

Local Park Use, the Balboa Reservoir, and Sunnyside's Desires

A Summary of a Recent Survey

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The prospect of a new park in our neighborhood is thrilling! Although the unstructured open space of the present reservoir site is used as a park of sorts, it is not appealing to many people. The new park planned for the Balboa Reservoir Project (BRP) will be welcomed by a great many local residents.

As Sunnyside's representative on the BRCAC, I believe the design team for the BRP central park will be interested to know more about the present park habits and desires of our local residents. To this end, I created a survey entitled "Local park use and the planned Balboa Reservoir Project open space and programming", which was open for responses between November 8 and December 4, 2020. The survey was distributed by email to Sunnyside Neighborhood Association members, who were encouraged to pass it along to others in the neighborhood or nearby.

Although there were several respondents who lived in other neighborhoods, I have analyzed the data for only the Sunnyside residents (n=102), who formed the majority of the respondents. The responses of non-Sunnyside residents in nearby neighborhoods were not significantly different in any case. View the anonymized [data here](#).

The purpose of the survey is to illustrate the actual uses that Sunnyside residents make of their local parks, and the basic desires that those park users have in terms of landscape and infrastructure. Just over half of the respondents lived in families. Walking, sitting, and doing things with children form a large part of their park activities. Trees, lawns, benches, and children's playgrounds are at the top of their wish lists for park features.

These things may seem obvious, but part of my motivation in carrying out this survey was to communicate to the design team working on the BRP central park that these basic uses and basic wishes are a real and substantial part of the lives of local residents, and that if they are to create a park that serves actual needs, they will want to take notice of these facts in the process of planning the new park space.

A summary of the survey results from 102 Sunnyside residents follows.

QUESTION A: Your Household

Just over half of the Sunnyside respondents live in family households (with young, teen, or adult children, or multigenerational)—52% in total. Couples made up the next largest group, with 39%, and singles a little less than 9%.

Couple		39%
Family with young children		35.3%
Family with teen or adult children		10.8%
Family with young and teen children		1%
Multigenerational family		4.9%
Single		8.8%

QUESTON B: Your Age Group

Compared to the overall demographics of District 7, the Sunnyside respondents were more heavily concentrated in the 41-65 age group, who made up about 60% of the survey. Seniors in D7 run about 25%, but the number of Sunnyside seniors came to just 20%.

8 – 17	0%
18 – 40	19.6%
41 – 65	59.8%
66 – 99	20.6%

QUESTION C: Local small-to-medium open space areas or parks you currently use on a regular basis.

Of the 96 respondents from Sunnyside who answered this question, most are already using park or open space adjacent to or in the site for the planned Balboa Reservoir central park: 76 said they used Balboa Park, the Balboa Reservoir, and/or City College open space or track.

Respondents were invited to check off as many as applied. Here are the number of Sunnyside respondents who checked off these nearby small-to-medium sized parks/open space areas:

Sunnyside Playground/Park	70
Balboa Park	64
Sunnyside Conservatory	47
Balboa Reservoir	36
Joost Baden Minipark	17
Aptos Park	16
Dorothy Erskine Park	13
Cayuga Playground	10
Miraloma Playground	9

Additionally, 5 respondents wrote in “City College” or “City College and Balboa Reservoir.”

There were 15 write-in answers that named parks or open space further away or not listed, including the Detroit Steps, Glen Canyon, McLaren, and Lake Merced.

QUESTION D: Thinking back over the past few years, what do you like to do at the parks and open spaces you visit?

Walking, sitting, and activities involving children predominated the responses to this question.

Respondents were asked to check their top five activities. Here are the number of Sunnyside respondents who checked off each of these park-based activities:

Walk for exercise	70
Walk for leisure	53
Gather with friends or family	52
Take children to playground	49
Sit in the sun	47
Take children to grassy or open area	46
Have a picnic	41
Sit in planted areas or garden	37

Sit in the shade	31
Walk my dog	25
Participate in unstructured games in open areas (Frisbee, ball catch, etc.)	24
Have a children's party	25
Run for exercise	23
Participate in games in dedicated areas (basketball, tennis)	19
Sunbathe on grass	8
Participate in group activities (singing, casual music performance, etc.)	7
Stationary exercise: tai chi, yoga, etc.	5
Have a barbeque party	5
Play table games (mahjong, chess, etc.)	3
<i>Take kids to ride scooters or balance bikes on paved areas or courts that aren't being used [write-in]</i>	1
<i>Theater! San Francisco Shakespeare Festival in the Park [write-in]</i>	1
<i>Sit in planted areas or garden, row on the water of Lake Merced [write-in]</i>	1
<i>Place for kids to bike and scooter [write-in]</i>	1

QUESTION E: Landscape features you like in parks and open spaces.

