

Friends



By Maureen Hannan

No longer just booster groups, friends organizations now function as essential partners.

THEY STAFF MUSEUMS, BUILD PARK SHELTERS, coach wheelchair basketball teams, and renovate historic sites. They run nature centers, keep invasive plants in check, lead tours, conduct fundraisers, execute PR campaigns, lobby legislators, and write grants. Some incorporate and draft formal bylaws while others operate with little formal structure. Most are comprised of just average citizens, while a notable few are fueled by celebrity star power. Park-supporting “friends groups” are diverse and malleable organizations: they perform a staggering array of services, and they tend to evolve according to the needs of the programs and facilities they serve.

Indeed

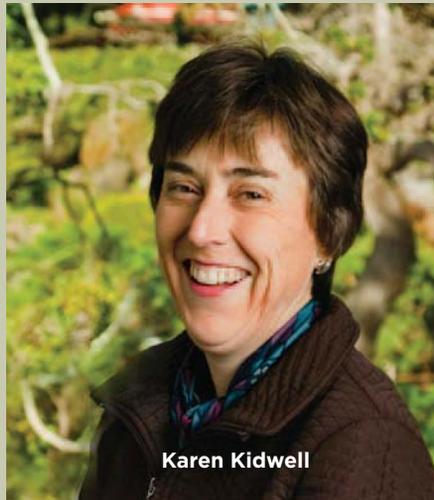


Karen Kidwell, executive director of the San Francisco Parks Trust, works closely with San Francisco Recreation and Park Department General Manager Phil Ginsberg to sustain and improve park programs, such as the Japanese Tea Garden in Golden Gate Park.

Inside SFPT

Exhilarating, Exciting, Exhausting

FOLLOWING CAREER STINTS in the for-profit field of finance on the east and west coasts, Karen Kidwell transitioned to nonprofits early in the last decade, fulfilling a personal commitment to work in the philanthropic world. Kidwell got her start with nonprofit organizations by serving seven years on the Board of Directors of the Committee for Green Foothills. She was a trustee of Earthshare of California, and is currently a trustee of the Green Foothills Foundation. Having experienced firsthand the importance of parks in both New York's and San Francisco's urban settings, she she came to deeply appreciate the need for green open spaces. "Parks simply make life in San Francisco better," she says. In 2008, Kidwell became executive director of the San Francisco Parks Trust (SFPT). Below, Kidwell discusses her role as head of a parks citizen group.



Karen Kidwell

The same thing that makes leading a parks organization easy also makes it difficult. The people who step forward are engaged and passionate, often considering a park to be almost their personal property. That enthusiasm and energy mean that they will work hard and dedicate themselves to a park or greening cause. Lots of people are very generous with their time and funds in support of parks—they understand their importance and care a lot, so that makes my job easy. However, not all users of parks agree on usage, policies, etc., so it's possible to have passionate disagreements about our parks and those disagreements can be hard to mediate.

In addition to the "must-have" skills/qualities of being organized, listening well, possessing high energy and enthusiasm and balancing the interests of all, it's important to have a bias to action tempered by patience. It's crucial in these times of crisis for parks to move ahead with fundraising and advocacy, and to push and push hard. However, some things don't yield to pushing in the short run, so it's important to know when to pull back and let things resolve themselves or return when the situation has settled down a bit.

Right now I'm spending at least 40 percent of my time on development and fundraising of various types and working with staff and consultants on campaigns to bring funds directly to the rec centers and parks, with our GearUp and reStore campaigns (equipment for rec centers and gardeners, respectively), a capital campaign for trails, and fundraising for SFPT. After that, about 30 percent of my time is spent on programs and organizational management, including work with our 60 park partner groups. The balance is spent working on advocacy and issues with our RPD colleagues and trustees, communicating with the public and our members and going to meetings on park/rec issues.

