Pocket park emerges from Fox Canyon plans

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Call it the little park that emerged from an imbroglio.

Plans are moving ahead for a neighborhood park in City Heights, about a block from a previously slated site that turned into a major headache for Councilman Jim Madaffer, among others.

The Wightman Street Neighborhood Park will cover just 1 acre but will evoke none of the controversy that doomed its nearby proposed predecessor, the 2-acre Fox Canyon Park.

"It is sort of the grand compromise, and it's something that should make everybody fairly happy and sort of move forward from the Fox Canyon debacle," said Michael Sprague, past chairman of the City Heights Area Planning Committee. "It'll make a great little pocket park for the people within that area."

The Fox Canyon Neighborhood Association, which sought the park that was scrapped, hopes the Wightman project will be "a catalyst" to revive Fox Canyon Park and others around the urban canyon, association president José Lopez said.

Madaffer championed the Fox Canyon Park proposal, but it was torpedoed last year by litigation, community infighting and allegations that Madaffer surreptitiously tried to get a road built as part of the project under a state grant for parks. The proposed extension of Ontario Avenue through the canyon was fiercely opposed by many residents when it came to light.

"Councilman Madaffer used his influence to pressure city staff to circumvent the public process," City Attorney Michael Aguirre wrote in a scathing, 61-page report issued in February.

Aguirre contended that Madaffer's actions resulted in the city's spending $400,000 over four years to develop a park on land it didn't own, and offering $475,000 for a parcel appraised at $52,000. The proposed land purchase fell through.

Aguirre's report was forwarded to the state Attorney General's Office and county District Attorney's Office. Neither has filed charges against Madaffer, Assistant City Attorney Chris Morris said.

In an interview this week, Madaffer called Aguirre's assertions "patently false, untrue and factually inaccurate."

"That report was nothing but an absolute waste of time and energy," he said. "I could
refute every single issue in there line by line, but I frankly don't have the time."

The city paid $5,000 in October to settle a lawsuit by a group that opposed the road extension’s inclusion in the Fox Canyon project.

Madaffer says he hopes the park and the Ontario Avenue extension are both built someday, but in the meantime he’s happy to see plans getting under way for the smaller Wightman project in a neighborhood dominated by low-income immigrants from Africa and Latin America. "It’s an underserved community," he said. "They deserve the same amenities you would find in Scripps Ranch or La Jolla."

The city paid $2.65 million in August for the Wightman Street parcel, on which sat a small apartment complex repeatedly flooded by storm runoff. The purchase price included settlement of a lawsuit by the property owners, said George Biagi, a spokesman for Mayor Jerry Sanders.

Construction costs for the Wightman park aren't set because it hasn't been decided what, if any, amenities it might have. Residents are being invited to an Aug. 1 planning meeting to discuss options and meet the design consultants contracted for the job, said Debbie Van Martin, project manager for the city Parks and Recreation Department.

About $690,000 from a development-fee park fund has been budgeted for the planning, design and environmental assessments, Van Martin said. Construction could get under way by late spring or early summer 2008, she said.

Caption: 2 MAPS
1,2. Original location of proposed park -- New proposed location 1,2. AARON STECKELBERG / Union-Tribune

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