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The Plaza de Panama Parking Proposals: A Timely Debate

The recent debate regarding the return of the Plaza de Panama to its original use as a pedestrian plaza has spurred a variety of proposals from various civic organizations and patrons around San Diego. The debate itself is not as to whether the plaza should be a pedestrian space- San Diego seems to recognize the merits of this use- but what is to be done with the 74 parking spaces currently occupying the plaza. There is merit to each of the proposed plans and to analyze each would require depth beyond the scope of this paper. But each proposal has something in common: addressing the problem of limited access to Balboa Park. Inadequate access to Balboa Park is a decades-long, much written about issue. It is an issue much larger than the Plaza de Panama itself, yet seems to be absent from the current Plaza de Panama debate. This paper suggests that by integrating existing planning proposals, current public transportation efforts and the 2015 Balboa Park Centennial Celebration we could achieve the much sought after goal of providing excellent access to Balboa Park.

In 1915 San Diego hosted the Panama-California Exposition to celebrate the opening of the Panama Canal. This exposition was responsible for providing many of the iconic structures that we have come to identify as Balboa Park today: the Cabrillo Bridge, the West Gate, The Prado, the Plaza de Panama and the Spreckles Organ Pavilion. In 2015 San Diego will celebrate the 100th anniversary of this exposition- the Balboa Park 2015 Centennial Celebration. In 2010 a design charrette was conducted and

a Centennial Celebration report was released, conveying an inspirational vision for the celebration. This report states that in order to have a successful Centennial celebration “the development and implementation of a comprehensive circulation, parking, bicycle/pedestrian access plan is essential.” (1) The report also states that “The Balboa Park 2015 Centennial Celebration cannot pay for long overdue infrastructure improvements but it can serve as a catalyst and deadline for the solution of a few long-standing challenges.”

There are many existing studies and solutions for solving Balboa Park’s accessibility issues that have already been approved by the City of San Diego. These existing solutions could be championed by



the 2015 Centennial Celebration Host Committee.

In each of these studies it was concluded that Balboa Park would require an investment in transit while mitigating the use of the automobile in the park. The Balboa Park Master Plan, developed in 1989, states “accessibility to and

within Balboa Park shall be increased through alternative modes of transportation including transit, inter-park shuttles, and intra-park tram, bicycle facilities...When off-site parking, transit, tram and shuttle systems provide adequate access to the Prado and Palisades areas, consider closing Cabrillo Bridge to automobiles... provided, however, that sufficient close-in parking is retained to accommodate the handicapped.” (2)

That same year the City produced the Central Mesa Precise Plan for the purpose of further defining the goals and objectives of the master plan. A few items worth noting from the Precise Plan regarding Circulation: “Reducing the presence of the automobile will emphasize natural qualities of the Park while recapturing the original intent of the Central Mesa design concept. Placing priority on the

pedestrian is based in the nature of the original site design.” (3) Also of note: “With higher visitor levels in the future, alternate forms of transportation will become a necessity to ensure maximum public use and enjoyment of the park.” (3) The Precise Plan, in addition to the Balboa Park Master Plan calls for an investment in transit access to Balboa Park. As of today this is limited to bus service and bus/trolleys.

In 2004 the San Diego City council amended the Balboa Park Master Plan and Central Mesa Precise Plan to allow construction of an underground parking structure parallel to Park Boulevard in front of the San Diego Zoo. This project was called the Park Boulevard Promenade. (4) The design was to solve long-term access issues with a transit center for public transportation and 4800 parking spaces to benefit the Zoo and greater Balboa Park. With the current debate centered on the redesign of the Plaza de Panama, the Zoological society issued a letter restating that parking solutions had already been studied and approved by the city council that would benefit all of Balboa Park. (5) Many of the current Plaza de Panama solutions being proposed are, in contrast, short-term parking relocation plans with no long-term accessibility in mind. Though the Promenade is not a cheap proposal (\$106 Million) the current cost of the proposed Plaza de Panama option by Dr. Irwin Jacobs (\$46 Million) would go a long way towards making this long term solution a reality.



Another more recent study completed by CIVITAS for the City of San Diego in 2003 lays out a plan to expand public transportation access throughout the park and to replace several scattered parking lots with a 4,500 stall parking structure. (6) This plan essentially relocates parking facilities for greater Balboa Park and the Zoo to the park's periphery along Park Boulevard. From here various transit options would allow park patrons to access Balboa Park's amenities. This plan is both viable and current and has undergone review by the City's Planning Commission. Interestingly, CIVITAS is also the author

of the Plaza de Panama study by Irwin Jacobs which endorses the construction of a pay-to-park structure South of the Spreckles Pavilion. Though this Garage has been discussed through various other plans it was never considered as a singular solution, but a component of a larger solution.