This is an exhilarating and rewarding job, and it can be exhausting, too. The economic crunch has made it even more difficult. It's easy to feel overwhelmed, so I suggest that anyone in this position set a clear set of goals and priorities to ensure that you actually accomplish something tangible. Your partners, staff, and board of trustees must know the goals and embrace them. Every day there is a new crisis and another great idea that you could tackle. But sometimes you have to say no, or "no for now" to ensure that you can deliver on what you have promised.

Friends groups have been around for a long time; many date to the 1970s and 1980s, when suburban sprawl first began to encroach upon beloved nature preserves, historic sites, and parkland. Typically, a citizens group would coalesce around such crises as development threats or budget cuts. After successfully confronting the crisis, the citizens would then continue to function as a "booster" group to enhance programs and improve facilities.

That park booster paradigm has shifted. In this era of budget cuts and stretched resources, the roles of organized, skilled citizen volunteers have expanded into areas that formerly fell wholly under the jurisdiction of park employees. Moreover, friends groups increasingly serve in the role of providing the funding necessary to keep the objects of their causes going. As Karen Kidwell, president of the San Francisco Parks Trust, explains, "Whereas our local park friends groups used to supply toppings for the sundae, they are now providing the ice cream."

Ironically, even as the need for volunteer groups skyrockets, the elimination of volunteer coordinator positions in park districts across the country has created new challenges for many agencies seeking to harness its citizen resources as well as for citizens seeking to serve the agencies. One result of this loss of park staff leadership has been the expanded roles of groups such as Kidwell's—umbrella organizations that serve essentially as friends of the friends groups.

The ingredients that make for successful partnerships between parks and citizen volunteers are just as diverse as the needs those partnerships fill. Interviews with agencies and citizen groups across the country point to one overarching theme of effective partnership: a clear, well defined citizen group mission that responds directly and specifically to the most pressing needs of the park(s) it supports. Additionally, once the mission is in place, it is the day-to-day process of building

Fighting for San Francisco Parks

The Delicate Dance of Give and Take

mutually respectful relationships and trust between park and volunteer leadership that determines the ultimate success and duration of that partnership.

Repeatedly, park directors and veteran volunteer leaders voice the same conclusion: wherever a clear, relationship-based mission guides the work, the joint venture between parks and their citizen supporters can become a shared adventure in community enrichment. That adventure includes valuable benefits and growth opportunities for both sides.

Several small, park-specific friends groups can be mobilized into one large, effective advocacy or fundraising group. “We called them the Green Team,” says Bill Beckner, NRPA’s research manager and the former director of Fairfax County Park Authority in Virginia, referring to coalitions of individual volunteer groups. “Park friends groups in Fairfax County didn’t form for the purpose of advocacy. But when we needed numbers, we could go to those friends groups and mobilize them.”

Similarly, Paul Wolf, president of Friends for the Preservation of Ohio State Parks, notes the ease with which the 59 friends groups (comprising 7,500 members) that make up his umbrella organization can unite to influence state legislation. He cites the group’s 2008 success in lobbying the Ohio state legislature to defeat a bill that would have slashed state park budgets by 10 percent.

Jane Hodgkinson, director of the Western DuPage Special Recreation Association in Illinois, adds that the very nature of in-the-trenches volunteerism makes its unified appeals to lawmakers particularly compelling. “When our special recreation volunteers are coached and given talking points, their letter-writing campaigns to their legislators are pretty unforgettable.”

Citizen groups have access to resources and funding options that government agencies do not. Though rules vary from one state or locality to the next, the simple fact is that private

“IT’S A DANCE, a constant give and take,” says San Francisco Recreation and Park Department General Manager Phil Ginsburg, commenting on the nature of his agency’s partnership with citizen volunteer organizations, “and, like any long-term relationship, it requires commitment.”