Overwhelmingly, respondents liked **trees**; almost everyone checked the tree box. Next most popular was **open grassy lawns**, followed closely by **native plants**.

Other features, and the number of respondents checking each, are shown below.

Trees	94
Open grassy lawns	70
Native plants	69
Flowers	48
Shaded areas	42
Water features	28

Community gardens	29
Manicured gardens	21
Swales (sunken areas planted to maximize runoff water)	8
<i>ferris wheel [write-in]</i>	1
<i>Pedestrian through pathways / walking paths / pathways for walking / DG paths [write-ins]</i>	4

QUESTION F: Built features you like in or near parks and open spaces.

This question highlights the most basic needs of local park users. The features they liked include traditional park equipment (picnic tables and benches, and playgrounds), followed closely by the not-so-traditional category of artwork.

SF Recreation and Parks Dept has required **artwork** in all public parks for several years now, and park users have come to expect and appreciate the inclusion of interesting and touchable artworks in the park environment. I encourage the designers for the Balboa Reservoir Project central park to commission artworks for the space that surprise and delight local park users, equaling or exceeding the standard of art found in many of the city's public parks.

Picnic tables top the list of park users' desires. These humble structures mean the difference between families being able to have a shared meal or a children's party, or not. They are the stalwart workhorses of the SFRPD public parks, often unglamorous in appearance, but always well-used. The ones at Glen Canyon are reserved and used almost every weekend. Sunnysiders and the future residents of the BRP alike deserve to have such a basic item nearby to them, in the new park. I have seen no reference to picnic tables in any projected plans for the central park, so I draw attention to this strong wish from local park users.

Similarly, **benches** ranked as high in people's desires. Sitting on the ground, or even on the planned stepped open-space area in the south end of the central park, is not something all bodies can do. Benches allow for people with reduced agility or ability, to sit and enjoy the park space—and sitting is something that we know people use parks for, from Question D, above.

During the design team presentation at the November 9 BRCAC meeting, the playground structure options presented did not include **swings**. I would like to draw attention to the popularity of swings in the responses, and suggest that the team consider including swings in the central park's playground equipment.

Basketball courts, which 18% of respondents indicated they would like to see at the BRP site, would likely not be feasible in the central park; however, perhaps this feature could be considered for the SFPUC open space on the south end of the BRP site, if one could be constructed as a temporary structure. One respondent contacted me directly to inform me that there was no regulation-sized court in the neighborhood (the one at Sunnyside Playground being undersized) and that he would dearly like to have one nearby.

Respondents were asked to check up to seven built features. Here are the number of Sunnyside respondents who checked off each option:

Picnic tables	81
Benches	80
Playground equipment for children	56
Artwork, murals	51
Artwork that people and children can touch	47
Artwork, sculptures	45
Swings	39
Coffee cart	36
Food truck	29
Performance facility (E.g. a pavillion or stage)	27
Bike parking corral	27
Individual seats	24
Café tables	24
Barbeque facilities	23
Bike-share station	20
Tennis court	18
Basketball court	18
<i>Water fountain [write-in]</i>	1
<i>Water feature kids can play in [write-in]</i>	1
<i>boat house [write-in]</i>	1
<i>PUBLIC RESTROOMS [write-in]</i>	1
<i>walking paths [write-in]</i>	1

<i>Ping pong [write-in]</i>	1
<i>Community garden [write-in]</i>	1
<i>Area for biking [write-in]</i>	1

