



Easy Essays by LeRoy Chatfield

William Land Park

A Short History

Much to the surprise of those who knew him, former Mayor William Land in 1912 bequeathed the sum of \$250,000 – \$4.8 million in 2005 dollars – to the city of Sacramento with these instructions: “I bequest and devise to the City of Sacramento the sum of two hundred and fifty thousand dollars to purchase a public park within a suitable distance of the city; the title to which shall be vested in the City of Sacramento, and which public park shall be known as and called William Land Park. And I authorize and empower the mayor and board of trustees of said city to expend so much as may be necessary for the purchase of the ground suitable for a public park, and to expend the balance in properly fixing up said grounds, as a public park.”

In 1918, after six years of debate, the city council voted 3-2 to purchase 238 acres known as the Swanston-McKevitt tract on Riverside Road. Thereafter, the park purchase was tied up in litigation until 1922 when the California Supreme Court refused to hear an appeal that would have reversed the 1918 city council decision to purchase the tract.

Because William Land had the reputation of being an astute, penny-pinching entrepreneur, Chauncey Dunn, Land’s personal attorney and the executor of his estate, was often quizzed as to why Mr. Land would give such a large sum of money for a public park. In August of 1912, Mr. Dunn, speaking to the Chamber of Commerce, said that Mr. Land wanted a “recreation spot for the children and a pleasure ground for the poor,” and he also wanted it to be situated within the city where it would be accessible to all.

In addition to the gift of a public park, William Land’s will created the Ann Land Memorial Fund (named after his mother) with a bequest of \$200,000 – \$3.8 million in 2005 dollars. The purpose of the fund was to provide care for the indigent poor. In 2004, the fund paid out \$75,000 in assistance to the poor.

Open Space, Urban Forest, and Recreation

The planning goals and zoning codes of the city of Sacramento are filled with references about the need for parks, open space, urban forest, and recreation use to maintain and preserve the quality of life for the community. A park, according to city codes, provides a refuge for residents from the ever-increasing encroachment of urbanization. There is no mistaking the intent of the city when it adopted Ordinance 17.48.040 Variances: “Open space regulations are to be literally and strictly interpreted and enforced to protect the public interest in the preservation and conservation of open space lands and their amenities . . . hence, variances will be granted only in extreme circumstances.”

At one time in its history, William Land Park was the premier public park in Northern California, not only because of its size but because it had been carefully developed into an extensive urban forest with recreational uses, both active and passive. Sixty years ago, the writer of this essay came with his parents – a 50-mile trip – to spend the day picnicking and seeing the sights of William Land Park.

Park Converted to College Parking Lot – 1,000 Automobiles

Despite the generous intentions of William Land, despite the city council vote in 1918 to purchase the property for a public park, despite the ironclad zoning regulations adopted by the city council to preserve open space for public use, two-thirds of William Land Park is now used as a college parking lot. Instead of William Land Park providing a refuge from urbanization, the most virulent form of urbanization – the automobile parking lot – has invaded the park, bringing with it the inevitable traffic, pollution, and parking space frenzy. Who would have thought such an outcome was possible?

Fixing the blame for the demise of the park is easy enough, but ultimately the failure belongs to park users themselves and to those citizen-guardians who understand the important role that parks play in a community, and even to park area residents who derive significant tangible benefit from its location – people like myself, who should know better but were unable or unwilling to speak up on behalf of the park and defend the integrity of William Land’s bequest.

Rob Fong’s Campaign Promise

First-year city council member Rob Fong has vowed not only to restore the use of William Land Park to the city’s residents but to refurbish and enhance the

park's condition so that once again it will become the envy of Northern California cities. This will be a difficult challenge for Mr. Fong because there is no so-called win-win outcome. Ultimately, the only choice to be made is whether William Land Park will once again be used as a park, or will continue to be used as a free college parking lot – the choice is either/or, not both.

Both park users and parking students feel a sense of entitlement about the use of William Land Park. Park users and area residents claim the park because of William Land's bequest and the city's unequivocal codes, which were written, albeit not enforced, to preserve open space. College parking supporters claim the park because their parking squatters' rights now extend back almost a decade.

The struggle to rescue William Land Park from the encroachment and ravages of urbanization is a grim reminder that when lax citizens allow local government officials to operate in private without the benefit of oversight and accountability, the quality of life for the community is inevitably diminished.

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