Ginsburg does the dance skillfully, according to colleague Karen Kidwell, president of the San Francisco Parks Trust (SFPT). Unlike many programs where volunteers typically are “coordinated” by park staff, Ginsburg encourages a thorough-going partnership model, actively seeking a peer-to-peer relationship with



San Francisco’s park-supporting private groups. For Ginsburg, who has held his post since 2009, this philosophy is about survival—about exercising the stewardship necessary to preserve an infrastructure that cannot be sustained solely through public funds. “We are fighting for our parks,” he says. “A city parks department can no longer meet the need to provide clean, safe, fun parks by itself.”

What does that peer relationship look like in practice? In the case of the SFPT, Ginsburg regularly attends board meetings, strives for daily communication, takes care in prioritizing his department’s requests for support, and submits to a high degree of financial accountability before the group’s leadership. “We want them to know,

if you support this program or function, the money will be spent wisely,” he says.

And it is critical that that trust be in place—because the kinds of funding support San Francisco’s parks department needs most right now is a tough sell to most donors. “We are able to build new facilities,” Ginsburg says, “but our operations budget is a disaster.” Considering that most donors can see the value of tangible equipment and facilities much more easily than that of maintenance crews or front desk staffing, citizen volunteer leaders need more than sheer fundraising savvy: They must be able to inspire confidence in donors for requests that have not typically been made in the past. “Karen has been able to inspire that confidence,” Ginsburg says with admiration.

Indeed, Kidwell and the members of the SFPT have, over the past two years, established a stellar track record in both communicating the needs of the parks department and delivering on its funding promises.

Ginsburg and Kidwell have the added responsibility of remaining sensitive to concerns many San Franciscans have about public-private partnerships. In a time of ever-deeper budget cuts, Ginsburg explains, where “we are duking it out over whether to fill a pothole or plant a tree,” the city’s parks department continues to aim for robust programming and well maintained facilities. Fulfilling that mission requires sustainable, alternative revenue sources from private sources. “Privatization,” though, has become a hot-button word—conjuring up for many city residents worries about restricted access and an unwelcome commercial feeling to their parks.

“This is not privatization; this is simply stewardship,” Ginsburg insists. “I think we have the most fantastic urban park system in the country. But its future lies in robust relationships between nonprofit groups and the park department.”



Friends of Silver Lake Naturalist Center in Pennsylvania

citizens always have more latitude in chasing and allocating resources than park employees do. Citizen groups—especially those with 501(c)(3) tax-exempt status—can accept all kinds of donations, apply for public and private grant money, and host whatever fundraising events they like. Moreover, friends groups can allow parks to collect program fees in ways that will directly benefit the hosting park or program site. The Friends of Silver Lake Naturalist Center in Bucks County, Pennsylvania, for example, actually collects the fees for all programs at the center. (Because of this financial arrangement, it also shares the governance of the group with the Bucks County Department of Parks

and Recreation.) Thus, all fees charged bypass the county coffers to go directly to the nature center.

A mature friends group provides stability—and even the possibility of growth—in times of budget cuts. While most friends groups arise in the midst of a threat or crisis, the ones that last to develop a committed, experienced volunteer base tend to become buffering agents—protecting parks from closure or loss of critical programs and equipment in bad economic times. As Kevin Munroe, manager of Huntley Meadows Park in Fairfax County, Virginia, comments, “There was a time back in the ‘80s when there was a danger of a road coming through the park. The protective nature of our friends group was formed during that time—and it is still a part of the group’s character.”

That prevailing mindset at Huntley Meadows has resulted in a group that is deeply committed to the unusual wetlands and abundant wildlife of the park. They view the park as an “almost sacred place.... And there is not a day that goes by where you can’t feel the positive effect and benefit of the friends group. They are helping us run the programs, staff the front desk, fund special purchases. They are literally helping us keep the lights on,” Munroe says.

