

BATTLE OVER



Plaza de Panama Project will reclaim Balboa Park for the People

By Bill Walton Plaza de Panama Committee

When Balboa Park opened in 1915 for the Panama-California Exposition, San Diegans enjoyed grand plazas and pedestrian promenades that allowed them to enjoy the charm and cultural heart of the park. These pedestrian plazas and walkways led to lush park areas with numerous places to sit and enjoy the beauty of Balboa Park with family, friends and visitors free from the hustle and bustle of city life.

Unfortunately, over time people were replaced by the flow of cars and traffic as the plazas were converted to roads and parking lots that now dominate these historic plazas. Today, we all drive through the heart of the park in search of that elusive parking space focusing on pedestrians, strollers, dogs and bicyclists instead of the architectural and botanical beauty passing by. Most times it's like a battle of wills — cars trying to get somewhere and park goers having to shift between a relaxed walk and a guarded state of being.

It once wasn't like this; and it doesn't have to be in the future.

In 2010, our mayor, Jerry Sanders, presented a vision of restoring Balboa Park's central plaza to its historic pedestrian use in preparation for Balboa Park's Exposition Centennial celebration in 2015. The Plaza de Panama Committee was established to help the community implement the vision — get cars and traffic out of the heart of the park and put people back in.

The committee developed the Plaza de Panama Project to realize this vision. The project will provide an alternate route for cars that avoids the heart of the park, allowing numerous public spaces — including the Plaza de Panama, Plaza de California, West El Prado and Esplanade — to be returned to historic uses as pedestrian-only spaces. A precedent for this was set in 1973 when East El Prado was reclaimed from vehicles and city buses. The Plaza de Panama Project builds on what was started almost 40 years ago and will extend this vibrant pedestrian-friendly atmosphere throughout the center of the park.

The Plaza de Panama Committee has conducted numerous studies and considered a wide range of ideas about how to improve and restore Balboa Park to its historic intent and charm. After careful study, the Plaza de Panama project presents us with the best alternative to reclaim our park for people, while ensuring that access to the park is not diminished. It maintains both an east and west access for vehicles by way of the new Centennial Bridge, which will allow traffic to flow around the core of the park directly to parking areas, including a new underground parking structure topped by a two-acre park that is level with the International Cottages. The underground parking structure will be built on the site of the current Spreckels Organ Pavilion parking lot. The project will return the core of Balboa Park to the grand public space for San Diego residents and tourists that it was in 1915.

By separating cars and pedestrians, the project will reclaim what once was; and it will

create 6.3 acres of new landscaped areas, plazas and promenades replacing what are now roads and parking lots. In addition, a new low-floor ADA-compliant, pedestrian friendly tram system will provide easy access to park amenities free of charge for all park visitors.

The Plaza de Panama Committee has pledged to raise \$25 million in private donations to pay for the Centennial Bridge and park improvements, while the parking structure will be funded by a self-supporting bond repaid through minimal parking fees at the structure. All parking outside of the structure will remain free. The parking structure and the tram system are two long-planned amenities that the city has approved, but has not had the financial resources to implement. The Plaza de Panama project has the financing resources to make those plans a reality.

The Plaza de Panama project is on track to be completed in time for the 2015 Centennial Celebration and will provide spectacular venues for this important yearlong celebration in Balboa Park rising to the experience of 1915.

History is an important educator. For the 1915 exposition, many of the buildings in Balboa Park were deemed “temporary” with every intention to be removed. Fortunately, citizens had the foresight and vision to maintain and create the historic treasure we enjoy today. The Plaza de Panama project will restore Balboa Park's historic grand plazas of 1915 for the people as they were originally intended — foresight and vision for the betterment of the community.