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A Park is Born

A brief history of Mission Trails Regional Park by Ruth Alter, Archaeologist

In the 1960s, the Navajo Community Planning Area, which includes what is now Mission Trails Regional Park, began to experience a major housing boom. As new developments sprang up everywhere, the City of San Diego decided an urban park was needed and they explored the possibility of setting aside 1,765 acres of open space that included Fortuna Mountain, Mission Gorge and Old Mission Dam. The federal government was also in the process of deaccessioning land from Camp Elliott, and the City felt some of it was well-suited for recreational use.

In 1967, with no City park yet in the works, the County of San Diego prepared its own regional park plan. This plan called for creating two smaller parks at Fortuna Mountain and Lake Murray. Five years later, a new County plan called for linking the Lake Murray recreational area to the open space on Cowles Mountain. No action was taken on this plan either and housing tracts continued to be constructed at an overwhelming pace.

In 1974, Cowles Mountain was in imminent danger of being developed when an opportunity to buy it suddenly arose. Encouraged by support from the Navajo area community, City Councilman Jim Ellis, County Supervisor Dick Brown, and Dorothy Leonard, President of the Navajo Community Planners, joined forces to acquire the property. The purchase laid the cornerstone for the park we now enjoy today and forged the inter-governmental cooperation needed to help make the park a reality.

But there was still a long way to go. The objectives, goals, and priorities of the park had to be established and a Master Development Plan had to be prepared. Finalized in 1976, the plan directed that the park serve the comprehensive recreational, educational, and cultural needs of San Diego at large. The park was to be regional in scope and was to preserve the wilderness character and visual integrity of the land. A community-wide contest in 1979 resulted in the park's name - Mission Trails Regional Park.

Fundraising, land acquisition, and creating park awareness were undertaken in the 1980s. Initially about 3,000 acres were already under various public ownerships - about half of today's total park acreage. An additional 2,500 acres were acquired from private parties between 1981 and 1984, partially funded by open space bonds approved by voters as Proposition C in 1977. A revised master development plan was approved in 1985 by the San Diego City Council and San Diego County Board of Supervisors.

A park image was established - signs identifying the park were erected, the area around the Old Mission Dam was cleaned up, a bridge over the river near the dam was built so visitors could cross safely, and a staging area on the southwestern side of Cowles Mountain was constructed for hikers. In 1989, the first park ranger was hired, and the park's interpretive program began.

The Master Plan called for a visitor center, and efforts in the early 1990s focused on raising funds toward that goal. In February, 1995, the Park's spectacular visitor center opened, showcasing the magnificent terrain around it. The 5.5 million dollar complex was paid for with corporate and private donations and state and local grants solicited by the Mission Trails Regional Park Foundation.

Today, Mission Trails Regional Park is fulfilling its obligation to the community with a full range of educational activities including organized hikes, lectures, and classes, as well as informal outdoor recreational opportunities. Many people and organizations over many years helped to create this wonderful resource.

The following are community leaders who made significant contributions in the planning, acquisition and development of Mission Trails Regional Park. (Year indicates time of initial participation.)

Dorothy Leonard (1974) - As president of Navajo Community Planners worked with Councilman Jim Ellis and Supervisor Dick Brown in the purchase of Cowles Mountain. Member of the Technical Advisory Committee that created the first park development plan. Member of Mission Trails Regional Park Citizen's Advisory Committee since its inception in 1978. Founding member of Mission Trails Regional Park Foundation. Current chair of Mission Trails Regional Park Citizens' Advisory Committee, member of Mission Trails Regional Park Task Force, and Secretary/Treasurer of Mission Trails Regional Park Foundation.

Jim Ellis (1974) - As a member of the San Diego City Council worked with Supervisor Dick Brown in the joint purchase of Cowles Mountain. Worked with City and County staff to create a regional park which would eventually include Fortuna Mountain, Mission Gorge, Cowles Mountain and Lake Murray. As a California State Assemblymember, directed his staff to represent him on the Mission Trails Regional Park Task Force. Former California State Senator. A Mission Trails Regional Park Foundation Honorary Director.

Dick Brown (1974) - As a member of the the San Diego County Board of Supervisors worked with Councilmember Jim Ellis in the joint purchase of Cowles Mountain.

Roger Hedgecock (1977) - Represented the San Diego County Board of Supervisors on Mission Trails Regional Park Task Force. An original member of the Task Force. Former Mayor of the City of San Diego.