Write-in comments from the survey

- Would love a good playground/grassy area similar to Balboa Park in the reservoir space as there are no playgrounds in Westwood Park between Balboa and Aptos. Sunnyside is on the other side of Monterey and still a jaunt.
- Please maximize usable landscape. Plants are pretty but expensive to maintain.
- Theater and music in the park. North Beach playground (Joe DiMaggio Park) has fun spaces separated without huge fences.
- No fruit trees; encourages raccoons, skunks, rats etc.
- The top three things for the open space for me would be 1) wide grassy field, 2) a nice playground with a variety of equipment for all ages (including big kid and baby swings), 3) and trees to provide some shade over parts of playground and field.
- Basketball court, please!
- LOVE that it will be a greenspace!!!
- An outdoor classroom space would be amazing. I'm wondering if partnering with SFUSD and Sunnyside Elementary could benefit this project.
- Trail/area for biking
- Please prioritize shade in the park, especially near the playground. Our parks are so hot and sunny on sunny days, and it would be so nice to have shade structures for families. Bike parking and bike share would be good, and having a place for kids to bike and scooter. I really love the idea of a cafe or food truck or place to get coffee near the park. That would make it an amazing family destination in the neighborhood.
- PUBLIC RESTROOMS
- Dog poop bag dispensers. (There's no mention of pets at all in the plans.)
- Dog park

- More open space and less housing, there is not enough parking to support these increased condos/apt while CCSF students are also crowding the streets to park and attend class
- Well lit for older folks - it'd be nice to have a running track around the development as well.
- The neighborhood by Balboa Reservoir desperately needs a children's playground. It would be the closest playground to our house (we're equidistant from the playgrounds at Sunnyside and Balboa), and our family walks around there all the time - to get coffee, burgers, to Whole Foods, riding bikes/scooters by the reservoir or just enjoying a long walk. Thank you for considering public input from local families!
- People use the current lots for biking ALL the time. It's a really incredible space for safe bike riding. We would be ecstatic for any continued ability to ride bikes away from cars.
- A place integrated with CCSF
- A little while ago I lived in Paris where there are many small, well-used, and beautifully manicured parks. Some elements that I loved about them (and that I saw many people use) were paths for walking and jogging, devoted game space for petanque/bocce or even chess/checkers. There were many gardens that either the city or non-profits maintained actively, but they didn't have plots that were fenced off in the middle of a public park. I do think in some gardens that there were fruit bearing trees, but representatives of the community groups were there daily to mind and attend to them. I would love to see this park as lively as the parks in Paris, and I think the trick to doing that is creating spaces where adults as well as children can engage in leisure activities, but not to create much fenced off space.
- Trees, trees, trees!
- It would be nice for the Balboa Reservoir Project to consider a park with wind protection.
- Pickle ball courts please
- Probably don't need to call this out, but also allow for handicap access
- I would love to see drinking fountain for people and dogs. I think having those features are kind and thoughtful to its 2 & 4 legged citizens. Thank you.
- As much park space as possible - the more the better - that allows diverse use.
- I've been using the berm grades at the Balboa Reservoir site to exercise. Something similar would be nice.

- It has long been a dream of mine for playgrounds to have coffee carts - would love for that to become reality!
- More amenities that highlight/protect special elements of terrain, natural features, sensitive areas but protected from trampling damage. More spaces that appeal to art, music, and theatrical activities in the outdoors.
- Love the coffee truck that has come to beach chalet fields!
- Please consider enlarging the Reservoir Park area. In order to serve the existing community AND residents of the new housing, the park

Conclusion and note about the November BRCAC meeting

During the design presentation at the November 9, 2020, BRCAC meeting, the design team heard some negative responses to the options they gave for park and playground designs. There seemed to be surprise on both sides—a bit like an awkward blind date. As a member of the BRCAC, I wish to work to keep local residents engaged with the process of developing plans for the site, and to improve the next conversation for all parties concerned. I hope this survey can help with this.

The negative reactions during that meeting to plans showing one or two areas surrounded—and thus removed from general use—by six-foot fences should be seen in light of some of the survey data here. Having such structures in the central park works against many of the established uses that local residents make of their parks: walking, sitting, and activities with children.

People want trees, but if those trees are part of an orchard, they will be fenced in, and this erases the chance for the general park user to enjoy those trees.

If the park is cut into sectors and parts of it fenced off, the opportunity to use it for sitting or walking—which were top activities on the survey—will be much reduced.

In all, I hope this survey helps fill out the picture for the ABB design team, beyond what they heard during the necessarily brief public comments at the November 9 meeting, and can thereby contribute to the future of this community process.

Thank you for your consideration.