As previously illustrated, there are several valid, existing and approved solutions to Balboa Park's long-term accessibility needs that could be promoted under the 2015 Balboa Park Centennial Celebration. In addition to these existing studies and plans, there are currently underway efforts to construct infrastructure improvements around Balboa Park that could be embraced and expedited by the Centennial Celebration Host Committee. Most noteworthy are efforts by MTS to develop the Silver Line streetcar and City/Park Line and SANDAG's RTP plan, which includes additional transit lines for downtown and Balboa Park.

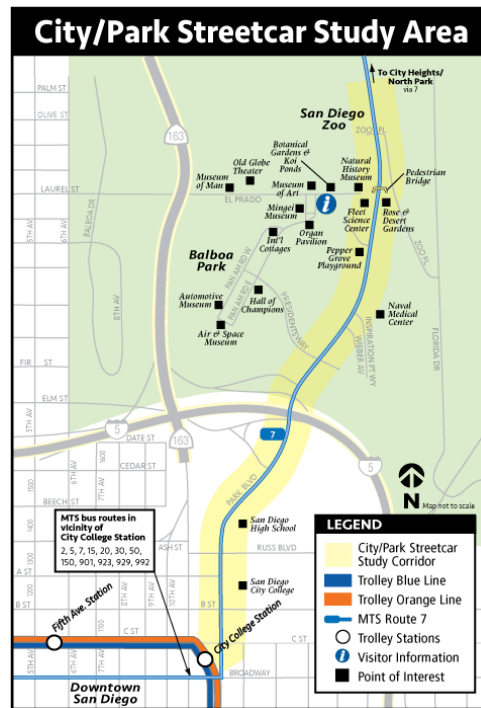
San Diego Metropolitan Transit System (MTS) is currently introducing historic streetcars to the Downtown area (7). They have already acquired several vintage streetcars that are planned to loop

through Downtown on the existing Blue and Orange line tracks, with service on weekends, holidays and during special events. In fact, one of these streetcars has been fully restored (pictured) and is currently performing test runs through downtown San Diego. Working with

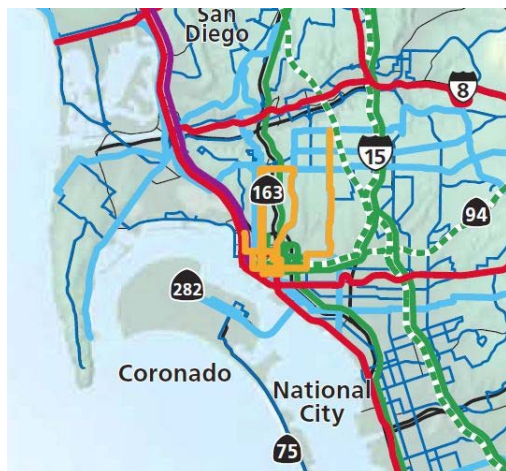


MTS on the restoration of the streetcars is the San Diego Electric Railway Association (8) which is dedicated to the preservation of the history of the San Diego Electric Railway - San Diego's primary streetcar system which operated from the late 1800s to 1949.

MTS is also currently studying the feasibility of a City/Park streetcar line that would link Uptown, Balboa Park, City College and Downtown via Park Boulevard. (7) This streetcar line is consistent with the aforementioned plans and could be timely completed under the leadership of the Centennial Celebration committee. The City/Park Streetcar line is also consistent with regional plans that are central to the development of San Diego's transportation needs in the coming decades- the 2050 Regional Transportation Plan.



The San Diego Association of Governments (SANDAG) serves as the forum for regional decision making regarding transportation needs in San Diego. They have issued their draft 2050 Regional Transportation Plan (RTP) which considers growth and development and how to effectively manage transportation through the year 2050 (9). This comprehensive study has identified streetcar lines that will link Downtown, Balboa Park and the surrounding communities (pictured left). Streetcar Route #553 would connect Downtown San Diego, Little Italy and East Village. Streetcar route #554 would loop



through Hillcrest, Balboa Park, and Downtown. Streetcar route #555 would run along 30th Street and connect Downtown with the North Park and Golden Hill communities. Streetcar route #554 is projected to be operational by 2020 and Routes #553 and #555 are projected to be operational by 2035. Though these dates

are later than 2015 they could conceivably be completed for the Centennial Celebration. As it is currently planned, route #554 would be operational only 5 years after the Celebration.

The price tag for these projects is relatively small when compared to the total budgeted capital improvements for the region (10). The construction costs for Route #553 (\$14 Million), Route #554 (\$28 Million) and Route #555 (\$25 Million) totals \$67 Million. The total projected cost of Capital improvement projects for the region is \$48.7 Billion. These streetcar projects would constitute only 0.137% of the total regional plan cost. To prioritize this portion of the budget in celebration of the 'Crown Jewel of San Diego' would seem prudent and reasonable. In fact, \$67 Million to create a public transportation network that would benefit greater Balboa Park, Uptown and Downtown as compared to the estimated \$46 Million to construct a pay parking structure to benefit visitors to the Plaza de Panama, as proposed by Dr. Irwin Jacobs, would seem a very good value- especially considering that the SANDAG streetcar projects would be funded by TransNet. TransNet is the half-cent sales tax for local transportation projects that was first approved by voters in 1988.