Larry Stirling (1977) - Represented the San Diego City Council on Mission Trails Regional Park Task Force. Served as Task Force chair. When in the State legislature was instrumental in acquiring State grant funds for the construction of the Visitor and Interpretive Center. Former California State Assemblymember and Senator. A Mission Trails Regional Park Foundation Honorary Director.

Mike Pent (1977) - Was an original member of the Mission Trails Regional Park Citizens' Advisory Committee and served as chair for 20 years. Represented the Citizens' Advisory Committee on the Mission Trails Regional Park Task Force. Was a founding member and president of Mission Trails Regional Park Foundation. A Mission Trails Regional Park Foundation Honorary Director.

Joe Morse (1978) - Represented the County of San Diego Park and Recreation Board as an alternate to Mission Trails Regional Park Citizens' Advisory Committee. Current president of Mission Trails Regional Park Foundation.

Fred Nagel (1978) - As Mayor of the City of La Mesa served on Mission Trails Regional Park Task Force. Former member of Mission Trails Regional Park Foundation Board of Directors. Member of Mission Trails Regional Park Citizens' Advisory Committee until his death in 2004.

Dick Murphy (1979) - Represented the City of San Diego Park and Recreation Board on Mission Trails Regional Park Citizens' Advisory Committee before being elected to the San Diego City Council in 1981. Represented the City Council on the Mission Trails Regional Park Task Force and served as Task Force chair. Returned to the Citizens' Advisory Committee upon leaving the City Council in 1985. As Mayor of City of San Diego, returned to the Task Force in December 2000 and served until July 2005. Current member of Mission Trails Regional Park Citizens' Advisory Committee. A Mission Trails Regional Park Foundation Honorary Director.

Judy McCarty (1981) - Represented Navajo Community Planners on the Mission Trails Regional Park Citizens' Advisory Committee before being elected to the San Diego City Council in 1985. Former member of Mission Trails Regional Park Foundation Board of Directors. Represented the San Diego City Council on Mission Trails Regional Park Task Force and served as Task Force chair. Returned to the Citizens' Advisory Committee for several years upon her retirement from the City Council. Currently a Mission Trails Regional Park Foundation Honorary Director.

Jean Hatton (1985) - Represented the City of Santee Park and Recreation Board on MTRP CAC. A founding member and Vice President of the Foundation. Served on CAC and Foundation Board of Directors until her death in 1999.

Susan Golding (1985) - Represented the San Diego County Board of Supervisors on the MTRP Task Force.

Betty Ogilvie (1986) - A member of the MTRP Foundation Board of Directors and a member of the CAC representing Tierrasanta Community Council.

Jim Madaffer (1988) - Member of Foundation Board of Directors from 1988 to 2000. Instrumental in raising funds for the construction of the Visitor and Interpretive Center. Represented the San Diego City Council on MTRP Task Force from 2000 to 2008, serving as Task Force chair. Mission Trails Regional Park Foundation Honorary Director

Lucy Killea (1990) - When in the State legislature was instrumental in acquiring State grant funds for the construction of the Visitor and Interpretive Center. Former San Diego City Councilmember and California State Assemblymember and Senator.

Bill Cleves (1992) - Represented Navajo Community Planners on the MTRP CAC and was a member of the Foundation Board of Directors until his death in 1996.

These are just a few of the people that have been visionary stewards of Mission Trails Regional Park. In addition to numerous community leaders, City and County staff have lent their vision and expertise towards the creation of the park. Three long-term stewards include -

Pete Cuthbert who participated in the development of the 1976 master development plan as staff with the County of San Diego Park and Recreation Department and, after his retirement, served on the MTRP CAC.

Nancy Acevedo, former Deputy Director with the City of San Diego Park and Recreation Department. As city staff was instrumental in seeing that additional park land was acquired and that the Visitor and Interpretive Center was built as a joint project with the MTRP Foundation. Joined the Foundation Board of Directors after her retirement and is a member of the CAC.

Don Steele, District Manager, Northern Division, City of San Diego Park and Recreation Department, staffed the MTRP Task Force and CAC, supervised park staff, and served as liaison between the City of San Diego and the Foundation. Joined the Foundation Board of Directors after his retirement.

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Photo: David Cooksy

Mission Trails Regional Park

The park encompasses 7,220 acres of both natural and developed recreational acres. Its rugged hills, valleys, and open areas represent a San Diego prior to the landing of Cabrillo in San Diego Bay in 1542. [Read more > \(https://mtrp.org/the-park-2/\)](https://mtrp.org/the-park-2/)

Photo: Chris Szvedo

MTRP Visitor Center

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Photo: Gerry Fietje

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