

# Resistance to new parks grows

By STEVE STROTH  
STAFF WRITER

"Parks mean trouble. We don't need them and we don't want them." — a Watsonville senior.

A man was shot to death in Ramsay Park (Feb. 8) while about 80 people looked on. — news item.

"I'm not against parks, just parks in my area. If they're in someone else's area, that's OK." — a Watsonville-area property owner.

Homeowners get their way: City Council rejects park proposal (Jan. 29). — news item.

What's going on here?

Traditionally, parks were considered boons to a neighborhood, assets to a community — oases of greenery, where families could picnic, children could play, the elderly could relax in bucolic beauty.

But these days, at least in Watsonville and much of Santa Cruz County, parks are regularly denounced as meccas for mischief — and worse.

The resistance to parks has a long history in the Midcounty area, particularly in the Rio del Mar-Aptos Seascapes communities, where residents have for years fought the inclusion of parks designations in the master plans for their neighborhoods.

And, a couple of years ago, the residents of the Drew Lake-College Lake area were so vociferous in their opposition to a plan to designate acreage in their area as a future community park that the Board of

Supervisors changed the designation.

The reasons for that opposition vary, but the essence of the message is clear: parks are bad news. Local people are

either afraid to use them, don't want to live near them, or just plain don't like them.

Those claims seem to fly in the face of the burgeoning demand at public parks for more recreation programs, which are now more available than they ever were. But local people have come out of nowhere in recent months to vehemently protest the building of new parks, especially near their neighborhoods.

That attitude has left city and county officials a little confused about future park development, since they say we don't have enough parks based on what's considered necessary to serve the current population.

And as the population grows, they say, the need for parks and recreation services grows with it. That problem is compounded by a shortage of affordable or available land for future parks.

The anti-park attitude has bewildered and even angered police, who maintain that parks are safe despite perceptions about the "bad element" parks attract.

But the tempest surrounding plans for new parks raises a question about the existing parks.

What has happened to our public parks, and why don't people like them anymore?

"They're not safe," said Marie Chrisman, a 65-year-old

resident of Pajaro Village. "I can't speak for parks in general, but in the Watsonville area, (parks) are getting a very bad reputation."

Recent events haven't helped that reputation.

"A few weeks ago I was assured by the police chief that everything at Ramsay Park was under control," Chrisman said, "and the next day there was a murder."

A 29-year-old man was killed at Ramsay Park during an argument with another man while the two were watching a soccer game Feb. 8. It was the second murder in the park in the last three years.

"I don't think the location has anything to do with the causation (of the murder)," Police Chief Ray Belgard said. "The two guys had an argument over a 12-pack of beer. They started out the day as friends, and it ends with one of them dead. It could have happened anywhere."

Added Belgard, "If we'd had 10 cops out there that day, that guy still would have gotten killed. But the park gets blamed, and, partially, so do we."

Since opposition to new parks preceded the murder, the incident prompted some park opponents to say, "I told you so."

One of them was Chrisman.

"We raised our children at Vasona Park in Los Gatos," she said. "The most violence I ever saw there was two little boys slugging it out. When I came here (10 years ago) people told me not to go anywhere in

Ramsay Park without (my husband). It's not safe."

It was that strong belief that local parks are unsafe which prompted several hundred residents of the Bay Village and Pajaro Village retirement communities to turn out en masse at several public hearings during the last few months. The group, led by Chrisman and several other village residents, denounced the city's plans to buy a 52-acre parcel next door to them for eventual use as a park.

After several public hearings, where parks were decried as "dope dens" and havens for criminals, ruffians and "the bad element," the City Council, in January, killed the park proposal even though everyone agreed the \$900,000 price tag made the property a steal.

Residents said a park that size would be an open invitation to crime in their neighborhoods.

Police maintain parks are not a crime problem, but people still fear them.

"None of us dare go to any city parks," said one woman at a hearing in December. "We have a fear, and we think we have a right to have that fear."

But fear isn't the only issue, although it may be the most common argument used against building new parks. A public park can also mean more traffic, garbage and crowd problems for surrounding neighborhoods. New parklands also cost money.

Those issues were featured prominently during public hearings this month on the

Santa Cruz County Park Master Plan, which a handful of Watsonville-area residents attended.