Of particular relevance to the Plaza de Panama debate is the fact that streetcars and public



transportation in Balboa Park are a San Diego heritage, established back in 1886. A vocal participant in the Plaza de Panama debate is the Save Our Heritage Organization (SOHO). Their mission statement is "to preserve, promote and support preservation of the architectural, cultural and historical links and

landmarks that contribute to the community identity, depth and character of our region" (11). The Silver line proposal by MTS and the streetcar routes #553-555 are a reiteration of this San Diego

heritage and should be recognized by SOHO as a way of reestablishing this link with our past while providing for our future.

In the 1880's a great Land Boom developed in Southern California and the need for public transportation in San Diego became evident. In 1886 the San Diego Street Car Company ran horse drawn carriages all through the then bustling downtown. (12) The following year, the Electric Rapid Transit Street Railroad company was organized to build and operate the largest electric



street railway in the country under the "Henry" patented system (13). Several years later the ill-fated San Diego Cable Car Company established a Cable Car route from 4th and L St. to Adams Ave. (14) Today's only surviving Cable cars can be enjoyed in San Francisco. Enter into a conversation with a patron at Reed's Hobby Shop in La Mesa and you will realize just how substantial San Diego's public transportation system was.

There are many opportunities to recapture this lost San Diego heritage. The MTS Silver line is already running historic carriages and will soon be introducing several more restored cars. SANDAG's



streetcar profile identifies the historic streetcar as a viable option. As was made aware to be by patrons of Reed's Hobby Shop, there are two original Class 1 streetcars that operated during the 1915 Panama-California Exposition (pictured at left) that are potentially ready for restoration and use in the 2015 Centennial Celebration.

In addition to past plans and current efforts to develop public transportation in and around Balboa Park, there are also proposals currently being introduced in the Plaza de Panama debate that are consistent with Balboa Park's long-term accessibility requirements. In particular, A proposal by Innovative Transportation Systems proposes historic streetcars running throughout Balboa Park with Trolley stations linked at the East-West terminuses of the Park.



(15) The location of centralized parking facilities at the periphery of the park and utilizing a tram/ streetcar to circulate users through the park's interior is consistent with many, if not all, of the approved plans already on the books.

Another project that could be incorporated into the 2015 Centennial Celebration project scope is the North Embarcadero Visionary Plan (NEVP) being conducted by the Unified Port of San Diego. Though this project is outside of Balboa Park's boundary, it would do much to expand the park experience. Though the effort to develop this bay-front area is a subject of debate in itself, it does present a unique opportunity to fulfill one of San Diego's oldest plans- John Nolan's 1908 comprehensive



plan for San Diego. In his plan for San Diego, Nolan proposes to link Balboa Park to the San Diego Bay waterfront. With two efforts underway- one to

redevelop the waterfront and the other to reconfigure Balboa Park, it is an opportune time to consider the link between them. In a study

conducted by the University of Oklahoma and the NewSchool of Architecture and Design, titled 'Linking the Park to the Bay: Realizing the 1908 John Nolan vision for Balboa Park and San Diego' (16), methodology, design recommendations and implementation and funding have all been explored. The 2015 Centennial provides the catalyst and deadline for the execution of John Nolan's plan.

In Conclusion, the Plaza de Panama debate regarding the fate of 74 parking stalls is flawed in its scope. Considering the requirements of an individual parking lot while failing to address the corporate circulation needs of greater Balboa Park does little to solve its long-standing accessibility questions. The 2015 Centennial Committee publically states that without the development and implementation of a comprehensive circulation, parking, bicycle/pedestrian access plan the Centennial Celebration will not be able to accommodate projected use. This puts the Centennial Committee in a unique position to finally address Balboa Park's long standing accessibility issues.

There are approved plans in place that have already undergone the public process, such as the Balboa Park Master Plan and Central Mesa Precise Plan. These plans have historically lacked funding and political will but that could now change. Current efforts by MTS and SANDAG to develop streetcar lines around Balboa Park are in various states of development and, if championed by the Centennial Committee, could feasibly be operational in time for the 2015 celebration. These streetcar projects have significant historical precedent and would enrich Balboa Park's heritage- a central issue in the current Plaza de Panama debate. The streetcars are already publically funded- another issue of debate. Also, the streetcars are consistent with circulation plans that have already been approved and adopted by the City of San Diego. Finally, Let this once in a lifetime event be the realization of John Nolan's vision for San Diego over 100 years ago by connecting the Park to the Bay. The 2015 Centennial Celebration is San Diego's opportunity to recognize Balboa Park's significance to our past and to assure that it is just as much a part of our future.

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