

# Park is 16 months from turning its life around

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gaged.” He singled out Betty Traynor’s steadfast leadership of Friends of Boeddeker Park as a key element qualifying the park for TPL attention. Its Parks for People program upgrades underused or deteriorating parks in dense urban neighborhoods that have children and active volunteer organizations.

“Nearly 50,000 people live within walking distance of Boeddeker,” said Jane Kim, District 6 supervisor. “The park needs to be a thriving and central part of the Tenderloin neighborhood.”

The 26-year-old Boeddeker, the only adult park in a 50-block area, has gotten a bad reputation over the years for dope dealing and gambling in its dark corners. Named after the late Father Alfred Boeddeker, who founded St. Anthony’s Dining Room, the park has needed constant attention from the police station catty-corner across the street.

Critics blamed many of its problems on Boeddeker’s design, including bricked-off, separate sections, a clubhouse without sightlines for monitoring outdoor activity, and thick, iron fencing that made it look like a fortress.

“Boeddeker Park is currently one of the most poorly designed parks in the city in a neighborhood craving vibrant, healthy open space and recreation,” said Phil Ginsburg, Rec and Park general manager. “The new park will have state-of-the-art play areas for kids and lots of amenities for adults, too. It will be a treasure for all.”

He thanked the trust for doing what the city could not.

Six years ago, TPL began looking for parks in need in San Francisco. Then-Trust Project Manager Jake Gilchrist, now with Rec and Park, found Friends of Boeddeker Park and came away impressed, especially with Traynor’s leadership and success with park projects and getting grants.

Boeddeker was ripe for a makeover and so was Hayes Valley Playground and Balboa Park for a campaign that TPL could lead, with Rec and Park and the city’s approval. Early heavy-hitting donors to join in were Banana Republic, Levi Strauss Foundation, McKesson Corp., PG&E and Wells Fargo. Each put up \$1 million. Other corporate and foundation funds eventually followed, plus state bond money and a state parks grant.

The three-park project cost totaled \$16.5 million. The \$3.4 million Hayes Valley Playground and clubhouse remake was completed in June 2011. Balboa Park’s \$4.1 million renovations were finished this fall. Boeddeker’s transformation will take 16 months.

After 10 outreach meetings in the neighborhood and design changes based on community feedback, the final version of the makeover was ready. But more funds — another \$1 million — had to be raised before the project could go forward. Ironically, this limbo period was the park’s lowest point.

The park began shutting down, sometimes for days on end this year, because of Rec and Park budget shortages. It was open just 15 supervised hours, weekdays-only, till Traynor got a grant to keep it staffed occasionally for an additional four hours for a special event like music. And weekday afternoons, children could use the playground — if accompanied by an adult.

Now Boeddeker will shed its forbidding fencing that makes it resemble an abandoned fortress for a lighter, thinner perimeter. The park will lose its bricked-off sections and have a walkway around a large lawn, a full-size athletic court, a playground with modern, ADA-compliant equipment, an outdoor exercise area and garden, a small stage with seating and a glassy clubhouse with a fitness room. The clubhouse will afford improved visibility over park activities, answering a longtime criticism.



PHOTOS BY TOM CARTER

**State and city officials** and neighborhood leaders, including true friend of Boeddeker Betty Traynor (in red), take ceremonial digs at a dirt pile to collectively launch the park’s 16-month, \$8.5 million renovation.



**Vegetation** was up for grabs. Philip, who didn’t want his last name used, pots a rosemary plant to take home.

A green aspect will be the capturing and reusing of rainwater with permeable paving, bioswales and a cistern for low-flow irrigation. Signs will explain the water and energy conservation.

“This brick walk will be gone,” Ginsburg crowed to the crowd. “It was called ‘the gantlet.’ Who needs it?”

The walkway held three tables of food from the Episcopal Community Services’ Chefs program, donated by TPL and the Tenderloin CBD. It had been famously used for footraces that former park Director Rob McDaniels held for academy and DeMarillac school kids, and was the seminal track for his Mac-CanDo Tenderloin Youth Track Club that still competes in Bay Area meets. But the strip was also known derogatorily as a path that skittish strollers took past winos and drug dealers seated on the benches.

Demolition will rip out the interior brick, leaving just the perimeter wall, a quarter of the park’s brickwork, for patching the walkway. The remaining 75%, too fouled with grout for reuse, will be ground up for recycling elsewhere, according to Alejandra Chiesa, TPL project manager.

A concern often voiced during neighborhood outreach meetings was for the fate of Boeddeker’s trees. The new park will add two more than the



**Park band** regulars Melvin and the Mellotones play the swan song for the bedraggled brick-laden park where kids once raced each other on the wide walkway.

56 trees Boeddeker has now both inside the park and on the sidewalks.

A few of the tall, stately poplars to the north against the Bel-Air and Coronado Hotel walls and that stretch around a bend in the park, which were not thriving, will be replaced by the fast-growing species known as *Populus nigra Italica*.

“None of the trees were in great shape,” said Chiesa, recalling a 2008 arborist report on Boeddeker. “But people wanted to keep as many as possible.”

The park slopes downward 14 feet north to south and some terracing will expose roots, so only two other trees will be saved, a Japanese maple in the back and a large Sweet Pittosporum near the new main entrance on Eddy Street.

The only tree lost from the sidewalk outside will be one in front of the gate. With that, the park loses 32 trees

and gains 35 of eight different species selected for low-water needs and urban use — from *Ginkgo biloba* to Catalina cherry.

During construction, Traynor says, the Friends will continue to meet monthly at the Police Community Room. The next meeting is Jan. 17, 3:30 p.m.

Topics for months to come will be considering programs for the new park, fundraising for clubhouse furniture and equipment and the problem of staffing in an unknown Rec and Park budget. Trust for Public Land says it expects to stay engaged with the park five more years, which figures to be an asset in fundraising.

Before the ceremony, Traynor said wistfully, “All these years of making lists of what we wanted, and now this. It’s more than we ever could have imagined.” ■