During the hearings, members of the county's Parks Commission had hoped to have local people tell them where to build parks in the future. Instead, the residents who attended the meeting said they didn't want any more parks in South County, period.

"We'd rather have the money spent on something other than parks," said Cliff Iverson, a College Lake-area resident. Iverson and several of his neighbors have been trying for years, without success, to get the county to ante up funds for flood prevention and drainage work in their flood-prone neighborhood.

"The county says it's broke, and you're talking about parks," Iverson told the park commissioners. "We don't need any more parks. Nobody uses the ones we have."

City recreation officials, who often turn people away from their crowded activity leagues and numerous recreation programs, can easily contest that claim.

But several other speakers at the county hearings echoed the concerns of village residents that parks are more trouble than they are worth.

Louis Schiavon, of Corralitos, was even more adamant than Iverson.

"I would be violently opposed to a park in an area where I live," Schiavon said. "I'm not against parks, just parks in my area. If they're in someone else's area, that's OK."

That type of opposition is apparently a common sentiment.

"We hear that a... said Ben Angove, director of the county Parks and Recreation Department. "What we've heard most from folks is, 'Parks are fine. I just don't want them in my neighborhood.' That's a pretty narrow view."

"I think people need parks and leisure more now than they ever did," he said.

The urbanization of Santa Cruz County has brought more traffic, more stress and more feelings of being cooped-up, Angove said. Parks provide a release from those strains.

"It sounds a little philosophical, but we don't have a sense of community anymore. We all seem to be holed up in our private homes," he said. "We've become isolated as a society, and parks become a way of not being isolated ... It's a way to meet your neighbors. Perhaps (the people who oppose new parks) are afraid to meet their neighbors. I think that's a shame."

Angove said the county's rapid growth-rate is straining community services at every level, including public parks.

"People aren't going to stop going to parks," Angove said. Even the people who oppose parks in their neighborhood are usually in favor of a park somewhere else, he said.

REFERENCE

WATSONVILLE  
REGISTER-PAJARONIAN  
March 1, 1986

WATSONVILLE  
Planning  
1986-1989  
1486



"Ten years from now we may not have the land we have available today," he said. "As the population grows, those same people who say they don't want more parks will become part of the very problem (crowding) they complain

about because we won't have enough parks."

Pat Donohue, Watsonville's director of Parks and Recreation, agreed.

"We're seeing more and more residential developments (such as apartments) that no longer have the traditional backyard," she said. "People need to have outdoor experiences, and that's what parks are for, to provide those experiences close to home."

That's one of the reasons Ramsay Park, the city park most often mentioned by park critics in Watsonville, has such problems, Donohue said. Not only is it the most heavily used park in the city, it is also isolated from any neighborhoods which can provide the kind of protection no policeman can offer.

Angove agreed, and explained:

"When you get neighborhood parks that are used, that's the best security we have. People are closer to the park and they care about it more. Besides, (criminals) are less likely to act in public. It's a traditional protection system."

So far, that hasn't convinced too many local residents.

They see some of the problems at Ramsay Park and expect similar results from any new parks, Donohue said.

"I think parks in general get a bad rap," she said. "That Ramsay Park is always put down is tragic. That park provides a lot of good experiences. We have many major events there every year with no problems."

As a kid growing up in Watsonville, Chief Belgard said he remembered going to the City Plaza for picnics and special events.

"I can't remember any problems at the park, but I do remember parks were always a good place to go," he said.

Residents of the retirement villages have the same memories, but they contend that parks are for young people and should be placed in the neighborhood of a senior community.

"I'm not against parks as a whole," said Ira Wilson, a Bay Village resident who opposed the city's park plans. "They're necessary. But in the proper place. Put them in a place

where the youngsters can use them to the fullest."

But where?

City staffers say Watsonville is running out of available land for parks, especially since the housing demand far outweighs what the city can supply now and in the future. That's why staffers pushed so hard for the 52-acre park.

"That was 52 acres of open space which the city can never again hope to buy," Donohue said. "It was just a phenomenal amount of land for \$900,000, and now it's lost to the community forever."



Kurt Ellison

Children play at neighborhood park on Riverside Drive.

# Parks: Why do people fear them?



Young men enjoy a pickup basketball game at much-maligned Ramsay Park.

Kurt Ellison