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City Readies a Beautiful 'Vista'

Park on Long-Troubled Belmont Learning Center Site to Open This Week

by Anna Scott

This week, City West will get a lot greener with the debut of a 10-acre park. If some people thought it might never arrive, that's understandable: It is opening on a notorious site where construction first began a decade ago.

Still, it is a case of better late than never for proponents of the Vista Hermosa Park. The facility, along with a new high school next door, slated to open in the fall, comprise a \$350 million investment that will help transform Downtown's western edge.

"The Vista Hermosa Park provides an outlet for relief for families in a densely populated area," said City Councilman Ed Reyes, whose First District includes the park. "The park provides a place for people to sit and contemplate nature, an athletic field for active recreation, and an outdoor classroom for students at the nearby school to have science classes."

On a recent morning, cement trucks rolled along the edges of the park. Inside, a cluster of young, potted trees sat on the patio by the main entrance at First and Toluca streets, waiting to be placed. Construction materials lay scattered nearby, while plastic covered freshly poured concrete walkways and yellow police tape cordoned off garden areas still being planted.

By 10 a.m. this Saturday, when the park debuts with a ceremony to include Mayor Antonio Villaraigosa, Second District County Supervisor Gloria Molina and Reyes, among others, every detail will be in place. The final result, said Dash Stolarz of the Santa Monica Mountains Conservancy, which will operate the park under an agreement with the Los Angeles Unified School District, will be an urban refuge.

"We wanted to bring the features of the national parks in the mountains to the center of the city," said Stolarz. "The park also connects the neighborhood to the city, and to the rest of Downtown."



Dash Stolarz, director of public affairs for the Santa Monica Mountains Conservancy, checks out the \$14 million Vista Hermosa Park, which her organization will run. The 10-acre facility will open Saturday, July 19. Photo by Gary Leonard.

Green Approach

The \$14 million Vista Hermosa ("beautiful view" in Spanish) features paved trails that wind gently up hills to multiple terraces. Highlights along the way include a children's play area with a giant plastic snake and turtle to climb on, an amphitheater with an artificial waterfall and graded flat rocks for seating and picnic areas.

An adjacent soccer field will be shared by the LAUSD and the city Department of Recreation and Parks. From the field's artificial turf to the mostly native Southern California plants, everything is designed to be eco-friendly, said Stolarz.

"The Conservancy's core mission is to protect natural resources," she said. "That's what we've done here, especially with regard to water conservation. Every drop of water that comes here stays here."

To that end, all of the park's ground surfaces are made from permeable materials that allow water to seep through to irrigate plants. A 20,000-gallon underground cistern will capture and circulate water throughout the park. The roofs of the two restroom facilities and a small administrative building are planted with greenery to help keep the structures cool. The green rooftops also create a nicer view of the park from surrounding high-rises, Stolarz noted.

"We have the view," she said as she peered at the Civic Center from one of the park's higher perches. "But the neighborhood also has the view."

'People's Park'

City West, the neighborhood west of the 110 Freeway, has become a residential hub in recent years.

Glossy high-rises like 1100 Wilshire, the GLO apartments and TenTen Wilshire have sprouted along Wilshire Boulevard. Meanwhile, the area surrounding Vista Hermosa houses the recently opened Canvas L.A. apartment complex and the upcoming Belmont Station Apartments, as well as smaller apartment buildings and single-family homes.

While the Echo Deep Pool recently reopened nearby, the area and its increasing population face a noticeable lack of green space.

"I think the park is going to be well-utilized by the people who live here," said Mamta Patel, a City West resident who represents the area on the Downtown Los Angeles Neighborhood Council's board of directors. "It's really needed. I will definitely use it for recreation and if there are events there."

Stolarz said that the park will offer regular educational programming and entertainment, along with a place to have lunch or kick a soccer ball. The Conservancy, she said, is meeting with various area nonprofits, including the City West-based Shakespeare Festival/LA, about how they might utilize the facility for performances and events.

"It will be the people's park," she said.

When the neighboring Edward R. Roybal Learning Center, expected to attract 2,800 high school students, opens in the fall, the project may also help to diminish its own troubled

history.

Construction on the site first began about 10 years ago, and was originally intended to bring a high school, retail and housing to the 35-acre plot. Known at the time as the Belmont Learning Complex, building was halted after the discovery of dangerous gases and an earthquake fault on the onetime oil field. While the project languished, the housing and retail elements were canceled. Eventually, plans were reconfigured and the project received a significant push from then-LAUSD Supt. Roy Romer. Ultimately two buildings near the earthquake fault were torn down. Construction finally resumed in 2006.

"The old Belmont Learning Center, in its complete failure, was what we were known for as a district seven, eight years ago," acknowledged LAUSD Chief Facilities Executive Guy Mehula. "As we finish this up and have a safe, quality school there, it puts a lot of demons behind us."

The park, said Mehula, was key in getting the school off the ground a second time. "The park was an integral piece of the package that we were able to bring to the community and get approved," he said. "Not only does this bring a school that this neighborhood deserved, but it brings open space to what is one of the most underserved, under-parked areas in the country.

"I hope everyone in the entire community is able to look at what's here and now," he added, "and at moving forward instead of focusing on the history of a decade ago."

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