Despite the challenges, playground design across the United States succeeds in generating creative play structures while making space for all abilities and generations. Themed playgrounds and nature play areas are used to enhance the play experience by incorporating the surrounding environment and cultural and historic context. Many cities successfully partnered with local schools to expand access to play spaces.

Lessons Learned and Implications for San Francisco

Many cities prioritize accessibility when designing their playgrounds, not only providing entry to the play space but also featuring play equipment that can be utilized by children.
with varying levels of ability. To make playgrounds in San Francisco truly accessible, we must work to incorporate equipment catering to all children, including those with physical and behavioral disabilities.

San Francisco must provide diverse play experiences in new playgrounds that are being produced — spaces that excite and entice children to be physically active, use their imaginations, and to engage with the natural world. Careful and comprehensive citywide design to create playgrounds that accommodate children of all abilities, learning modes, and feature cutting edge elements should be distributed throughout the city.

In addition to inclusive play, risk play and nature play, there are two other design considerations that stand out. Designing playgrounds with fitness in mind and multi-generational play are two ways San Francisco can create healthier communities through play. Both can often be achieved simultaneously, as many playground and fitness equipment manufacturers make outdoor equipment suited for all ages.
What’s Next? Forging Ahead in San Francisco

Unique Opportunity for Philanthropy

The recent renovations and re-openings of several new playgrounds and the work of the Failing Playgrounds Task Force highlight San Francisco’s commitment to providing safe and innovative play spaces for all children. However, there is still much work to be done. Of the city’s over 135 playgrounds, 33 were categorized as failing in the Parks Alliance’s 2014 Reassessment Report.

The $15.5 million allocated for playground renovations from the 2012 Parks Bond guarantees that the neediest of playgrounds — ranked as top priority by the Task Force — are addressed, but more failing playgrounds remain. The recommendations of the Failing Playgrounds Task Force have presented a clear road map for philanthropy and point to needy playgrounds that must be considered next for capital investment. With this solid mandate for philanthropy and firm data backing it, San Francisco has a unique opportunity to engage funders and get these projects done. The time is right – investment directed now to playgrounds in Tier 2 (page 4) will fund worthy projects and extend 2012 Bond monies.

In addition to the playgrounds in Tier 2, remaining high priority playgrounds for renovation and prime candidates for philanthropy include: Brooks Park, Buena Vista, Crocker Amazon (at Italy), Crocker Amazon (at La Grande), Golden Gate Park (Lincoln Ave), Golden Gate Park (Mothers Meadow), Grattan, Miraloma, Precita Park, Selby-Palou Mini Park, Silver Terrace, Visitacion Valley and Youngblood/Coleman Playground.

Playground Design Considerations

In February 2015, the SF Parks Alliance, in partnership with the Recreation and Park Department, is hosting a public Playground Design Forum to collect community input regarding what elements and experiences members of the public would like our city’s playgrounds to include going forward. The Playground Design Forum will bring together members of the public, planners, playground designers, children’s advocates and other diverse stakeholders. Data gathered at the Forum will inform future renovations, assuring that resulting playgrounds are well designed and provide rich and stimulating play environments.

Filling in Playground Gaps

As reported in the City’s Recreation & Open Space Element of the General Plan (SF Planning Department, Final Draft, April 2014), many “playground gaps” remain: these are areas of the city that are outside a quarter-mile walking distance to a playground.

As noted on the map, sizable playground gaps exist along the city’s south-eastern waterfront, a fact that should be taken into consideration and remedied through the planning process for the Blue Greenway (a vision to connect parks and open space in SF’s southeastern neighborhoods). Given projected population
growth and increased development in this portion of the city, there is a demonstrated need for new recreation and play opportunities. The Sunset district is also playground deficient and could benefit greatly from capital investment for play.

Creating Additional Spaces for Play

In addition to building new play spaces, there are other creative strategies for providing access to playgrounds in areas devoid of them. The Parks Alliance will continue to work with community members and District 2 Supervisor Mark Farrell on the Shared Schoolyard Project to identify and open more schoolyards on weekends, thereby providing more play spaces to the city’s children. Other opportunities for creating play spaces may be found in Street Parks, a partnership between the Parks Alliance and The Department of Public Works that enables and assists community groups in transforming DPW-owned parcels into community gardens and gathering spaces. Additionally, Pavement to Parks, a Planning Department program that seeks to turn under-utilized parts of streets and rights of way into pedestrian spaces, may present another venue for play space.

Conclusion

The San Francisco Parks Alliance is committed to improving the state of play in our city, and going forward we will continue to work to build capacity and success of our “Friends of” playground groups. We will also advocate for innovative playground design, work in partnership with the Shared Schoolyard Project to activate schoolyards beyond school hours, and continue our philanthropy efforts to address playground renovations that need to be done. Working in tandem with the Recreation and Park Department, City officials, playground advocates and stakeholders, the Parks Alliance will assure positive momentum to improve our city’s play spaces continues.
Acknowledgments

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The San Francisco Parks Alliance extends thanks to RPD’s Capital and Planning Division staff and members of the Failing Playgrounds Task Force for their service benefiting the city’s children and youth.