And at the nature center in Bucks County,

Local Profile Friends of Huntley Meadows Park Passion in Place

WHEN KEVIN MUNROE began his job as manager of Huntley Meadows Park in Fairfax County, Virginia, he stepped into a smoothly running, mature partnership between the park and its loyal band of citizen volunteers. “My only job,” he says with a laugh, “was not to mess it up.” The friends group, formed 25 years ago in reaction to a proposed highway through the unique wetland wildlife sanctuary, is known throughout the county park system for its dedication to the 1,261-acre park. In fact, for the last three years, Fairfax County Park Authority’s Elly Doyle Award for outstanding volunteerism has gone to officers of the Friends of Huntley Meadows. Theirs is a dedication that, according to Munroe, continually inspires the park staff. “They care passionately about the park,” he explains, “and that strong connection the Friends

have to the site—the staff here all respect it and embrace it.”

In many ways, the Huntley Meadows friends group represents a model for effective partnership at the local site level. Building on the foundation of simple passion for a place, the group combines comprehensive programming support with fundraising for needed items. Not a day goes by that the volunteers are not onsite helping with routine operations, visibly and behind the scenes. They lead tours, staff the front desk, write grants, fund staff training, and provide such extras as waders and motion-sensing camera equipment. They are currently working with Fairfax County to institute a \$2 per car parking donation at the park. The donation would go directly to the Friends to assist it in its supportive role—yet



Pennsylvania, that Bob Mercer oversees, the programs are actually growing thanks to the Friends of Silver Lake. "Growth has not been on the county side here—it's been on the Friends side," he says. The volunteer group currently supplies 50 percent of the nature center's budget—and that amount is growing. "Thanks to their commitment, we are expanding our education and our outreach."

Close working relationships between park and recreation agencies and local citizen volunteers ensure parks address the needs and interests of the public. Nowhere are the benefits of public-private partnership more dramatic than in Jane Hodgkinson's field of special recreation. Since the inception of Illinois's state-funded Western DuPage Special Recreation Association, families of the mentally and physically disabled participants have come out on a daily basis to help plan and run the programs that serve their loved ones. In the process of serving together, the teams of volunteers get to see firsthand the benefits of the existing programs. But appreciation is only a starting point for the networking and innovation that grow out of those working relationships.

The San Francisco Parks Trust began to see the results of this sort of day-in, day-out interdependence

after outfitting the city's 11 new bond-funded recreation centers with furnishings and special equipment. A successful major fundraising effort created a trust and an ease of communication that led to the formation of a special discretionary fund to supply small but crucial items. The friends groups get the satisfaction of seeing their facilities safe and well outfitted—and park staffs are encouraged to continue communicating their day-to-day plans and needs to the citizens they serve.

Mark Thornton, parks and recreation director for Hillsborough County in the Tampa area of Florida, leads a department that is now operating on less than 75 percent of its 2007 budget—maintaining 46 sites with a staff of six people. In Hillsborough's budget heyday between 2002 and 2006, the agency provided such services as a free, daily after-school care program for county residents. But now the after-school program has become the province of the school system, and Thornton's staff struggles merely to maintain park facilities. Thornton summarizes his agency's current situation: "We're going to have to look at a new model of how we provide services...where we are more a facilitator than a provider." Thornton, like many others in his position, sees only one logical conclusion: "We must become a public-private partnership." ❁

We're going to have to look at a new model of how we provide services, where we are more a facilitator than a provider. We must become a public-private partnership.

—Mark Thornton,
Director
Parks and
Recreation,
Hillsborough
County,
Florida

FRIENDS OF HUNTLEY MEADOWS PARK
Fairfax County, Virginia
PRESIDENT: Kathi McNeil
YEAR FOUNDED: 1985
NUMBER OF MEMBERS: 400
PRIMARY FOCUS: Protection of a wetland
wildlife sanctuary
FUNDED BY: Member dues



another example of the natural, common-sense collaboration between park and volunteers. In its efforts to protect and preserve a unique habitat, the Friends of Huntley Meadows Park make it possible to teach future generations about the biodiversity of marshes and meadows.

The truest test then of a park group committed to teaching children is whether those children return to the park as adults. Not only do those who grew up enjoying the park now bring their own children to visit the wetlands, but many now serve as members of the Friends of Huntley Meadows Park. ❁