



Redefining the role of the Guadalupe River Park in San Jose

By Jason Su, October 5, 2020.

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Birds wade through floodwaters north of Coleman Avenue. Photo by GRPC staff.

The first six months of 2020 have redefined the role parks play in our communities.

We know (and may take for granted) that parks offer opportunities for recreation, attract



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development interest, connect people to nature, and promote walking and biking. This precious social infrastructure has also adapted to include new uses: immunity-boosting and mental health healing, supporting essential services (particularly food cultivation and services distribution), providing opportunities for economic recovery, and allowing protestors a safe outdoor place to gather.

The growth in demand and expansion of park uses compels us to redefine the role of parks, and our role as the community that supports them.

This year brought with it unprecedented challenges to communities, cities, and civics. The Covid-19 health crisis exposed vulnerabilities in our public health and safety network. The pandemic and the ensuing shelter-in-place practices led to a precipitous economic downturn and historically high unemployment. The protests following the death of George Floyd, Breonna Taylor, Ahmaud Arbery, and many others exposed systemic racism and oppression that was all too familiar for Black people and communities of color.

So how does the Guadalupe River Park affect its surrounding community?

Guadalupe River Park and Gardens is a three-mile ribbon of parkland that runs along the banks of the Guadalupe River in the heart of downtown San Jose. It is geographically central to the transformation of San Jose by one of the region's largest public infrastructure and private development projects in the Diridon Station Area, where BART, California High Speed Rail, Google's Downtown West, and a number of smaller commercial, residential, and transportation developments are underway. At the same time, the housing affordability and homelessness crises have led to a significant population living dangerously close to a river that floods annually. Not only does that leave many without the dignity of a home, it exacerbates a contentious relationship between encampments and ecology.

The San Jose community is faced with navigating uncharted territory, centering collective prosperity around public life, and restructuring our social, civic, and economic systems for equity. We must work toward these goals, keeping in mind the layered challenges of a public health crisis, systemic racism, and economic downturn. With those in mind, we can audit the social infrastructure and community assets we already possess and invest in them in ways that will translate to the greatest level of community benefit. A place to begin is with our parks.

- Are parks the panacea for all of our social ills? **No.**
- Do they play a part, both in the near and long term, in our community's resilience? **Absolutely.**
- Can we position our parks to be more responsive to the changing and expanding roles they continue to play in our community? **Yes.**

Catalyzed by investment from the Knight Foundation and the City of San Jose Department of



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Parks, Recreation, and Neighborhood Services, the Guadalupe River Park Conservancy (GRPC) has embarked on a partnership with the City and SPUR to better understand how the Guadalupe River Park can affect the environmental, economic, and equity factors in our community. GRPC, as San Jose's nonprofit partner for the active use and development of the Guadalupe River Park, promotes education, advocacy, and stewardship. We believe the River Park can become San Jose's "civic greenway," offering a place for people to connect with community, history, nature, and each other.

To better understand how our park can serve the ecosystem of community-based supporters who share a vision for a better River Park, we will develop a long-term direction for the park through a visioning and community engagement process. This process will also require a certain amount of GRPC introspection as to the type of organization that can best address the multitude of priorities for park use.

Our success will depend on civic partnerships and leveraging the decades of leadership that continue to propel aspirations and optimism for our River Park. Our alliance of community partners include SPUR, the Rotary Club of San Jose, South Bay Clean Creeks Coalition, Urban Confluence, UC Master Gardeners of Santa Clara County, city and county elected leaders, other public officials, neighborhood residents, businesses, cultural institutions, and more.

We all have ideas about how a great public space should look. However, this year has taught us the need to reframe the discussion in order to serve our communities more equitably. Through this initiative, we intend to re-examine these questions:

- What makes a great public space?
- What can public spaces do to capture the spirit of our city?
- How can public spaces reflect the needs of our neighborhoods and the crises, present and systemic, that we collectively face?

*The conversation is no longer what a park **needs** in order to become a great public **space**, but what a park **needs to provide** in order to make the community a great public **place**.*

Join us as we reflect and re-envision what a great public place means.

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